Introduction

This book is about the world the Arabs encountered when they conquered the Middle East in the mid-seventh century and the world those conquests created. The importance of the Arab conquests for the history of the Middle East and, indeed, for the history of the subsequent fourteen hundred years, needs no emphasis. Apart from the rise and triumph of Christianity, no other event in the first millennium rivals them in significance. A majority of the population of the world today is affected in profound ways, daily, by these two events.

For all its importance, however, this period has been remarkably resistant to the writing of a compelling and persuasive unified account that does equal justice to the religious landscape of the region and to its changes under both Roman and Arab rule. On the Roman side, one easily gets lost in a thicket of ecclesiastical labels and rarefied Greek theological terms. The fact that these terms, when rendered into Syriac—a dialect of Aramaic that served as the literary language for much of the Middle East's Christian population at this time—might mean different things to different Christian confessions does not help matters, nor does the fact that many of the labels used to refer to various groups can be regarded as offensive. It is a period rich in historical importance but also abounding in opportunities for perplexity.

The appearance of Muslims on the scene adds another layer of potential confusion. The emergence of Islam along with its controversies and civil wars brings with it befuddling Arabic names, competing precedence claims, and tribal genealogical assertions and relations that seem, to the uninitiated, as arcane as they are apparently consequential. The Islamic tradition has left us remarkably detailed—even at times awkwardly intimate—information about the Prophet Muḥammad, and yet accounts of early Islamic history have frequently been mired in interminable and intractable debates about how much, if anything, we can believe of the traditional Muslim account of Islamic origins. More significant than this or that report about the Prophet's behavior or activities are the bigger questions that haunt the field: Did the Qurʾān actually originate in Muḥammad's lifetime, in Western Arabia? Can we even speak of 'Islam' as a phenomenon before the late seventh century?

In the last several decades, it has become increasingly common for scholars to attempt to bring together the late antique and early Islamic worlds.[1] In this

[1] The literature is increasingly vast and rich. See, e.g., A. al-Azmeh, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity: Allāh and His People* (New York, 2014) and R. G. Hoyland, ed., *The Late Antique World of Early*

book, I will try to do this as well, but I hope to offer a slightly different approach from a number of previous attempts. I will proceed from a basic assumption that if we want to understand how Arab conquerors related to the traditions of the populations they conquered and, more specifically, how Christians and Muslims interacted with one another, we must first understand Christian-Christian interactions, for the Middle East, in the several centuries before the birth of the Prophet, witnessed the irreparable fracturing of its Christian community and the development of rival and competing churches.

Looking at intra-Christian relations in the late Roman period will take us to a still more antecedent question: What did most of the population of the Middle East actually make of the disputes that had so divided the Christian communities of the region and which fill the pages of manuals of church history? What did it mean to be a Christian for most people, and what importance was accorded to intra-Christian religious differences? These questions will lead us to a whole host of further questions. Was there a layering of knowledge that could be found in the Christian community—that is, did some members know more than others? The answer to this last question is obvious, but it leads to a further question whose answer is not so immediately clear: What were the consequences of such a layering?

In order to understand the world that the Arab conquests created, I want to suggest, we need to first understand the world they found. And to understand that world, we need to attempt to understand the religious attitudes and

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Islam: Muslims among Christians and Jews in the East Mediterranean (Princeton, 2015), the latter one volume of more than two dozen that have been published in the landmark series, edited by Lawrence Conrad and Jens Scheiner, *Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam*. G. Fowden, *Before and after Muḥammad: The First Millennium* (Princeton, 2014), represented an ambitious attempt at reperiodization. H. Kennedy, 'Islam,' in G. W. Bowersock, P. Brown, and O. Grabar, *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World* (Cambridge, Mass./London, 1999), pp. 219–37, is a classic statement of the continuities and discontinuities between the late antique and Islamic periods. Av. Cameron, 'Patristic Studies and the Emergence of Islam,' in B. Bitton-Ashkelony, T. de Bruyn, and C. Harrison, eds., *Patristic Studies in the Twenty-First Century* (Turnhout, 2015), pp. 249–78, provided an overview of attempts at viewing Islam within late antiquity and advocated greater integration of patristic and early Islamic studies. A. Borrut and F. M. Donner, eds., *Christians and Others in the Umayyad State* (Chicago, 2016), can be taken as representative of an increasingly prominent tendency among scholars to focus on non-Muslims in medieval Muslim empires. Decades before this trend picked up steam, of course, Peter Brown's *World of Late Antiquity* (London, 1971) had already set the rise of Islam firmly in the context of the later Roman world. The tendency to set the origins of Islam in the late antique period has been especially notable in Qur'ānic studies. Among an abundance of publications, see, e.g., A. Neuwirth's, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike: ein europäischer Zugang* (Berlin, 2010); Neuwirth, 'Locating the Qur'an' and Early Islam in the "Epistemic Space" of Late Antiquity,' in C. Bakhos and M. Cook, eds., *Islam and Its Past: Jahiliyya, Late Antiquity, and the Qur'an* (Oxford, 2017), pp. 165–85; G. S. Reynolds, ed., *The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context* (London/New York, 2008); Reynolds, ed., *New Perspectives on the Qur'ān: The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context* 2; and N. Schmidt, N. K. Schmidt, and A. Neuwirth, eds., *Denkraum Spätantike: Reflexionen von Antiken im Umfeld des Koran* (Wiesbaden, 2016).

behaviors of most of its inhabitants and how those attitudes and behaviors affected the leaders of the Christian churches. It is these leaders who have left us the texts we study in order to try to understand this world.

A great deal of this book will be an effort to put flesh on the unseen contexts that swirl around such texts. These contexts were there when the texts were written, but they escape our notice easily; once supplied, however, they cast many things into new light. The great majority of Christians in the Middle East, I will suggest in Part I of this book, belonged to what church leaders referred to as 'the simple.' They were overwhelmingly agrarian, mostly illiterate, and likely had little understanding of the theological complexities that split apart the Christian community in the region. 'Simple' here does not connote 'simple-minded,' as it might in some varieties of English, nor should it be understood as a category restricted to the laity: there were monks, priests, and even bishops who were simple believers. The men who wrote the texts we study lived their lives among these simple believers: they fed them and ate with them, they prayed with them and for them, they taught and healed them, and they had the responsibility of pastoral care for them. A key to understanding the world that the Arabs found is the recognition that it was overwhelmingly one of simple, ordinary Christians; and that it was a world fracturing into rival groups on the basis of disagreements that most of those Christians could not fully understand.

I will attempt to show how this paradox can help explain the shape that Middle Eastern Christianity had in the centuries after the Council of Chalcedon took place in AD 451 and before the Arab conquests covered in Part II of this book. There was, during this period, fierce competition for the loyalties of simple, everyday Christians among leaders of the various Christian movements in the Middle East. This competition helped fuel debates, the composition of polemics, the translation of texts, the creation of educational institutions, and the development of a Syriac-language syllabus of study (among Miaphysites) in the seventh century. In this regard, it might be helpful to recall the competition between Catholic and Protestant missionaries in the nineteenth-century Middle East and the educational consequences it had for the region, especially Lebanon.[2]

Because the question of continuity/discontinuity between the periods of Roman and Arab rule in the Middle East has been a topic of such great interest to so many, I will pause for a brief "Interlude" between Parts II and III to look at it more closely, focusing especially on the question of continuity when

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[2] On Catholic-Protestant competition in the Middle East, see, e.g., the brief overview in A. de Dreuzy, *The Holy See and the Emergence of the Modern Middle East: Benedict XV's Diplomacy in Greater Syria (1914–1922)* (Washington, D.C., 2016), pp. 218–21.

seen through the prism of Syriac sources and the unique non-imperial, non-state-centered perspective that they offer.[3] The intense competition among religious elites for the allegiances of simple Christians led to a series of remarkable intellectual continuities in the Syriac-speaking world across the sixth to ninth centuries, a time that has traditionally been seen as one of great cultural rupture.

In Part III, I will arrive at the question of how Arab conquerors and settlers fit into the landscape sketched out in the first two sections of the book. Here, I will emphasize that when thinking about the history of the Middle East in the early period of Muslim rule, one needs to constantly supply another context often invisible in the Arabic texts we read about the period: that of the non-Muslims who formed the overwhelming demographic majority of the region for centuries after the Arab conquests. The Christian communities of the Middle East are the ones with which I am most familiar, and it is for this reason (as well as for reasons of space) that I have focused primarily on them rather than on Jews, Zoroastrians, or others; the story of how Muslims related to these other non-Muslim groups is an important one that I will leave to scholars more learned than I. Discussions of Christian-Muslim interaction have customarily focused on actual interactions—there is a rich body of scholarship that has located, classified, and analyzed instances of Christian-Muslim encounter [4]—but in Part III, I will attempt to look first at what 'Christian' and 'Muslim' meant in the seventh and eighth centuries before asking questions about how Christians and Muslims related to one another. As in Parts I and II, my focus will be on the level of the ordinary, simple believers who were the great mass of both Christians and Muslims living in the Middle East in the early medieval period.

Crucially, in this early period of Muslim rule, we also need to recognize that most of the Prophet's notional followers, including many of the leaders of the early Muslim state, were people who had converted late in his life for apparently this-worldly reasons, often en masse. These late converts, many of whom rebelled against the leadership of the Prophet's community after his death and had to be forced back into the fold by means of military violence, likely had little deep understanding of Muḥammad's message or the full im-

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[3] Cf. the remarks in M. Debié and D.G.K. Taylor, 'Syriac and Syro-Arabic Historical Writing, c. 500–c. 1400,' in S. Foot and C. F. Robinson, eds., *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*, vol. 2: *400–1400* (Oxford, 2012), p. 156: 'Syriac historiography is a rare example of non-étatist, non-imperial, history writing.'

[4] Most notable perhaps are R. G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton, 1997) and the monumental series edited by David Thomas and others, *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographic History*, vols. 1–11 (Leiden/Boston, 2009–) (hereafter *CMR*).

plications of what it meant to belong to the religious community he founded. Indeed, those implications and Islam itself were still being worked out in this period. One of the keys to thinking about the earliest Christian-Muslim inter-actions, I will therefore suggest, is to keep in mind that we are dealing with a setting in which simple Christians were meeting late mass converts and their descendants, even as Islam itself was being elaborated as a full-fledged way of living in the world.

Keeping our focus on simple believers, Christian and Muslim, will also give us what I hope is a different perspective on the question of the gradual conver-sion from Christianity to Islam of much of the Middle East's population over the course of the Middle Ages. Whatever the social and economic benefits and consequences—and these often will have been significant—when viewed from the standpoint of ordinary religious believers, a conversion from Christianity to Islam may not have been as momentous, in religious terms, as one might expect. We are dealing with a world, I will suggest, in which one could become a Muslim and still hold on to many Christian practices and even beliefs.

Here an obvious but basic point should be emphasized. We should resist the easy assumption that the beliefs and practices of the contemporary Mus-lim (or Christian) population of the Middle East in an era of printing, satellite television, the Internet, and attempted universal public education will have been substantially similar to those of most of the medieval Muslim (or Chris-tian) population of the region. We need to think away the ability of the state and religious institutions to use modern mass communication and education to create a uniformity of religious belief and understanding. As a useful anal-ogy, it might be helpful to recall that '[e]ven in a country such as France, which had centuries-long traditions of political frontiers and where norms of proper usage had been developing for centuries, probably not much more than 50 percent of French men and women spoke French as their native language in 1900.'[5] The understanding and practice of Islam by most medieval Middle Eastern Muslims will have been quite different from that of the liter-ate, television-watching, Internet and social-media using Muslim population in the cities of the Middle East today.[6] It will also have been different from the beliefs found expressed in the medieval texts we study. As is the case also with Christian writings of the late antique and early medieval periods, when it comes to Islamic religious documents, we need to learn to see the

[5] P. J. Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton, 2002), p. 31.

[6] J. Grehan, *Twilight of the Saints: Everyday Religion in Ottoman Syria and Palestine* (New York, 2014) is a very suggestive study. Though based in the late Ottoman period, Grehan's arguments about the nature of religious understanding and practice for most inhabitants of the Middle East could be applied to earlier periods as well.

invisible context of simple, ordinary adherents swirling around the things we read.

The question of the motivations, meaning, and consequences of conversion will be a major focus of Part III of this book. At the end of Part III, I will take up the question of how Muslims related to the religious traditions of the people they now ruled. This was a world where, very literally, the mosque was in the shadow of the church. Following Albrecht Noth, I will suggest that the precarious demographic and cultural situation that conquering Muslims found themselves in led to attempts, reflected in a variety of *ḥadīth*, to limit contact with Christians and Jews and discourage imitation of their behavior and religious practices. Alongside such attempts at proscription, however, can be set other putatively Prophetic utterances, which seemed to grant approval to seeking information from Christians and Jews. What is more, it is possible to identify various figures who did just this. Furthermore, scholars have long noted a variety of wide-ranging continuities between late antique Christian practices and later Muslim practices and beliefs.

Part IV takes up the question of the process by which this great host of late antique ideas, habits, and at times even texts, entered into what Patricia Crone termed 'the bloodstream of Islam.' The field of medieval Middle Eastern history is commonly understood to be Islamic history, an unspoken and sectarian conflation that relegates the non-Muslim population to what is usually, at best, the shadows of whatever image of the period we are given. Social history provides a key approach for recovering the role that non-Muslims played in making the world that scholars of the region in this period study. Moreover, the question of how Muslims related to the traditions of the religious communities they now found themselves ruling provides a vehicle for making the story of the Middle East under Muslim rule less overtly elitist and confessional—that is, one that focuses on more than just its hegemonic Muslim minority and concerns itself with all of the region's inhabitants.

In attempting to tell this story, I have made use of a large number of sources, in various languages, and belonging to a variety of genres. In order to keep the book from becoming any longer than it already is, I have tried to keep issues of *Quellenkritik* to a minimum and have instead chosen to offer some reflections on my approach to the sources in Appendix I.

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Much of what follows will be an attempt to tell the religious history of the late antique and medieval Middle East from perspectives that are typically not privileged or which are often traditionally ignored or relegated to some sort

of inferior status. Chronologically, my main focus will be roughly the years 500–1000, that is, from the era of Anastasius and Justinian in the post-Chalcedonian Roman Empire up to the pre-Crusader Abbasid period, but I will use evidence from other periods as well; geographically, I will concentrate on the Fertile Crescent—Syria, Palestine, and Iraq—but other regions, most notably Egypt, will also appear. Before the Arab conquests, my main emphasis will be on the simple, uneducated Christian and how he or she related to the theological debates that occupied the leaders of their church. I will focus on the Aramaic-speaking Christian population of the Middle East, not just those authors who wrote in Greek. In the period of Muslim rule, I will be particularly interested in the Christian population of the Middle East, the population which must have been a large majority in much of the region but whose existence and importance often silently vanishes after the conquests.

The result of pushing these perspectives from the margins toward the center will be, I hope, a narrative that subverts deeply ingrained tendencies in the historiography of this period. This book has two fundamental goals: first, to argue against adopting a heavily theological understanding of the Christian communities in the post-Chalcedonian Middle East as well as against a strongly doctrinally focused understanding of Christian-Muslim interactions. And second, to de-center Islam within medieval Middle Eastern history and de-sectarianize the subject by undermining the common understanding that the history of the medieval Middle East is synonymous with the problems and questions of Islamic history. If modern European historians now commonly speak of 'transnational histories,' historians of the medieval Middle East should strive for 'transconfessional histories' that explicitly reject the unstated millet system which has traditionally governed how the field has operated, a system that gives Islam, a minority religion, pride of place in the region's medieval history and dissertations focused on Islamic topics distinct preference in hiring decisions for academic positions. Apart from distorting contemporary understandings—both in the Middle East and in the West—of the role and importance of non-Muslims in the history of the medieval Middle East, this historiographic millet system distorts how we view medieval Islam itself. For properly understanding the Middle East's politically dominant medieval Muslim population requires understanding that it is precisely that: a hegemonic minority whose members were descended from non-Muslim converts, one which elaborated and articulated its positions on a host of issues in conversation and competition with the non-Muslims whom they ruled over, lived alongside of, were frequently related to, and often explicitly defined themselves against ideologically. Another challenge should be kept in mind as well: the East Roman Empire, an overt and thoroughgoing Christian state, represented the chief

ideological, political, and military rival of the state governed by Muḥammad's successors in the centuries after his death. Both internally and externally, non-Muslims were competitors, and they were seen as such.

This book ultimately represents an attempt at writing a nonelitist, desectarianized religious history of the late Roman and early medieval Middle East, one that takes seriously the existence of a layering or continuum of knowledge and engagement in religious communities and which is concerned with the lived religious experience of all the region's inhabitants, not just that of select members of politically hegemonic groups. Scholars have written many erudite books and articles about learned Christians, Jews, and Muslims in this period. But these were figures who would have constituted a fraction of their respective communities. What happens if we ask about everyone else?