

Samuel Noble and Alexander Treiger, eds., *The Orthodox Church in the Arab World, 700-1700: An Anthology of Sources*. DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2014. Pp. ix +375; \$35.

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The texts, and thus the history of Arabic-speaking Christians have too long remained out of reach to Western historians of Christianity, sequestered as they are by historical developments that isolated these Christians from the West and the language barrier that Arabic presents. In the present volume, Samuel Noble and Alexander Treiger take a significant step toward filling this gap by offering an anthology of Arabic texts in English translation that display the range and diversity of the Arabic Christian tradition. This range covers both a broad span of time (as the sub-title suggests, roughly 700-1700 CE) and genres. As such, these texts offer a small, but representative sample that displays the vitality of this understudied and undervalued literary tradition. Several of these texts have never before appeared in English translations, and several have never appeared in any Western language.

The editors begin the volume with a helpful Introduction, including an impressively concise yet detailed overview of the history of Christianity in the Arabic-speaking world. In this narrative, the editors do offer a brief introduction to all of the Eastern Christian traditions that ultimately adopted Arabic, but they note that the focus of this particular volume is the history of the Arabic-speaking Christians who remained loyal to the Antiochian Orthodox tradition. Historically, these Christians have been called “Melkites,” denoting their allegiance to the faith of the Byzantine Emperor; Noble and Treiger refer to this tradition as the “Arab Orthodox” Church. Thus, the texts presented in this volume represent only one branch of Arabic-speaking Christianity. Although this editorial decision limits the diversity of texts that might have been included, this decision may actually be helpful to non-specialists, who may be confused by the various branches of the Syriac-Arabic tradition.

In the Introduction, the editors also offer an overview of Christian literature produced in Arabic. Throughout the course of this overview, the editors place each text included in this volume within a broader literary and historical context, which is particularly helpful for scholars who are new to these materials. This overview of Christian Arabic literature shows the range of genres that

Arabic-speaking Christians adopted. Each text includes a brief introduction by its translator and a bibliography for further suggested reading.

The first selection, translated by Mark N. Swanson, presents excerpts from the earliest surviving Christian work in Arabic, the 8th-century, anonymous, and untitled theological treatise that Swanson calls “An Apology for the Christian Faith.” Swanson has previously published on this work and is currently preparing a complete English translation, to be accompanied by an Arabic edition prepared by Samir Khalil Samir. This text is likely the most well-known of all those included, given its publication history beginning with Margaret Dunlop Gibson’s discovery of the text at the Monastery of Saint Catherine. And yet, despite the fact that this text has existed in an English translation for over a century, it still remains unknown to many historians of Christianity. Swanson’s notes on this text are in-depth, reflecting his prior work, and will be of a helpful resource for those interested in the Christian appropriation of Qur’anic texts and language.

The second selection comes from the late 8th/early 9th-century bishop of Harran, Theodore Abu Qurra, with an introduction and translation by John C. Lamoreaux. The passage chosen for inclusion in this volume—an excerpt from Theodore’s “Treatise on the Existence of God and the True Religion” (*Maymar fi wujud al-Khalīq wa-l-dīn al-qawīm*)¹—was previously published as part of Lamoreaux’s edition of Theodore’s works,² though Lamoreaux has edited this translation slightly for the current volume. The excerpt presented here provides Theodore’s survey of religious options available to him by speaking to adherents of each religion—Hanifs (local “pagans” from Harran), Zoroastrians, Samaritans, Jews, Manichaeans, Marcionites, Bardaisanites, and—finally—Muslims. Much like the religious odyssey presented by Justin Martyr, Abu Qurra seeks the “true religion.” This selection is an excellent addition to this volume because it provides a wealth of information about Theodore’s perception of other religions, a topic that will be of

¹ Note: the editors present all Arabic transliterations without diacritical marks, so I have followed their convention in this review.

² John C. Lamoreaux, *Theodore Abu Qurrah* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2005).

interest to many who may want to use this book as a textbook for a course.

The third selection represents the “disputation/dialogue” genre that became popular for Christian apologetic and catechetical purposes in the Muslim world. The text chosen—the 9th-century “Disputation of the Monk Abraham of Tiberias,” translated by Krisztina Szilágyi—provides an excellent example of this genre. Moreover, this particular disputation is of interest because it also features some Jews as part of the disputation in addition to the monk Abraham and a Muslim emir. Like all other writings of this genre, this account is highly fictionalized, as Szilágyi notes, but the topics discussed in the dispute provide a window into the historical world of inter-religious dialogue by highlighting the doctrines that Christians felt they needed to defend against their Muslim neighbors.

In Chapter 4, John C. Lamoreaux presents translations of three hagiographical works: “The Passion of Saint Anthony Rawh,” “The Passion of Saint ‘Abd al-Masih al-Ghassani,” and “Saint George and a Muslim.” Scholars who are already familiar with the hagiographical traditions in Greek or Syriac will recognize many familiar themes here. According to Lamoreaux’s introduction, the first two texts are likely based on real, historical figures while the third is probably a literary creation, invented for the purposes of extolling the local shrine of St. George in Lydda. Scholars and historians who are interested in martyrdom and the genre of hagiography more broadly will find these translations of particular useful.

Turning from hagiography to history, the next selection comes from the 10th-century “Chronicle” of Agapius of Manbij, also translated by John C. Lamoreaux. Agapius’ Chronicle spans from creation to the author’s present time, the middle of the 10th century. The excerpt provides an argument for the superiority of the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible (i.e., the Septuagint) over both the Hebrew version—which he argues was corrupted by the Jews—and all translations based off the Hebrew, including the subsequent Syriac translations. As such, this selection presents a fascinating historical retelling of the translation of the Septuagint under Ptolemy Philadelphus as well as a textual exposition of the “corruptions” in the Scriptures of the Jews.

The sixth chapter in this volume shows the diversity of the offerings of Arabic Christian literature, featuring the poetry of Sulayman al-Ghazzi, an 11th-century bishop from Gaza whose poetry has never before been translated and published in a Western language. Samuel Noble provides the translation and introduction, which situates Sulayman's life and work within the broader turmoil of Palestinian Christian life in the 10th and 11th centuries. Two poems are included here, entitled: "Not All Baptized with Water Are Christians" and "Soul, Do Not Mourn Death." The first focuses on orthodoxy and heresy in faith and the nature of the Church, whereas the second provides an intimate window into Sulayman's life, including the death of his son. These poems offer but a small taste of the richness of the Arabic Christian literary tradition, and one can only hope that more will appear in English translation in the near future.

The next two texts, comprising Chapters 7 and 8, offer a glimpse into the ways that older philosophical and theological texts from other languages—primarily Greek—influenced theological writing in Arabic. First, Samuel Noble presents a translation of two essays by 'Abdallah ibn al-Fadl al-Antaki, an 11th-century deacon of Antioch, whose grasp of Greek philosophical and patristic texts shows a well-rounded education. These two essays, one on the soul's pursuit of virtue and the other on the refutation of astrology, show an impressive range of explicit citations of or references to previous literature. Indeed, on only one page, Ibn al-Fadl manages to quote or refer to Galen, Aristotle, Gregory of Nyssa, and John of Damascus—no small feat! Prior to this volume, neither of these essays has ever been published in English.

The text of Chapter 8, "The Noetic Paradise," represents (likely) the only text in this volume that was not originally written in Arabic. This text—an anonymous, allegorical treatise of unknown origin—was composed in Greek, but the Greek original is now lost. Thus, the Arabic translation represents the only surviving vestige of what the present translator, Alexander Treiger calls "a masterpiece of Greek patristic literature" (188). In this allegory of ascetic life, the *nous* is expelled from Paradise—just as Adam and Eve were expelled—and it struggles to return to this paradise. This text has yet to be edited and published, either in Arabic or in English translation, but Treiger's excerpted translation included in this

volume is part of his forthcoming edition and translation of the work.

The following work, also translated by Treiger, provides a window into ecclesiastical issues, insofar as it presents a biting critique of the Church, and especially the priesthood, by the Agathon of Homs. This Agathon (ca. 11th/12th-century), born Iliyya of Antioch, assumed the bishopric of Homs at some point in his life; however, he later resigned the position, citing “blasphemies” in the priesthood as his reason. The text presented here represents, as Treiger calls it in his introduction, “an apology [Agathon] wrote in the wake of his resignation” (201). As such, this letter represents an extensive treatment of the priesthood and church leadership that is unparalleled in Arabic Christian literature. Treiger’s partial translation here is the first translation of this text to appear in English.

In Chapter 10, eminent Christian Arabic scholar Sydney H. Griffith presents a translation of Paul of Antioch’s well-known “Letter to a Muslim Friend,” which circulated broadly among Arabic-speaking Christians. Indeed, although Paul served as the bishop of Sidon, and thus presumably wrote his “Letter” from there (likely in the early 13th century), this work provoked a response from a near-contemporary Egyptian Muslim, Shihab al-Din Ahmad ibn Idris al Qaraḥi, and it was copied and distributed in Cyprus in the early 14th century. According to Griffith, Paul of Antioch is unique because, although his audience is Christian, he writes with “an Arabic idiom that is distinctly Islamic” (217). No doubt one reason for the popularity of this text is its unique argument; Paul attempts to use passages from the Qur’an to support the practice of Christianity, including a reinterpretation of the life of Muhammad through a Christian lens.

The final two selections in this volume bring us to the modern period and demonstrate the vast reach of Arab Orthodox Christians in the 17th and 18th centuries. Four selections from the writings of Macarius Ibn al-Za‘im, the 17th-century Patriarch of Antioch, translated by Nikolaj Serikoff, comprise Chapter 11. Macarius’ life and writings show both an intense desire to bring the practices of the Arabic Orthodox community more in line with those of the Greek Church and the influence of Western missionary activity. Macarius also traveled extensively in Eastern Europe, soliciting financial support for the Orthodox Christians

under Ottoman rule. Much of Macarius' writings are preserved in a largely unpublished "notebook" that he kept during his travels. Of the four texts included here, the first three come from this notebook. The fourth will likely be of broadest interest: a letter (one of two known such letters) written by Macarius to the French King Louis XIV. This letter sheds light on the French missionary interest in the Holy Lands in the 17th century, and Macarius appeals to Louis as a defender of Middle Eastern Christians.

The final selection comes from the travelogue of Paul of Aleppo, archdeacon of Antioch, and son of Macarius Ibn al-Za'im, with translation and introduction by Ioana Feodorov. Paul accompanied his father on his travels to Eastern Europe, mentioned above, and he kept a detailed record of their travels, including local customs of the people they encountered. Despite the significance of this text, no complete edition or Western translation exists yet, though Feodorov notes that there is an edition and French translation in progress. The passages chosen include a description of stops in Constantinople, Moldavia, and Moscow; likewise, they also include meetings with significant figures including the Russian Patriarch Nikon.

All of the texts chosen for this volume are interesting in their own right, but the collection of these sources into a single volume, with helpful introductions and bibliographies, makes this book an invaluable resource for the study of Arabic Christianity and, indeed, the history of Christianity more broadly. The editors have also included a "Biographical Guide to Arab Orthodox Christianity," which falls into four categories: 1) Reference Works, 2) English Translations of Arab Orthodox Texts, 3) Translations of Arab Orthodox Texts into Languages other than English, and 4) Other Useful References. Finally, three indices—Biblical passages, Qur'anic passages, and general—round out this volume.

Henceforth, historians of Christianity will have no excuse to remain ignorant of the Arab Orthodox tradition. The editors and translators are to be commended for creating such a valuable resource and at such an affordable price. And indeed, in the current socio-political atmosphere in which there is so much ignorance concerning the history of Christians in the Middle East, their efforts deserve a wide audience.