

Christians and Muslims in Syria and Upper Mesopotamia in the Early Arab Islamic Period: Cultural Change and Continuity

Ahmad Shboul *

Introductory

This is a preliminary report of research in progress on social and cultural change in early Islamic Syria. Syria is defined here as the historical region covered by modern Syria, south-west Turkey (Antioch province), Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine-Israel. Upper Mesopotamia denotes the area between the upper middle Euphrates and Tigris. The early Arab Islamic period is here understood to extend from the early seventh to the late eleventh century A.D. The present essay takes a broad perspective beyond the limited question of religious conversion. It is more concerned with processes of cultural change, continuity and acculturation. This study is mainly based on literary evidence and special attention is given to works of Syrian provenance.¹

It is perhaps necessary to remind ourselves that, in most studies in Western languages, the history of the rise of Islam and of the Arab conquest of the eastern and southern Mediterranean has often been viewed from a eurocentric perspective.² This paper starts from the regional perspective of West Asia and the eastern Mediterranean, particularly that of geographical Syria itself. This is not simply due to a desire to shift the focus, but rather because historically this region of the eastern Mediterranean has played a particularly significant, in a sense even central,

* Ahmad Shboul is Associate Professor of Arabic & Islamic Studies in the Department of Semitic Studies, University of Sydney. He is interested in Arabic historiography and Arab-Byzantine cultural relations, and currently directs an ARC project on 'urbanisation and social change in early Islamic Syria'.

¹ Most available sources for this period are in Arabic, including some written by Arabic-speaking Christians from Syria. It is planned to take due account of non-Arabic material, particularly Syriac and Greek, as well as archaeological evidence in this ongoing research.

² For example, the Pirenne Thesis (and most of the lively debate generated by it) is only concerned with the impact of the rise of Islam on western Europe.

role in both the Roman-Byzantine world of Late Antiquity and in the early Islamic period.³

In discussing social and cultural change and continuity in Syria after the coming of Islam, a number of important factors need, therefore, to be remembered. Some of these factors are connected with the position of the Arabs in pre-Islamic Syria, the importance of Christianity among the pre-Islamic Arabs of Syria and upper Mesopotamia, and the close links between Syria and the Hijaz, the birth place of Islam. Other factors have to do with Islamic teachings and Islamic Arab attitudes as well as actual policies, in early Islamic Syria, towards Christians and Jews as 'People of the Book'.

There is no doubt that the Arab Islamic expansion in both the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean regions constitutes a significant turning-point in world history. It is important to remember that it is not only, or even mainly, through religious conversion that Islam has transformed the old world of the eastern Mediterranean. A particularly remarkable outcome of the early Arab Islamic enterprise was perhaps the readjustment of the geopolitical and cultural orientation of the Near East. Moreover, a significant, but often ignored, historical fact in this context is that in such countries as Syria, including Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine — as well as Iraq and Egypt — religious conversion to Islam has never been complete. Indeed, it was perhaps never meant to be complete. Moreover, Islam as a religious, political and cultural force in the eastern Mediterranean has, in a sense, contributed to the historical self-definition of Eastern, particularly Arabic, Syriac and Coptic, Christianity.⁴

Unlike the conversion of the peoples of western Europe to Christianity, for example, the peoples of Islamic Syria, including Palestine, Jordan and Lebanon, as well as those of Iraq and Egypt, despite undeniable social and other pressures, were not subjected to any systematic process of religious conversion to Islam whether by political authorities or religious missionaries. In fact, during the early Islamic period, before the drastic

³ For the former period, see in particular the insights of Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity: from Marcus Aurelius to Muhammad*, London, 1971, particularly chs 15 and 16; F. E. Peters, *The Harvest of Hellenism: a History of the Near East from Alexander the Great to the Triumph of Christianity*, London, 1972.

⁴ See the insights of some modern Eastern bishops in Maximos IV Sayigh (ed.), *The Eastern Churches and Catholic Unity*, Edinburgh-London, 1963, the editor was Patriarch of Antioch and All the East, of Alexandria and of Jerusalem, for the Greek Melkite Catholic Church.

episode of the European crusades, the majority of the population of these countries under Arab Islamic rule remained Christian. This becomes particularly significant when one realises the geographical proximity of Syria, as well as of Iraq and Egypt, to the Hijaz, the cradle of Islam and the centre of the first Islamic religious and political community. Moreover, Syria, Iraq and Egypt have in turn played the role of political and cultural centres of an Arab Islamic Caliphate: that of the Umayyads in Damascus, the 'Abbasids in Baghdad and the Fatimids in Cairo.

Thus while these three regions became, and continue to be, central parts of an Arab-Islamic world politically and culturally, they still maintained considerable indigenous (Eastern) Christian communities. Furthermore, these Eastern Christian communities have been, and are today, largely Arabic speaking. In the case of historical Syria, as defined above, and also upper Mesopotamia and southern Iraq, Eastern Christians were not simply arabised with time after the Islamic conquest as might be assumed. Rather, most of them have had lived as Arabs, some of them hellenised or aramised, long before the coming of Islam, in certain cases before the triumph of Christianity.

It is instructive to contrast this with two other geographical areas to the east and west of these central Islamic lands. Thus while Iran has been almost entirely converted to Islam in religious terms, it has not been linguistically or culturally arabised. On the other hand, North Africa has been largely arabised in language and culture and virtually completely converted to Islam. It is obvious that Syria has been more linguistically and culturally arabised than it has been religiously islamised.

A corollary of this must be the need to question old assumptions about the historical process of the 'spread' of Islam, or 'islamisation' as it is sometimes imprecisely described. It seems plainly inaccurate on historical evidence to assume that the Arab Islamic conquest of Syria, Iraq and Egypt, for example, and the establishment therein of the political authority of Arab Muslim caliphs led necessarily to the immediate, or even eventual, mass conversion to Islam of the populations of these regions. Thus the terms 'spread' of Islam, or 'islamisation', when applied to these countries, need to be understood more correctly, as essentially referring to historical processes of political rule, social transformation, acculturation, arabisation, rather than religious conversion. The concept of 'islamisation' need not conjure up a graphic simile of some flood submerging the lands that came

in its way, with the assumption that regions close to the centre would have received more 'inundation' than outlying areas.

Compared to other regions, Syria as defined above (and to a lesser extent southern Iraq and upper Mesopotamia) would appear as unusual due to the long and considerable connections with Arabia and the Arabs in pre-Islamic times. The modern political map of the Arabian peninsula and the Middle East in general can obscure important aspects of historical and human geography. One of these aspects is the significant links between Syria, the wider Fertile Crescent, and the Arabian Peninsula as geographical-cultural area and also between the Arabs and their neighbours as people long before the Islamic period. In some sense, it could be argued that parts of Syria had been already relatively 'arabised', in terms of demography, language and culture, prior to the Islamic conquest. Thus with due recognition of the processes of hellenisation and romanisation, it can scarcely be assumed that in terms of society and culture, conditions in Syria under Roman and Byzantine rule were necessarily the same as in Asia Minor, for example.⁵

First, it is necessary to be mindful of the early and continued presence of Arab tribes and clans in Syria in pre-Islamic times, particularly in the eastern parts — between the western Lebanon range and the Euphrates, and also the east of the Jordan and southern Palestine, including the area near Gaza. In some cases, this Arab presence goes back to several centuries not only before Islam, but also before the Christian era. It is significant that the so-called 'earliest written reference to Arabs', i.e. the 9th-century B.C. Assyrian inscription, already speaks of the Arabs' presence as far north as the modern Syrian-Turkish border. Indeed a number of Arab tribes since ancient times had their areas of pasture and agricultural settlement in the Syrian and Mesopotamian steppes. Tribal Arab presence was also already established long before Islam in such parts of this region as Galilee, Mount Lebanon, Hawran, Golan, Damascus, Hims (Emesa), and the Euphrates basin. Some Arab clans were absorbed in the agricultural and urban life or were involved in regional and dynastic politics throughout the Hellenistic period.⁶

⁵ For parallels concerning Iraq, as distinct from Iran, under the Sasanians, see M. G. Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest*, Princeton, 1984.

⁶ See, in particular, Peters, *op. cit.*, and Shahîd, *Rome and the Arabs*, Washington, DC, 1984, pp. 5-15.

The earliest recorded military encounter between Arabs and Greeks in this region (4th century B.C.) refers to the Nabataean Arabs in modern-day Jordan. By the time Pompey arrived in Syria on behalf of Rome (64 B.C.), he had to deal with several influential, partly hellenised and aramised, Arab dynasties as far north as Edessa, Antioch and Emesa, as well as the Nabataean Arab kingdom between Damascus and Petra and further south.⁷

These facts would indicate that ancient Arab groups have for long considered Syria as part of their native sphere, not only in pastoral transhumance, but also in agricultural settlement, urban life, commerce and politics. Long before the Roman conquest of the Orient and down to the Arab Islamic conquest of the early seventh century A.D., Arab demographic, cultural and political presence in the Syrian region seems to have persisted. This is exemplified notably during the heyday of the Nabataeans of Petra and their extensive trade empire between the third century B.C. and the early second century A.D. It is seen again during Palmyra's brief rise to supremacy (3rd century A.D.) and in a different way afterwards in the role played by such Arab tribal powers as Tanukh, Salih, Kinda, Lakhm and Ghassan (from the 3rd to the early 7th century A.D.). The Roman authorities in the Orient, while obviously seeking to limit the impact of nomadic Arab tribes on Syrian lands, never succeeded, perhaps never attempted, to exclude them completely. The Roman *Provincia Arabia*, roughly corresponding to modern Jordan and the southern regions of the Syrian Arab Republic, was not only based on former Nabataean Arab domains, but continued to have a majority of Arab population. Other parts of Syria, as defined in this essay, also continued to have significant Arab populations under Roman rule, notably the area of Hims (Emesa).

Thus under Roman and Byzantine rule, Arab groups were an integral part of the native population of Syria and upper Mesopotamia. In addition to the role of such Arab states as Palmyra, and of Arab *foederati* such as Ghassan in the political, economic and cultural life of the Roman and Byzantine Orient, it is necessary to remember other hellenised, romanised Arab elements in several Syrian cities and in the countryside. The role of Arab groups in the history of pre-Islamic Syria thus both predates and survives the Roman conquest of the Orient. It cannot therefore be reduced

⁷ See Peters, *op. cit.*, p. 320ff.

to a pattern of sporadic raids or penetration by nomadic tribes from beyond the Roman *limes*.⁸

On the other hand, the Arabs of the Hijaz, Najd, the Yemen and the Gulf region, have had trade and kinship links with Syrians long before the Muslim conquest. The people of Mecca itself, including many of Muhammad's ancestors and contemporaries, traded with Syrian centres. Pre-Islamic Meccan-Syrian trade routes seems to have been more significant than Mecca's other trade routes. Muhammad's great grandfather, Hashim, is said to have been buried in Gaza where he died during his last trading journey from Mecca to the Palestinian coast. Muhammad himself reached Damascus as a merchant more than once before his prophetic mission, and the Hijaz-Syria routes seem to have been a significant factor in his subsequent diplomacy as a political leader.⁹

A second important point, regarding Syria and the Arabs, has to do with the spread of Christianity as the religion of practically all the Arab tribes, clans and urbanised families in Syria during the three centuries before Islam. To put it another way, it is worth remembering that the majority of the Christian population of Syria on the eve of the Muslim conquest were not ethnic Greeks or Romans. Rather they were largely indigenous Aramaeans and Arabs, albeit hellenised in the major cities, who were Eastern Christians, following either the Patriarchate of Antioch or that of Jerusalem.¹⁰ There were also Jewish and Sabian minorities. The native Syrian and Palestinian Christian Churches were represented, in the pre-Islamic period, by two main groups. The native hellenised Orthodox (Melkite) bishops of Syria and Palestine may have been in agreement most

⁸ For the role of the Arabs in the Roman and Byzantine Orient, see the detailed studies of Irfan Shahid, *op. cit.*, and his continuing series *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fourth Century*, 1984, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century*; *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, 2 pts, 1995; G. W. Bowersock, *Roman Arabia*, Cambridge, Mass., 1983; F. E. Peters, 'The Nabateans in the Hawran', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 97, 1977, pp. 263-77; also R. Dussaud, *La Penetration des Arabes en Syrie avant l'Islam*, Paris, 1955, first published in part in 1906.

⁹ See for example, F. E. Peters, *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam*, Albany, 1994, ch. 3; V. Sahhab, *Ilaf Quraysh: Rihlat al-Shita' al-Sayf* (The Pacts of Quraysh: the Winter and Summer Caravans), Beirut, 1992; see also A. Shboul, cited below.

¹⁰ On this process, see in particular J. Spencer Trimingham, *Christianity Among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times*, London & Beirut, 1979; I. Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs*, cited above, volumes on the 4th, 5th and 6th centuries, particularly pt 2 of the last volume.

of the time with the bishops of Constantinople and Rome. Indeed several of them had worked hard for ecclesiastical unity. Among their congregations, mostly Aramaic- and Arabic-speaking, there was perhaps a feeling of alienation towards Byzantium. This was certainly more so in the case of the other major group of native Christians, the Monophysites (Syrian Orthodox). The additional factor of ecclesiastical estrangement vis-à-vis Constantinople had been at work from the fifth Christian century, and had begun to lead to more hardened communal feelings, particularly from the time of Justinian I (mid-sixth century) onwards. It is important that both Muslim and Eastern Christian historians such as the 10th-century Melkite Bishop Mahbub (Agapius) of Manbij (Hieropolis) and the 12th-century Monophysite Syriac Bishop Abul Faraj Ibn al-'Ibri (Bar Hebraeus) speak of the Christian Arab tribes of Syria as a significant element numerically and politically on the eve, and after, the Arab Islamic conquest.

Thirdly, it is important to keep in mind the close historical and linguistic connections between the Aramaic (or Syriac) and Arabic groups in pre-Islamic Syria and upper Mesopotamia (and also Iraq). Their common Christianity, after the fourth century, was both a manifestation and a strengthening factor of historical links between the two peoples. In certain parts of Syria and Mesopotamia there was some degree of Arab assimilation, or perhaps 'mutual assimilation' with the Aramaean population in villages and towns to the extent that some scholars refer to a 'common spoken Arabic-Syriac idiom used by both peoples'.¹¹ This fact, together with the strong hellenising features of educated Syriac-speaking elites, including Monophysites, during the Byzantine period, had significant implications for processes of acculturation during the early Islamic period.

Fourth, we need also to appreciate the historical experience of the population of the Syrian cities and countryside during the Byzantine-Persian wars of 613-29, 'the last Great War of Antiquity' in the words of Peter Brown. One of the serious consequences of this war, particularly the prolonged Persian occupation of Syria and upper Mesopotamia, apart from devastation, was a certain weakening of the old Syrian Arab alliances with Byzantine authorities. It was in fact towards the end of the Persian occupation and about the beginning of the Byzantine restoration, that the

¹¹ N. V. Pigulevskia, *Araby u Granits Vizantii i Irana V IV-VI vv*, Moscow-Leningrad, 1964, pp. 10-11, 14-15; Arabic trans. by S. O. Hashim, Kuwait, 1986, pp. 22-23, 28; cf. Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest*, p. 222.

rising Islamic community under the skilful leadership of Muhammad succeeded in establishing pacts of mutual security with a number of strategic centres of Arab Christian, and in one or two cases Jewish, population in southern Syria. These included Ayla, Adhruh, Jarba and Miqna. At the same time Muhammad began to explore channels of contact with more powerful Christian Arab tribes in Syria, such as Judham, Kalb, Tayy, Bali and Kinda.¹²

On the other hand, a significant point to keep in mind is the official Muslim attitude towards Christians and Jews, as 'People of the Book' or the 'People of the Covenant' as reflected in the Qur'an, in traditions and policies of the Prophet Muhammad and in the practice of early Arab Muslim leaders during the conquest and for sometime afterwards. In practical terms, this attitude was exemplified by a series of written covenants, or peaceful security pacts (*aman* in Arabic), between Arab Muslim leaders of the conquest and the leadership of indigenous Christian populations (including local Arabs in certain cases) of Syrian towns and their hinterland.

An understanding of the above points is necessary in order to appreciate the situation after the Muslim conquest. In other words, to the Syrian Arabs and Aramaeans, the Muslim Arabs in their conquest of Syria did not simply erupt out of the unknown into a completely foreign land. Moreover, the Arabic- and Aramaic-speaking Christians of Syria, Mesopotamia and southern Iraq, with both of whom the Muslims were soon to establish close cooperation, were to become the significant mediators of cultural interchange. For the first century or so of the Islamic period, this applies particularly to those urban families who were experienced in the traditions of Byzantine administration and/or influenced by hellenistic traditions of thought and scholarship. There were among the vital factors of both continuity and change in the evolution of early Islamic society and civilisation.

Aspects of Change and Continuity

¹² See A. Shboul, 'Relations of the early Islamic Community with Byzantine Syria at the time of the Prophet Muhammad' (in Arabic), *Studies on the History of Arabia*, III, ed. A. T. Alansary, Riyadh, 1989.

Religious Change, Conversion and Culture

It is possible to raise a series of questions while keeping in view the concept of tension, or dialectical relationship, between continuity and change in Syrian society during this crucial period. A detailed investigation of a wide range of literary sources as well as numismatic, epigraphic, artistic, and archaeological evidence, would illicit some answers at least to some of these questions.

At this stage it is only possible to indicate the range of questions and some broad implications of such an inquiry. These include: the consequences and repercussions of the Islamic conquests; impact of Arab wars coming after an interregnum of Persian occupation and on the wake of a recent, very short-lived, Byzantine reconquest; the impact of the inauguration of the new Islamic Arab rule, first with its centre in the Hijaz, then the establishment of the Umayyad dynasty with Syria itself as a new imperial centre; the effect of dynastic change and the reverting of Syria to the status of a province, as a result of the fall of the Umayyads; the implications of policies of the `Abbasid regime with its Iraqi-Iranian-Indian Ocean orientation away from Syria and the Mediterranean. Linked with this is the impact of later political changes affecting Syria, including the establishment of regional dynasties, such as the Tulunids, Ikhshidids, Fatimids, all centred on Egypt with varying degrees of control over Syria, and the rise of such provincial dynasties as the Hamdanids, Mirdasids and `Uqaylids in northern Syria and upper Mesopotamia. Other questions include the effect of Islamic taxation on the economy and society of Syria; developments or decline in agriculture and in land and water management; the conditions of trade routes and regional and international commerce; the relationship and mutual impact of urban, agricultural and pastoral economic activities. Of some significance is the role of the evolution of early Islamic jurisprudence and its actual workings in Syria and upper Mesopotamia during this formative period .

The question of the role, successful or otherwise, of the central and regional political players in the processes of political and social integration is significant, particularly as Islamic Arab rule in Syria during this period has been described as an 'empire on trial'.¹³ Connected with this point is the issue of inter-community relations across tribal, local, and also

¹³ See K. S. Salibi, *Syria under Islam: Empire on Trial, 634-1097*, Delmar, N. Y., 1977. Although Salibi's subtitle may be justifiable, some of his assumptions and conclusions as well as the tenor of his interpretation remain unconvincing to me.

confessional, lines. At a more elevated conceptual plane, perhaps, it is necessary to take into consideration, and if possible to analyse, aspects of continuity and change in social and religious values. In this context the question of actual or perceived convergence and conflict between Christian and Islamic religious values deserves special attention. Perhaps even more crucial, in terms of social and political change, is to consider the tensions between Islamic religious values and old Arab tribal ones.¹⁴

Finally, from the point of view of the Christian communities, it is important to keep in mind the position of these communities and their relations with Islamic political authorities and the evolving Islamic milieu, at the ideological as well as the practical levels, including tribal relations and life in the countryside and the steppe. Moreover, the extent of the Byzantine factor needs to be investigated, both in the context of official Arab-Byzantine relations and in the history of changing ecclesiastical links between the Churches of the Orient, including the Melkite (Greek Orthodox) Church and the see of Constantinople. These are the kind of issues explored in the ongoing research on early Islamic Syria of which the present essay is but a provisional introduction.

In terms of any connection between the wars of the conquest and conversion, the Islamic historical literature on this period in Syria is generally more preoccupied with the details of the conquest and establishment of Arab Islamic rule, for both historical and juristic interests, than with the question of religious conversion. The contents of the peace covenants at the time of the conquest, as well as the broader, often quite detailed, historical narratives, seem to imply that there was relatively very little conversion as an immediate result of the conquest of Syria and upper Mesopotamia. As a general rule, the peace covenants guaranteed safety of the people, as well as their property, places of worship and freedom of religion in return for payment of a regular annual tax (*jizya*) either as a lump sum or as dues on individuals and produce.¹⁵

The question of the physical impact of the military operations of the Islamic conquest and subsequent new Arab settlement upon the Syrian population and landscape is in need of fresh and more thorough

¹⁴ For a comparative regional perspective, see A. Shboul, 'Aspects of Socio-cultural Continuity and Change in the Hijaz during the First Islamic Century' (forthcoming).

¹⁵ On these, see in particular M. Hamidullah (ed.), *Majmu'at al-Wathai'q al-Siyasiyya* (Collected Political Documents), Cairo, 1956; D. R. Hill, *Termination of Hostilities in the Early Arab Conquests AD 634-656*, London, 1971, pp. 59-98.

consideration. Much has been reiterated, often with little substantiation, about the destructive effect of the conquest on urban life in Syria.¹⁶ A survey of the operations of the conquest would reveal a pattern that was far more characterised by negotiated surrender rather than prolonged war. There were three significant battles, Ajnadayn, Pella and Yarmuk; only the latter was a major one and all three were fought outside, or even relatively far from urban areas. Most large cities were besieged, often for short periods. With the exception of Caesarea, extended siege or extensive killings on both sides do not seem to have been the norm. Many towns seem to have been taken with little or no actual fighting. At the end practically all cities were given covenants of security more or less according to the pattern alluded to above. That is, they were guaranteed the safety of persons, places of worship, and property, as well as freedom of religion. In certain cities, such as Jerusalem which surrendered to the caliph `Umar in person, and Damascus, for example, special mention was made of crosses under the terms of safety guarantees. There does not seem to be any evidence of wanton destruction of cities or neighbourhoods.¹⁷ In certain cases, there was mention of encouraging and safeguarding trade and other economic activities among the native populations.

In demographic terms, the conquest clearly led to considerable consequences. In the coastal cities and other major urban centres with large Byzantine garrisons, bureaucracy or large non-native population, the non-native population would have been considerably reduced as a direct result of the conquest. This was partly due to the heavy casualties reported for such major military engagements as the Yarmuk and Caesarea, partly due to the withdrawal of the troops and officials and their dependants. This also partly explains the extent of Arab settlement in vacated centres, particularly along the coast.

At another level, the dividing ethnic and religious lines during the wars of the Arab conquest of Syria were not always very clear from the perspective of the native Syrian Arabs, and to a certain extent Aramaeans. For a while at least, it is possible to speak of a crisis of identity among Christian Arab clans in Syria and upper Mesopotamia. More specifically, there were several Christian Arab tribes whose men fought alongside the Byzantines. But there were other Christian Arab tribes, particularly after

¹⁶ See for example Salibi, *op. cit.*, pp. 19ff., 161ff.

¹⁷ Hill, *op. cit.*, p. 59ff.; F. M. Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests*, Princeton, 1981.

the initial Muslim victories, who joined the forces of the conquest and fought alongside the Muslim Arabs against the Christian Byzantines without themselves converting to Islam. The second caliph, `Umar, is reported to have instructed his generals to seek the active support of the Arabs of Syria, without making it a condition that the latter should convert to Islam.¹⁸

Several Christian Arab tribes did eventually convert to Islam, of course. The question of the conversion of each tribe or clan is not easy to document in our present state of knowledge. Further research would probably clarify some of the uncertainties. With few exceptions, conversion of clans seems to have occurred not so much as a direct result of the conquest, but rather considerably later and in totally different circumstances. An early exception which seems to prove the rule is that of a branch of Ghassan who are reported to have converted to Islam at the time of the conquest and then quickly reverted to Christianity. This was apparently in protest at the less than differential treatment accorded their proud leader, the legendary Jabala, by the caliph `Umar.

Conversion by clans of certain Christian Arab tribes to Islam took place under the Umayyads, and more often under the `Abbasids and other later Muslim dynasties. More often than not this was connected with political and economic factors. Many clans however, including branches of Quda`a, Taghlib, Tanukh, Ghassan and other Yamani tribes remained Christian for a long time, some to our own days. For example, the large tribe of Tanukh which had been prominent in the area between the middle Euphrates and the Aleppo hinterland since pre-Islamic times, is known to have remained mostly Christian at least until the reign of the `Abbasid caliph, al-Mahdi (A.D. 775-785). This caliph is reported, by the 9th-century historian and geographer al-Ya`qubi, as having invited Tanukhi leaders to embrace Islam during a visit to their region.¹⁹ We are not told of the extent of their response to the caliph's call, but it is evident that increasing numbers of Tanukhis are later mentioned as Muslims in the sources. Most of this tribe probably converted by the mid-9th century and became thoroughly assimilated in the urban culture of the time producing many prominent scholars and judges. In certain cases, the same tribe would eventually have Muslim as well as Christian branches; examples of this can still be seen in

¹⁸ Tabari, *History*, ed. Ibrahim, vol. III, Cairo, 1969, p. 601.

¹⁹ Ya`qubi, *History*, Najaf, 1955, vol. II, pp. 398-9

the region in our times. Indeed many present-day Christian Arab clans and families in Syria, Palestine, Jordan and Lebanon still trace their origins to such tribes, particularly Ghassan.

An outstanding example of a large tribe that remained proudly Christian for a considerable time is the Banu Taghlib, originally active in the middle Euphrates region. What is particularly unusual about Banu Taghlib is that having remained Christian they refused the condition of paying the *jizya* from the outset. Instead, they negotiated with the caliph `Umar, who was far more flexible than many later Muslim rulers and jurists, to pay the *sadaqa*, which is a Muslim tax, although they had to accept to pay double the usual rate. Taghlib remained Christian well into the `Abbasid period while playing a significant role in Arab Islamic politics and culture. During the Umayyad period, they had produced several influential poets, including the famous al-Akhtal, the court poet of several caliphs and for a while a friend of John of Damascus (before the latter gave up his administrative position in the Umayyad court and became a monk). The Taghlib seem to have largely converted by the mid-9th century AD. This probably remained a nominal or superficial conversion, at least in the case of one clan of the large Taghlib tribe. For in the mid-10th century thousands of the Banu Habib clan of Taghlib chose to take the drastic step of going over to the Byzantine side, and at the same time reverting to Christianity. This appears to have resulted partly from tribal tensions, partly, perhaps more especially, from displeasure with the oppressive policies and heavy taxes imposed by Sayf al-Dawla, the otherwise-celebrated Arab Emir who was himself from the tribe of Taghlib.²⁰

The story of Taghlib illustrates the complexity of the situation of politically active Christian Arab tribes within the Islamic polity, particularly from the early `Abbasid period onwards. The problem for such groups does not seem to have been mainly one of religious repression. More often than not it was, rather, a combination of long term tribal conflict and political and economic pressures. There were already examples of disruptive tribal strife during the Umayyad period. However, this was not necessarily between Muslim and Christian tribes as such. Rather, it represented the age old rivalry between the so-called 'Qays' and 'Yaman'

²⁰ The episode is reported by the contemporary Arab geographer Ibn Hawqal, *Surat al-Ard*, ed. J. Kramers, Leiden, 1938, pp. 153-4, who explains this by Sayf al-Dawla's tyrannical policies.

divisions of the Arab tribes in Syria and upper Mesopotamia. This was often fuelled by economic factors and the divide-and-rule manipulation of caliphs, sultans or emirs.

At the individual level conversion did occur frequently. But the process of conversion, whether for individuals or clans, was not always in one direction only. For there are cases of conversion from Islam to Christianity and there are some documented cases of re-conversion by Arab individuals, families or clans to Christianity or to Islam throughout the period from the 7th to the 11th century A.D. (and indeed later).

Examples of individual and limited group conversion from Christianity to Islam can be found scattered in the biographical literature. But it is significant that, with some exceptions, this seems often to refer more to later generations than those contemporary with the conquest. A significant category in this context is that of war captives during the early Islamic conquests. Two points may be made here. First, apart from direct general references in such main sources as Tabari, for example, it is necessary to undertake more detailed research into the extensive biographical compilations to gain a clear picture. It is often only because a number of the descendants of former captives became famous, mostly in the areas of Arabic scholarship, literature or music, that we come across references to their family background, including such statements describing someone's father, mother, or grandfather as having been among the captives from the times of the conquest. Secondly, there were far fewer captives from Syria, upper Mesopotamia, Iraq and Egypt — countries with populations belonging to 'People of the Book' — in comparison with those from Iran or North Africa, for example.

In terms of demography, the process of increased Muslim population in certain parts of Syria after the conquest seems to be connected more directly with increased Arab migration and settlement of Muslim families and clans, rather than with any large-scale conversion of indigenous inhabitants. The obvious early increase in the proportion of Muslim inhabitants in the coastal towns of Syria-Lebanon-Palestine, and in the northern Syrian, Cilician, and Mesopotamian frontier towns (the *thughur*) facing Byzantium need to be explained essentially in the context of strategic considerations. This is not to say that Christian inhabitants of these regions, both Arab and Aramaean, were excluded from living in the ports and frontier centres. Indeed, some Christians are known to have sometimes participated in the war effort against Byzantium in different capacities.

Syria under early Arab Islamic rule seems to have experienced more social integration of tribal Arab populations in existing cities, towns and villages. In any case, most towns and eventually many of the large villages had mixed populations both in ethnic and religious terms, a fact documented by Arab geographers and travellers and in other genres of Arabic writing. It seems significant that, unlike Iraq, Egypt and North Africa, early Islamic Syria did not need new Arab 'garrison towns', such as Basra, Kufa, Fustat, or Qayrawan. The early camp of Jabiya, on the site of an old Arab Ghassanid position, was not, or rather was not planned to, evolve into a garrison town. From the beginning, Damascus became the main administrative centre and remained the most important city in Islamic Syria. Similarly Hims, Antioch, a number of coastal towns, such as Beirut, Tripoli, Jabla, and Ascalon, and also the Cilician centres of Tarsus and Adana became flourishing Islamic Arab cities.

Moreover, it seems from a careful reading of the sources, including the works of geographers, travellers and men of letters, that cities and towns in Syria and upper Mesopotamia throughout this period were generally characterised not only by religious diversity, but also by interaction across confessional barriers. It was not unusual to find Muslims and Christians, and in certain cases also Jews, sharing the same neighbourhood. There are references to both Christian and Muslim children sharing a class in the same school in Umayyad Damascus for example. Visits to each other's places of worship by Muslims and Christians are also documented.

A particularly interesting aspect of religious pluralism also occurred within individual Arab clans. This was perhaps more visible in certain groups with a high political or military profile in the early Arab Islamic polity. Apart from different branches of the same tribe being divided between the Christian and Islamic faiths, it is possible to find cases of mixed religious allegiance within the same small family. For example, a tribal Arab official, or even a governor, could be a first generation Muslim but his parents, or at least one of them, could remain Christian. In one instance at least, the Muslim official in question built a special church, or chapel, in the name of his Christian Arab mother. Although this evidently was not so common, its very occurrence is indicative of the type of environment prevailing in this early period. Among other considerations, this is obviously quite significant in the context of acculturation and cross-influences, as well as shared living across the two religious communities. Related to this, but quite distinct from it is the role played by the numerous

ex-slave girls of Greek and other Christian background who became mothers of Muslim children while they themselves could remain Christian.

Up to the end of the Umayyad period, the official policy of the state did not seem to include the encouragement of religious conversion. Indeed, there are well-known examples of blatant discouragement of such conversion. Although the examples usually come from Umayyad Iraq under the governor al-Hajjaj, rather than Syria, the point seems to illustrate the significant link between socio-economic factors and pressure for conversion, or in this case against it. For al-Hajjaj is credited with forcing back to their villages and their old religion those converts who fled to Islam as a religious identity to escape official taxation imposed by the government in the name of Islam.

The Umayyads were however very much aware of the need to implement distinct political and administrative measures to ensure arabisation and islamisation of their state, particularly after solving the dangerous crisis of civil war by the able `Abd al-Malik (A.D. 685-705). `Abd al-Malik and his immediate successors executed a series of far-reaching policies that in a real sense amounted to 'converting' the Umayyad regime from its previous, quasi-Byzantine, image to a more recognisable Arab and Islamic polity. It seems however that the first Arab dynasty was more interested in cultural and political conversion rather than religious conversion. `Abd al-Malik inaugurated the systematic arabisation and islamisation of such crucial institutions as the official registers of revenues in Syria (followed eventually by those of Egypt and Iraq), the coinage, the official papyri stationery, the official robes (*tiraz*) and the milestones along the old Roman roads. All these had been a legacy from the Byzantine period and the lettering inscribed on papyri, textile, coins had been Greek (Latin in the case of the early Roman milestones). The coins and papyri also had specific Christian symbols and formulae. All this was now converted into the Arabic script with appropriate unmistakable Islamic expressions. It may seem remarkable that it took the Islamic authorities about sixty years to achieve this. This however could be seen as further evidence for cultural continuity in the life of Syria during this period of transition. The changes finally implemented by `Abd al-Malik clearly pronounced a new cultural epoch in the life of Syria and the eastern Mediterranean.

`Abd al-Malik and his son and successor, al-Walid, also undertook an extensive building programme, particularly in Syria and Palestine, which

can be said to have partly converted the urban landscape of the region. In doing so, they ensured the implementation of a substantial Islamic dimension to be added to, or according to some scholars to distract from, the Byzantine legacy of Christian monuments in the Umayyad central province. The new buildings included such brilliant Islamic monuments as the Dome of the Rock and the Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem and the Great Umayyad Mosque in Damascus.

One important aspect that needs further study is the transformation of the church organisation and the ecclesiastical landscape of Syria during this period. At one level, the native Christian communities had to come to terms with the new political situation resulting from the establishment of Islamic rule in Syria and Palestine. This applies to the Melkite (Greek Orthodox) as well as the Monophysite (Syrian Orthodox) communities. Even the former, officially in close communion with Byzantium, showed enough realism and concern for positive relations with the new regime. Their bishops, native Syrians but thoroughly hellenised, played leading roles in negotiating the terms of the peace pacts with the Arab conquerors. A distinguished example of these is the contribution of the Palestinian Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem, in the terms given personally to the holy city by the caliph `Umar. Before long the Eastern Churches of Antioch, Jerusalem and Alexandria seem to have practically faded away from the Byzantine ecclesiastical orbit, though not necessarily its intellectual thought-world. However, the Melkite church consolidated its position as the leading church in the region, while the Monophysites who were particularly relieved of Byzantine attempts at controlling them, continued to flourish.

This period, as early as the 680s, witnessed a particularly significant new development among the Christian communities of Syria that was to have far-reaching implications at the ecclesiastical, cultural and, as it turned out, political levels. This was the birth of the Maronite community as a new Eastern Christian Church before the end of the seventh century A.D. The formation of the Maronite Church was essentially connected with internal ecclesiastical differences and was partly the product of the social conditions of the area, particularly the native culture of parts of the Syrian-Lebanese countryside. There is no doubt that the new political environment provided by the early Arab Islamic state indirectly facilitated this development.

Christians and Muslims

On the whole, the impact of the establishment of Islamic Arab rule in Syria has had very considerable impact on the native Christian communities. This has been manifested through two interrelated ways. The first is the consolidation of Islam as a majority religion in the country. This has not happened as a result of any systematic programme of religious conversion, but rather as the end-product of a long historical process that made possible the evolution of an Islamic political and cultural environment. The second has to do with the almost total arabisation of the Christian communities. This is particularly true of the Maronites, as well as of the original Greek Orthodox communities out of whom a Greek Catholic church later emerged. (This is now also exclusively called Melkite, although the latter term used to apply to all Eastern Greek Orthodox Christians of the Syrian regions). This long process of arabisation, which for some groups goes back to pre-Islamic times, was for the others brought about by the broader arabisation associated with Islam.

For Islam as a civilisation, particularly for Arab Islam, the contribution of the native Arab and Aramaean Christians of geographical Syria, upper Mesopotamia, and Iraq has been tremendous. This is connected with the efforts of their bilingual, occasionally trilingual, scholars, including monks and bishops, who fulfilled the vital role of intellectual and cultural mediators. This was not only between Christianity and Islam as religions, but more so between the Hellenistic tradition of Antiquity and the Arab Islamic tradition of learning that flourished during the first five centuries or so of Islamic history. The Arab and Syriac Christians were so instrumental in the crucial movement of translation into Arabic of Greek works of philosophy, medicine and other sciences. They laid the foundation for that fruitful reception, assimilation and study of the 'Sciences of the Ancients' into the world of Arabic Islamic learning.

In this and their joint contribution with their Muslim colleagues, Syriac- and Arabic-speaking Christian scholars were full partners in a significant enterprise. In a sense they were also teachers who enriched the Arabic language and helped make it a language of science. They have helped to 'convert' the Arabs and Islam of this period to much of Hellenism. It is true that most of this work was done under the patronage of the `Abbasids in Baghdad and that the Nestorian Christians of Iraq and Iran played a significant role in it. But the initiative had begun mostly in Syria and upper Mesopotamia under the Umayyads, and Syrian Christian scholars whether

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Monophysite, Melkite, Greek Orthodox or Maronite continued to contribute to this effort throughout this important period.