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# Introduction

AFTER A LONG CIVIL WAR, the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mun established his rule in Baghdad, the city that had been built by his ancestor al-Mansur some fifty years before. The Christians of the Levant had endured oppression from a series of local warlords in the course of this conflict. The establishment of the caliph in Baghdad offered them new opportunities to seek the patronage of central government. But this patronage came with strings attached. For any Christian leader to win the ear of the powerful, he would also need to present himself and his co-religionists as loyal and useful supporters of the new status quo.

Al-Ma'mun's reign was experimental in many ways. The new caliph toyed with designating a successor from outside the Abbasid family, the Shia imam 'Ali al-Rida. And he would be notorious in later Sunni circles for forcing Muslim scholars to agree to that the Quran was uncreated. But from a Christian point of view, his most disturbing innovation was to decree that small groups of non-Muslims could secede from their traditional leaders (Christian patriarchs and Jewish exilarchs) without penalty and nominate their own leaders. Until this point the caliphal government had tended to endorse the leadership structures of a small number of Christian confessions, all of which could trace their histories back to before the Islamic conquests of the seventh century. But al-Ma'mun's innovation threatened to alter this arrangement quite radically, and allow any disaffected Christian bishop to secede from obedience to the patriarch and from the wider structures of his confession.

This book focuses on the life and times of Dionysius of Tel-Mahre. Dionysius was al-Ma'mun's contemporary and a client of his general 'Abd Allah ibn Tahir. It was partly thanks to 'Abd Allah's support that Dionysius was able to retain the patriarchate, in the teeth of the complaints of rivals. And Dionysius' links with 'Abd Allah allowed Dionysius to act as a representative of the caliph in Egypt. These connections made Dionysius much more prominent and

secure than most of his predecessors. One major strand of this book is how Christian institutions were strengthened by the support they received from the caliph's government. In an era when the reach of government was becoming deeper and more effective, in such fields as taxation, the judiciary and the recruitment of a standing army, Christian leaders were able to gather tithes and issue legislation, facilitated by official support in the recognition of an official patriarch and the use of coercion against recalcitrant clergy.

The transformations of this period that resulted from the closer connection of Muslim government and Christian church were not only political and economic; they were also cultural and intellectual. When al-Ma'mun was on the cusp of allowing a proliferation of non-Muslim authorities, Dionysius tells us that he preserved the authority of the patriarchate by drawing an analogy between himself and al-Ma'mun as both being imams. Dionysius' attempts to draw on the cultural and political thought of the Muslim elite are the second major strand of this book.

The notion of an imam was a central feature of the political thought of the Abbasid family. The title 'imam' had been used to designate the rightful caliph in exile in the era before the Abbasid revolution against his 'tyrannical' Umayyad predecessors. And it had been used in a similar fashion to assert al-Ma'mun's legitimacy during his civil war with his brother. But often the term 'imam' was simply used as a synonym for 'caliph'; i.e., the ruler of the state. The jurist Abu Yusuf conceives of the imam as the proper object of all Muslim obedience: to obey the imam is obey God.<sup>1</sup> In addition to having this political meaning, the term 'imam' could also carry a lower-order meaning to refer simply to a prayer leader, who stood in front of a congregation in a mosque.

Dionysius uses the Arabic term 'imam' in his Syriac account of his audience with al-Ma'mun. In so doing he develops the meaning of the term to assert a political role for the Christian patriarchate within the caliphate. As imams, he allegedly told al-Ma'mun, patriarchs exhorted their congregations to peace and obedience. He stresses that this did not mean that he challenged al-Ma'mun's authority in such matters as capital punishment. Rather, Dionysius asserts that his authority had the same legitimacy as the caliph's, in that it flowed from the consent of his co-religionists, and that, like the caliph, the Christian imam assured the good order of the realm.<sup>2</sup>

1. Duri 2011: 49.

2. MS XII. 14 (IV, 519 / III, 68–69).

This justification for the authority of a Christian patriarch would also serve as a mandate for the caliph's troops to intervene against Dionysius' opponents. One of Dionysius' rivals, Abraham of Qartmin, known as 'Abiram', objected to Dionysius' omission of a traditional prayer. Dionysius represents this act of dissent as an affront to his role as imam, guaranteeing the good behaviour of the Christian masses.<sup>3</sup> Dionysius' self-fashioning as imam was both a defence of the status quo before the caliph and an excuse for an intervention against his rivals that was quite novel, and it gave him a power that few of his predecessors had enjoyed.

We are reliant on Dionysius himself for these statements. Naturally, we cannot know whether he really did say these things in front of the caliph. But it is striking that he expected the readers of his Syriac history to see the different resonances of the Arabic term. He seems to have envisaged a sympathetic audience that was already immersed in the elite Islamicate culture of the caliphate.

Marshall Hodgson defined 'Islamicate' as a 'social and cultural complex associated with Islam and Muslims . . . even when found among non-Muslims'.<sup>4</sup> I find the term useful here for describing the transfer of terminology from Muslims to non-Muslims in the caliphate, which allows us to recognize that Christians and Jews remained unconverted and bore different political rights from Muslims (and were therefore not 'Islamic'), but they were increasingly distinct from co-religionists in Byzantium and Francia, in terms both of their historical self-fashioning and of church governance and doctrine. This book describes how interactions with the caliphal government that was growing in power produced a distinctively Islamicate church.

This reuse of ideas of Islamic origin by a Christian leader illustrates the close links between Dionysius and Muslim rulers and intellectuals. But it also shows us that he considered it advantageous to replicate and adapt Islamic discourses for his own goals: to protect the rights of his co-religionists and to assert his own right to rule over them.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the two phenomena that

3. MS XII. 12 (IV, 509–10 / III, 56).

4. Hodgson 1974: I, 59. Ahmed 2016: 157–70 observes several problems with Hodgson's model, especially the priority it gives to 'interior religion' and its implicit downgrading of mere culture. Ahmed fears that this distinction gives ammunition to those who wish to prioritize Salafist interpretations over 'Asian' forms of Islam.

5. Weitz 2018: 3–5 comments that studying the involvement of subaltern elites in adapting imperial ideas and institutions is an underexploited approach in the historiography of the

I discuss—the changes in the church as an institution and the changes in the way in which Christian leaders expressed their worldview—were connected. Christians were being asked to acknowledge the clergy (as opposed to lay aristocrats) as their leaders, to pay money in tithes and to accept collaboration with the state. These demands were rendered palatable because of the clergy's claim that they acted as an effective advocate of Christian rights before Muslim rulers at the same time as they asserted social boundaries between Christians and Muslims on an everyday level.

### The Parting of the Ways?

Much recent scholarship has stressed the vagueness of boundaries between Muslims and others in the first centuries of Islam. One strand of this scholarship has highlighted the involvement of Christians in the earliest stages of the development of Islam. Scholars such as Guillaume Dye, Karl-Friedrich Pohlmann and Carlos Segovia have identified possible Christian contexts for the composition of parts of the quranic corpus.<sup>6</sup> Others, including Angelika Neuwirth, have pointed to the use of Christian concepts and vocabulary by the Quran's composer(s) that might have made it more attractive or comprehensible to Christian audiences.<sup>7</sup>

Fred Donner has taken a rather different approach by suggesting that Christians and Jews were a part of the believers' movement alongside converts from Arabian polytheisms. He argues that they remained so until the time of 'Abd al-Malik (r. 685–705), whose deliberate and public anti-Trinitarianism was directed toward Christian members of the movement. It was only at this point, Donner asserts, that we can speak of Islam as a religion distinct from a more ecumenical believers' movement.<sup>8</sup>

A second strand of recent scholarship has seen Islam, Christianity and Judaism as distinct religious traditions but emphasized the porosity of their boundaries and the ease with which ideas and practices flowed between them. Shared rituals provide some of the most striking examples. Muslims continued to practice common rituals with their Christian neighbours, such as 'sniffing the

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Islamic world, which tends to be interested in non-Muslim populations only through the lens of 'tolerance'.

6. Dye 2014; Dye 2011; Pohlmann 2013; Zellentin 2013; Segovia 2019.

7. Neuwirth 2010; Neuwirth 2014: esp. 25–26.

8. Donner 2010.

breeze', the Egyptian spring festival,<sup>9</sup> or the great feasts of Christmas, Easter and Pentecost.<sup>10</sup> Jack Tannous and David Taylor have noted the continuation of rituals of baptism (the baptism of St. John), which was used to protect children from the power of demons, among Muslims even into the twelfth century.<sup>11</sup>

Scholars of intellectual history can point to further examples of interconfessional exchange. Josef van Ess and Sidney Griffith have highlighted the role of *kalām* ('the science of dialectical speech') in the Islamic world of this period. This was a method of debate that sought to elucidate the nature of God and moral questions on the basis of rational arguments, without presuming the primacy of any specific scripture. The prevalence of *kalām* produced a relatively open environment in which Jews, Christians and Muslims (as well as freethinkers, Zoroastrians, dualists and Manichaeans) could all engage in joint discussion.<sup>12</sup>

The *mutakallimūn* were not moral relativists, and they aimed to convince others of their own persuasive version of the truth. But the existence of a shared culture of debate, conducted in Arabic, facilitated the spread of ideas among thinkers of different religious traditions.<sup>13</sup> As Garth Fowden has argued, the so-called Abrahamic traditions were united by Aristotle much more than they were by Abraham.<sup>14</sup>

The prestigious role of Christians in the translation movement from Greek to Syriac to Arabic has long been known,<sup>15</sup> but Sidney Griffith also highlights the degree to which Christian translation and use of the Bible were themselves influenced by quranic language.<sup>16</sup> In a world where intellectuals refined their

9. Mas'udi, *Muruj*, II, 70. Cf. II, 364.

10. Mas'udi, *Muruj*, III, 405; Muqaddasi 182–83 / 153.

11. Tannous 2018: 375–76 and Taylor 2015.

12. Cook 1980; Griffith 2007 (and Griffith 2002a–g); Becker 2003: 390–91; van Ess 2006; Keating 2006: 8–9; Beaumont 2018a. Van Ess 2017 discusses the origins of *kalām* at 55–64 and surveys the presence of diverse religious groups (and religious ideas) in the 'salon culture' of Baghdad at 488–536. For Zoroastrians in religious discussions, see de Jong 2016: 230. Treiger 2014a stresses the origins of *kalām* in Christian Christological discussion. The importance of arguments from first principles in *kalām* may be partly the result of different communities' refusal to accept one another's scriptures because of rival accusations of tampering (*tahrif*) (cf. Hayek 1986: 39). On 'freethinking' in Baghdad, see S. Stroumsa 1999.

13. Rudolph 1994; Moss 2016b; Hughes 2015: 91–95.

14. Fowden 2014. Cf. also D. King 2013 and D. King 2014.

15. Gutas 1998; Troupeau 1991.

16. Griffith 2013.

positions in order to defend the superiority of their religious traditions, they also borrowed the ideas and expressions of their interlocutors to make their defences more persuasive.<sup>17</sup>

Both of these two scholarly trends—the focus on a Christian presence within the caliphate and the emphasis on the blurred boundaries between religious communities—can be seen in the work of Michael Penn. Penn has noted that Christians writing in Syriac in the Middle East rarely recognized that their seventh-century conquerors had a distinctive religion.<sup>18</sup> Even in the Abbasid period, he observes, some Christian authors minimized the distinctions between Islam and Christianity.<sup>19</sup> And authors such as Jacob of Edessa who sought to demarcate the different communities mostly spoke to deaf ears in addressing non-elite community members who did socialize with outsiders, whether Muslims or heretics.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, moral legislation can more readily provide evidence of the presence of perceived social ‘problems’ than prove that these problems found effective solutions. Penn argues that the ways of Islam and Christianity had not fully parted even by the ninth century.<sup>21</sup>

However, as Yonatan Moss points out in a review, it is unclear when Penn thinks the ways did part, and when we might speak of distinct Muslim and Christian religious communities or meaningfully use the words ‘Muslim’ and ‘Christian’ to describe historical individuals.<sup>22</sup> The fact that sources do not report, or choose to underplay, differences in practice or that members of religious communities shared ideas and practices does not mean that boundaries between communities did not exist. As Luke Yarbrough observes, Penn draws an analogy between the study of Judaism and Christianity on the one hand and the study of Christianity and Islam on the other.<sup>23</sup> But Penn’s analogy fails to convince, both because Islam was a religion of the conquerors (who had the motivation and the means to assert their distinctiveness from the conquered) and because the seventh-century Near East already had a model of

17. Griffith 2002a–g and Beaumont 2018b. Griffith 2018: 3 comments that although Christian apologists did not treat the Quran as a canonical scripture, they quoted from it to support Christian teachings and used it as a source of ‘felicitous Arabic expression’.

18. Penn 2015a: 53–63.

19. Penn 2015a: 74–96.

20. Penn 2015a: 66–70, 145–48, 151–52, 164–65.

21. Penn 2015a: 182.

22. Moss 2018.

23. Yarbrough 2016b. Also see Tannous 2018: 396.

discrete religious communities in the legislation of the Christian Roman empire, which could be imitated by its successors.

## Creating Distinct Communities

Much of the recent scholarship that I have described here responds to two welcome developments in the study of religion and in the representation of the relationship between ‘Islam’ and ‘the West’. The first is the turn away from seeing religious traditions as essentialized categories. Scholars are increasingly reluctant to speak simply of religions, as if they were static things born from the heads of prophets. Rather, religions are phenomena that are constantly ‘in the making.’<sup>24</sup> They are also continuously linked by shared texts and narratives, which, in the case of the ‘Abrahamic’ religions in particular, serve as bridges for the transmission of ideas from one tradition to another.<sup>25</sup>

The anti-essentialism of approaches in religious studies in the late twentieth century is connected to the second development, namely growing efforts to chart the shared cultural legacies of ‘the Muslim world’ and ‘the West’, even to the point of breaking down the coherence of these two zones. Richard Bulliet’s coinage of an Islamo-Christian civilization is a good example of this approach for its emphasis that Christendom and ‘Islamdom’ were far more similar to one another than they were to other political-cultural systems.<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless, I follow Tom Sizgorich in stressing that something that monotheist traditions also had in common was their use of a series of social technologies that differentiated adherents of different religions into distinct communities and organized these into hierarchies. Figures such as John Chrysostom in fourth-century Antioch and Ahmad ibn Hanbal in ninth-century Baghdad underscored the need to keep outsiders and their ideas at a circumspect distance, even when the government granted these outsiders rights and legal protection.<sup>27</sup>

Chris Wickham, writing about conversion to Christianity in the Middle Ages, has recorded similar kinds of constraints in the area of institution building. He argues that the first stage of conversion, in which individuals accept a new religious identity, is fairly tolerant of older beliefs. But this tolerance is followed,

24. This literature is now very large, but see Nongbri 2013.

25. Cf. Gregg 2015.

26. Bulliet 2004.

27. Sizgorich 2012.



maybe generations later, by the development of church institutions that both police belief and enforce rules on tithing and marriage. This is the point at which some ideas are identified as having foreign origins and are censored.<sup>28</sup> Anthropologists have referred to this process as ‘anti-syncretism’, in which individuals’ beliefs and practices are aligned to their public religious identities.<sup>29</sup>

Though people did share ideas and practices between religious traditions, some religious traditions also constituted themselves as distinct communities. Such communities were led by religious elites who generated revenues and redistributed them as charity according to criteria they themselves controlled.<sup>30</sup> These definitions of the ‘deserving poor’ might encourage community members to obey the strictures of a religious elite. Community members were bound by rules to limit social contact with and marriage to outsiders.<sup>31</sup> Such restrictions ensured that property remained within the community and hindered the ability of community members to make alliances with outsiders that might undermine the importance of its leaders. Without the ability to control marriages and revenues in this way, religious communities could not have persisted from generation to generation.

The existence of boundaries between communities was not a natural or inevitable development. After all, the use of practices from multiple religious traditions to mark different life stages or to govern different aspects of an individual’s life has long been accepted in several East Asian societies.<sup>32</sup> Instead, we have to see the emergence of distinct confessional communities as the result of interaction between models and institutions present in the late Roman period on the one hand and the incentives and constraints provided by the caliphate on the other.

28. Wickham 2016.

29. Shaw and Stewart 2003.

30. For the control and definition of charity as a central feature of episcopal power, see Patlagean 1977; Norton 2007: 188; Benga 2013: 551; Brown 2002. For the significance of the Muslim charity tax (*zakāt*) and the gradual annexation of its collection and distribution by *muhaddithūn* such as the followers of Ibn Hanbal, see Salaymeh 2016: 344; Mattson 2003: 39–40.

31. Here I draw on the broad literature on group maintenance in modern and contemporary studies, e.g., Gordon 1964; van der Berghe 1987; Goody 1976; Kalmijn 1998; van Leeuwen and Maas 2005.

32. Gellner 1997. See also Liu 1988: 175 for the incorporation of local cults into Chinese Buddhism and Palumbo 2015 for Taoism and Buddhism as two poles on a spectrum of belief in fourth-century China.

## Clerical Leadership

It is important to recognize there was no single ‘Islamic’ response to religious and cultural diversity.<sup>33</sup> The Quran does conceive of humanity as divided into confessional communities, of which the Jews, the Christians and the Muslims are the most prominent.<sup>34</sup> And it conceives of pre-Muhammadan prophets as lawgivers, in the sense that they issued rules for their followers, as the Quran and the Torah both do to some extent.<sup>35</sup> These quranic presumptions may have encouraged Muslim rulers to classify conquered populations according to confessional identity and to endorse clerical leadership of these communities. Nevertheless, it is not clear that such expectations directly determined how non-Muslims were governed and classified in the Umayyad period, for instance. Nor is the meaning of the Quran’s vague and often contradictory statements on the subject self-evident.<sup>36</sup> Neophyte Edelby has suggested that lawgiving by Christian patriarchs was a response to the quranic expectation that each religious community should have its own law.<sup>37</sup> But we might also argue that patriarchal lawgiving represents a continuation of pre-Islamic traditions of canon law and of bishops’ official roles as judges and arbitrators in the Roman period.<sup>38</sup>

33. Dorfmann-Lazarev 2008: 75 gives this impression by describing the installation of a system of rules in the seventh century that lasted ‘from the Muslim conquests to 1922.’

34. Karamustafa 2001 comments that the Quran’s acceptance of multiple *ummāt*, defined by their respective religious traditions, is a peculiar combination of human dissent and divine preference (discussing Q2:213, 16:120). W. Smith 1991: 81–86 argues that ‘Islam’ was unusual in launching into a world that already had traditions with a developed self-consciousness, a context that is reflected in the Quran’s division of humanity into different ‘religions’ and its conception of ‘Islam’ as a closed system.

35. Van Bekkum 2007 discusses the Karaite treatment of the Torah as a source of law, which responded to Muslim expectations of prophets’ acting as lawmakers but also undermined Rabbinic claims that the Talmud should be a source of law.

36. Donner 2011 argues that several of the state’s administrative functions were retrospectively identified with terms used in the Quran that had originally lacked this specific sense. One example may be the use of the term *jizya* for the poll tax. The term *jizya* is associated in the Quran with the humiliation of the payers, but the poll tax in the caliphate may not have originally carried this association. Cf. Legendre and Younes 2015.

37. Edelby 1950–51. Simonsohn 2016b: 236 (citing earlier literature) suggests that in the eighth and ninth centuries Christians developed legislation that was more explicitly rooted in religious sources in response to Muslim expectations.

38. Humfress 2007: esp. 34–35, 155–71.

Alan Walmsley argues that ‘rather than enervating Christian society, Muslim rule strengthened Christian communities and their leaders as they responded to new challenges and opportunities, encouraging them to become increasingly self-reliant, reinforcing self-identity and building a new cultural orientation.’<sup>39</sup> This is true up to a point. I certainly concur that the period following the conquest created new opportunities for minority groups and that Christians began to write in Arabic. But we should not take for granted the particular type of Christian leaders that arose or the kind of social identity that they attempted to reinforce. Clerical authority sometimes came at the cost of the authority of non-Muslim lay aristocrats. Furthermore, behind the general term ‘Christian’ lurk a number of competing confessions, only some of which were granted influence or recognition by the caliphal state.

A glance at the historiography of South Asia helps to illustrate how traditional leaders can play a key role as native informants for rulers and, in the process, exclude the narratives of others, contributing to the reclassification of religion. Historians of British India have highlighted the extent to which ‘Hinduism’ is a product of Muslim and Christian expectations of a religion as a discrete entity with its own scripture, on the model of the Bible or the Quran. But the classification of diverse beliefs and practices in different parts of India as ‘Hinduism’ also provided an opportunity to Brahmins who could articulate the common features of this Hinduism to their rulers. The reclassification of the religious landscape was thus not solely an imperial imposition but also the elevation of certain Sanskrit texts and Brahmin clergy as embodiments of the ‘Hindu tradition.’<sup>40</sup>

Both Jews and Christians possessed institutions that supported community members with welfare and education and that restricted, or attempted to restrict, social interactions with those outside the community.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that clerics and intellectuals effected a redefinition of non-Muslim religions that responded to Muslim expectations but did so in a way that was varied and innovative.<sup>42</sup> For instance, centralized rule by the patriarchs of Antioch and Alexandria was portrayed as an intrinsic part of the

39. Walmsley 2007: 124.

40. Bayly 1988: 155–58, esp. 156: ‘Traditional India was not a rigid society. It was British rule which made it so, codifying many localised and pragmatic customs into a unified and Brahminised “Hindoo Law” and classing people into immutable castes.’ Cf. R. King 1999; Nongbri 2013: 109–17.

41. See further discussion in chapter 6.

42. Some non-Muslim religious traditions underwent much greater redefinition in response to Islamic expectations of religion and prophecy. See, for instance, van Bladel 2009: 234–37 for

Christian religion, which the caliph was obliged to support because of the agreements of his predecessors.<sup>43</sup>

One effect of the ability of patriarchs such as Dionysius to establish close links to the caliph and to speak on behalf of Christianity was that it isolated groups who might have called themselves Christians but who did not acquire this kind of access. Both Marcionites and Manichaeans held cosmological ideas that were quite unlike those of Nicene Christians (that is, of the mainstream confessions of both the Roman world and the caliphate). They also used very different scriptural canons. Both groups nonetheless called themselves Christians.<sup>44</sup> The fact that Arabic sources do not call them Christians is, in part, due to the success of other, more numerous and influential groups in appropriating exclusively the identity of the Christians who are accorded rights and status in the Quran.

By a similar token, the influence that Dionysius and his fellow patriarchs were able to wield at the Abbasid court and the revenues they were allowed to collect as a result from their co-religionists were substantial incentives toward the merger of smaller groups whose leadership did not enjoy such benefits. A very nearly successful attempt at union between the Julianists and the Jacobites may be an example of this process from the early Abbasid Jazira.<sup>45</sup>

## Hierarchy and the Insecurity of Minorities

The authority granted to clerical leaders is sometimes represented as a sign of the tolerance embodied by Islamic methods of governing diverse societies, especially in the Abbasid and Ottoman periods.<sup>46</sup> But we should

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the emphasis of Harranian ‘pagans’ on their following of Hermes as a monotheistic prophet who provides a *sunna* and a *shari‘a* and constitutes the Harranians as a *milla*.

43. I discuss this type of representation in chapter 8.

44. The sixth-century Syriac *Life of Aba*, 3, suggests that the term ‘Christians’ (*krīstyanē*) was used in one part of northern Iraq to refer to Marcionites rather than Nicene Christians; see the discussion in Fiey 1970b. For Mani as ‘apostle of Christ’, see Sundermann 1991, and for Manichaeans as ‘true Christians’, see Lieu 2007: 291. Both groups were sufficiently significant to merit refutations by John of Damascus and the patriarch Timothy I in the eighth century (Griffith 2016: 35; Briquel-Chatonnet et al. 2000: 9) and by ‘Ammar al-Basri and Moses bar Kepha in the ninth (Hayek 1986: 42; Vööbus 1975).

45. See chapter 3.

46. Edelby 1950–51; Barkey 2005. Barkey and Gavrillis (2016) explicitly consider the Ottoman *millet* system a product of the ‘pact of Umar’. Tas 2010: esp. 499 sees it as stemming from the religious pluralism of the seventh-century Constitution of Medina. The two latter claims are examples of wishful thinking.

remember that clerical powers were predicated on an arrangement that kept non-Muslims unarmed and inferior to Muslims in the confessional hierarchy, both of which were important mechanisms in enabling a small number of conquerors to maintain control over very large non-Muslim populations.<sup>47</sup>

Writing of the late Roman empire, Michael Maas has argued that the management and classification of ethnic and religious diversity was a key element in the maintenance of empires through hierarchies within an empire's borders and binary divisions vis-à-vis absolute outsiders.<sup>48</sup> 'Tolerance' of ideas and practices could be an element in what Brian Catlos calls an 'authoritarian toolbox'; it could be used to encourage minority groups to endorse a hierarchy in which they were placed in the middle and to share in collective prejudice against outsiders who were not deserving of such tolerance.<sup>49</sup>

In the case of the caliphate, Lena Salaymeh suggests that we might think of Jews and Christians as 'semi-citizens', dependent on the government for protection and recognition.<sup>50</sup> They were officially superior to religious outsiders (such as Manichaeans or pagans) or political enemies (such as the Romans), and they were accorded rights and legal protections. But they could also be rhetorically associated with these external groups in order to demonstrate the precariousness of their position in society. For instance, al-Jahiz accuses Christians in Baghdad of introducing ideas from Manichaeism or 'pagan' philosophy that disturb and confuse innocent Muslims.<sup>51</sup> Likewise, authors of *futūḥāt* works, such as Azdi, describe Christians in Syria as *mushrikūn*, the term used in the Quran for the 'polytheist' opponents of Muhammad among the Quraysh, who reportedly associated other deities with God. The *futūḥāt* works draw on this binary language and condemn Christians for their veneration of the cross and their prideful resistance to the Muslims.<sup>52</sup> Finally,

47. For comments on the Ottoman situation, critical of attempts to use this in modern multicultural debates, see B. Turner 2013: 287. Braude 2014 stresses that there were many different *millet* 'systems'.

48. Maas 2003. Cf. Schott 2008: 10–11; Lyman 2003.

49. Catlos 2014: 864.

50. For 'semi-citizenship' in the caliphate, see Salaymeh 2016.

51. Al-Jahiz, *Refutation of the Christians*, 4.7. See also discussions in Chokr 1993: 58–61; Gibson 2015: 124–25, 134, 189.

52. E.g., Azdi, *Futuh al-Sham*, 107, where 'Amr ibn al-'As writes to Abu 'Ubayda al-Jarrah after the conquest of Damascus that God will never allow disbelievers to overcome believers. For the cross as a (useless) battle standard at Yarmuk, Azdi, *Futuh al-Sham*, 220.

Dionysius of Tel-Mahre is very conscious of Muslim attempts to conflate Mesopotamian Christians with the Romans. He stresses that Mesopotamian Christians are the descendants of those conquered people who concluded a treaty with the Muslims and were promised religious rights and security in return for laying down their arms and paying taxes.<sup>53</sup> Dionysius' anxiety reflects the fact that not all Muslim elites felt that Christians deserved these protections: to some they were simply a defeated people whose role was to labour for and pay taxes to their conquerors.<sup>54</sup>

These three ninth-century examples all illustrate that some models of Muslim–Christian relations entailed a hierarchy in which Christian religious practice was tolerated and Christians were protected as long as they obeyed certain conditions. On the other hand, the narratives of conquest and the description of Christians in the Quran were sufficiently malleable that some Muslims could simply collapse humanity into a binary of Muslims and non-Muslims, which could be equated to the binaries of pure and impure, believer and nonbeliever, and conqueror and conquered. I believe that the insecurity of categories helped to keep Christian representatives as clients of the caliph's patronage and supporters of his rule, since it was ultimately the caliph's intervention that ensured that Christians' rights were protected in practice.

## Writing about Minorities in the Caliphate

There is a temptation to write in general terms about the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims within the caliphate. This is certainly a feature of several classic works on the treatment of non-Muslims that tend to conflate the experience of different Christian and Jewish confessions (while often ignoring the experience of Zoroastrians and Manichaeans).<sup>55</sup>

53. Discussed in chapter 7.

54. E.g., MS XII. 9 (IV, 499 / III, 36), where Tahir's governor in Edessa rejects the citizens' complaints when troops are billeted on them: 'Why do you complain to me[,] Christians? In the time of the Romans you lived off this land while our ancestors wandered in the desert. . . . Now [that] we have seized this land from the Romans by our swords, why do you find it so difficult to leave it? . . . Pay the tribute and shut up'.

55. Fattal 1958; Tritton 1930. Note the comments of R. S. Humphreys (1988: 257–58) on the ahistorical approach of these works. For Zoroastrians, see Choksy 1997, Savant 2013 and the important article of de Jong 2016. For Manichaeans, see Chokr 1993 and Reeves 2011.

In this book I attempt to differentiate between various confessional groups as well as between divergent social classes and regional experiences. One advantage of the chronicle sources and saints' lives that I employ in this book is that they often offer fine-grained detail, which allows us to escape the trap of generalizing about non-Muslims *tout court*, an approach that ignores differences among communities and change over time. These sources also allow us to track their authors' varied kinds of self-fashioning: sometimes the 'we' of the text is an ethnic group (Suryaye as opposed to Armenians, for instance) or the inhabitants of a region (the people of the mountain) rather than explicitly a religious group.<sup>56</sup> And they can reveal how the same word is used differently across time and space, sometimes even within the same source. Nevertheless, these sources do not present us with the unfiltered experiences of any given sector of the population. Rather, they are often interventions by sectarian entrepreneurs, who seek to present the past to engender behaviour in the present and/or to exclude groups or individuals from the collective identity that the authors imagine for their readers.

In this book I have chosen to write chiefly about the Jacobites, the Miaphysite confession that owed allegiance to the patriarch of Antioch and that chiefly employed Syriac as a liturgical language. My main source is the *Chronicle* of Michael the Syrian, a twelfth-century Jacobite patriarch, which embeds the work of the earlier Dionysius of Tel-Mahre.<sup>57</sup> I will make some comments shortly on the Christian confessions of the Middle East, on the terminology used to describe them and on my primary sources, especially on how we might identify Dionysius' work. But I should stress that my immediate purpose is to investigate how Dionysius and near-contemporary historians in the Jacobite tradition imagined their environment and to demonstrate that they were overwhelmingly concerned with the internal affairs of the Jacobite church and with their relationship to Muslims and their government. They do mention some other minority communities (the Melkites and the Maronites in particular), but this interest is secondary. I invoke examples from other communities for two purposes: in order to clarify causation in the Jacobite case and to show how Jacobites used the example of other communities in their own self-fashioning.

56. I discuss this vocabulary in chapter 9.

57. On Michael in general, see Weltecke 2003 and, more briefly, Weltecke 2010 and van Ginkel 2006.

## The Miaphysites in the Sixth Century

The Jacobites were the most numerous and significant Miaphysite confession of the Middle East in the eighth century. Miaphysitism is a Christological position that asserts Christ's united human and divine nature, and many of its adherents have found it difficult or impossible to accept the Christological statements of the 451 council of Chalcedon.<sup>58</sup> Miaphysitism was briefly an imperial orthodoxy under the emperor Anastasius (491–518), and it was championed by the patriarch of Antioch Severus (d. 538), as well as by several sixth-century Syriac-speaking theologians, such as Philoxenus of Mabbug (d. 523).<sup>59</sup> Anastasius' successors Justin I (518–27) and Justinian (527–65) reasserted Chalcedonianism as the imperial orthodoxy, and Severus was exiled to the Egyptian desert. Nevertheless, Justinian and other sixth-century emperors did make several substantive attempts at union and tended to treat the Miaphysites as schismatics rather than simply heretics. There was periodic use of force against recalcitrant monks and clergy, and this was sometimes represented as persecution by Miaphysites, but the imperial court continued to be a source of (indirect) patronage and arbitration for Miaphysites, especially in Constantinople. It was against the background of this oscillating government policy that the missionary bishops John of Tella (d. 538), John Hephaestu and Jacob Baradeus (d. 578) ordained priests and consecrated bishops in an independent Severan Miaphysite hierarchy in the Levant, the Aegean and Anatolia.<sup>60</sup>

There is a tension in the attitudes of Severan Miaphysite authors of the sixth century toward the Roman emperor and the Chalcedonian churches. On one hand, emperors such as Marcian (450–57), who convened Chalcedon, and Justinian were sometimes reviled as persecutors.<sup>61</sup> But on the other hand, there was real hope for reconciliation, and Miaphysites such as John of

58. For Miaphysite Christology, see Lebon 1909 and Grillmeier and Hainthaler 2013. Winkler 1997 played a major role in popularizing the term 'Miaphysite'. Horn 2006: 8–9 prefers 'anti-Chalcedonian', but I avoid this because some Miaphysite churches did accept the disciplinary canons issued at Chalcedon, even if they rejected its Christology. Blaudeau 2016 discusses the debate on the theological terminology and summarizes the older literature.

59. On Severus, see Alpi 2009; Menze 2008: ch. 1. On Philoxenus, see Michelson 2014.

60. I sketch this narrative in Wood 2010: 167–70. See also Grillmeier and Hainthaler 2013: 187–91. There were other, non-Severan Miaphysite churches as well. The Julianists were the most prominent in our period.

61. Wood 2018b.



Ephesus (d. 588) conceived of the movement as ‘an orthodoxy in waiting’. People accepted communion, attended services and visited pilgrimage sites in churches of the ‘wrong’ confession.<sup>62</sup> A number of significant Miaphysite intellectuals did cross over to the Chalcedonians in the late sixth century,<sup>63</sup> and Monenergism, the early seventh-century compromise formula, was briefly successful in reconciling substantial numbers of Miaphysites to accept communion with Chalcedonians.<sup>64</sup> In the sixth century the boundaries between Miaphysites and Chalcedonians were often blurred in practice, even if episcopal and priestly hierarchies diverged by about 600.

### The Jacobite Church in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries

The history of the Miaphysites after the Arab conquests is frequently very obscure. The parts of Michael’s *Chronicle* that discuss the Jacobite church are often limited to brief biographies of the patriarchs. Hagiography is particularly important for our understanding of the period circa 630–740, for which it provides localized insights into the experience of different Jacobite communities, especially in former Roman Mesopotamia.<sup>65</sup>

The Jacobite church of the seventh and eighth centuries was ruled by a patriarch of Antioch who claimed to be a successor of the patriarch Severus. But though the patriarchs retained the title of Antioch, they never ruled from the ancient capital of Roman Oriens and instead resided at rural monasteries in Syria and Mesopotamia.<sup>66</sup>

The role of the patriarchs was, in theory, to uphold the church’s orthodoxy and the canons.<sup>67</sup> In practice, however, the patriarchs did not seek to regulate

62. Wood 2010: 166–73; Wood 2018b. Cf. Mikhail 2016: 178–80 on Egypt.

63. See Van Nuffelen forthcoming for the examples of Probus and John in the late sixth century. Another example is the Severan Miaphysite patriarch Paul the Black; see Brooks 1929 and Blaudeau 1996.

64. Moorhead 1981; Meyendorff 1989: ch. 10; Booth 2013a: 206–8; Haldon 2016: 37.

65. See chapter 1.

66. Hage 1966: 10–11. Note the useful list of monasteries in Hage 1966: 107–9. The two main surveys of Jacobite church structures in the caliphate are Hage 1966 and Nabe-von Schönberg 1977. Both suffer from a failure to recognize change over time, rooted in a lack of source criticism. And their division of material at the reign of Cyriacus means that they cannot trace important changes in attitudes across the period 750–850. Nevertheless, I have benefited from both books’ clear exposition of the evidence.

67. Hage 1966: 14; Nabe-von Schönberg 1977: 12.

the church by issuing their own canons until the end of the eighth century, which is a sign of the church's greater centralization under the Abbasids. The patriarchs travelled widely to free prisoners, petition the caliph, investigate accusations against incumbent bishops and convoke synods.<sup>68</sup>

Occasionally patriarchs were appointed after being senior bishops. But it was not uncommon for unordained monks to be elected as patriarch and pass through all ranks of ordination on successive days, as occurred in the cases of George of Beltan and Dionysius.<sup>69</sup> Several patriarchs had served their predecessors as archimandrites or *syncelloi* (chief administrators), and this pattern may have allowed standing patriarchs to wield some influence over their succession.<sup>70</sup>

Unlike the church of the fourth century, the Jacobite church required that all bishops be monks.<sup>71</sup> In practice, patriarchal elections were dominated by a small number of monasteries. The most significant in the seventh century were Gubba Barraya ('the outer cistern') near Cyrrhus in northern Syria and Qenneshre ('the eagles' nest') also in northern Syria. Qenneshre was the most significant of these, and in the period 591–845 monks of Qenneshre held the patriarchate for 136 years.<sup>72</sup> After about 740 these two monasteries were joined by several others, all, not coincidentally, near to new political centres: these were Qartmin in the Tur Abdin (the modern monastery of Mor Gabriel), as well as the monastery of the Pillars and the monastery of Mar Zakkai, both in Raqqa.<sup>73</sup> The latter two had been dedicated in the sixth century but flourished in the conditions of mid-eighth-century caliphal patronage. Finally, the monastery of Mar Mattai near Mosul also deserves mention in this context because

68. Hage 1966: 18. Debié 2015a: 145–46 summarizes the itinerary of Dionysius himself.

69. Nabe-von Schönberg 1977: 10.

70. Hage 1966: 13. MS appendix III: V, VII.

71. A clear statement is given in Ibn Jarir 31, 101.

72. Tannous 2018: 171.

73. Honigmann 1954: 52. Palmer 1990 is focused on the monastery of Qartmin. For the foundation of the monastery of the Pillars by Justinian's wife, Theodora, see MS XI. 5 (IV, 414 / II, 420). The monastery was burned by the rebel Nasr ibn Shabath during the fourth fitna (MS XII. 7 [IV, 494 / III, 24]), but it recovered sufficiently for Dionysius to be ordained deacon there (MS XII. 10 [IV, 503 / III, 43]). The monastery of Mar Zakkai was also a sixth-century foundation whose monks had been persecuted by the Chalcedonians but which had also hosted several early Miaphysite synods. For two mosaic inscriptions in verse at Mar Zakkai, see Brock 2009: 292. Both monasteries continued to produce numerous bishops throughout the period under consideration.

of its significant influence over sees in Iraq. Chapters 2, 4 and 5 consider the changing fortunes of these monasteries under Abbasid rule.

These monasteries also stood out as important intellectual centres. The Church of the East patriarch Timothy envied the library of Mar Mattai.<sup>74</sup> Seventh-century Qenneshre was probably the place where translations of Greek philosophy and patristic theology were made for later generations of Syriac-speaking clergy.<sup>75</sup> In addition to being Dionysius of Tel-Mahre's home monastery, Qenneshre also trained the famous intellectuals Jacob of Edessa, Severus Sebokht and Thomas of Harkel.<sup>76</sup> Monasteries were significant scribal centres in this period, and manuscript copies were an important (and expensive) output of monastic intellectual life. One theme of Dionysius' history writing is Qenneshre's rivalry with the other great monasteries, sometimes expressed through Qenneshre's claims to an intellectual heritage and through denigration of the ignorance of his competitors.<sup>77</sup>

The Jacobite church of the eighth and ninth centuries contained three regions that the chronicles register as politically active. The first of these was Mesopotamia, which corresponds roughly to the Arabic Jazira. Wolfgang Hage has aptly described it as the 'hinge' of the church: it encompassed the cities of Edessa, Harran, Amida and Reshaina, whose bishops were all significant players in the election of the patriarch and where many of the major synods of the church were held.<sup>78</sup> Edessa, in particular, could draw on a prestigious history as a centre of Syriac scholarship in the Roman period and as the capital of the pre-Roman kingdom of Osrhoene.<sup>79</sup> Dionysius himself was the scion of several Edessene aristocratic families, the Gumaye and the Rusafaye.<sup>80</sup> However,

74. Barsoum 2003: 359. For Timothy's letter (Letter 43), see Tarán and Gutas 2012: 80. The library of Mar Mattai features prominently (if polemically, as a trove of magical spells) in the *Life of Rabban Hormizd*, 94/190.

75. D. King 2013; Tannous 2013; Tannous 2018: 169–98.

76. Barsoum 2003: 317, 325–28, 334–50; Tannous 2018: 171–72.

77. Michael the Syrian includes biographies of several Qenneshrite intellectuals (X. 24 on Athanasius Gamala; X. 26 [IV, 391 / II, 381] and BH HE I, 267 on Thomas of Harkel; XI. 7 on Severus of Samosata; a brief note on Severus of Sebokht at XI. 8 [IV, 423 / II, 433]; and XI. 15 and BH HE I, 289–91 on Jacob of Edessa). The bias in favour of Qenneshre in modern histories of Syriac thought may ultimately reflect our reliance on Dionysius and the traditions of his monastery.

78. See the list of synods in Hage 1966: 110–11 and Mounayer 1963.

79. Millar 2015d; Millar 2015e; Wood 2010: chs. 3–4.

80. See chapter 1.

the period under study witnessed serious challenges to Edessa's primacy with the new political prominence of Harran, which served briefly as the Umayyad capital, and Maypherkat, which was deliberately promoted by its bishop Athanasius Sandalaya.<sup>81</sup>

Raqqa, the capital city founded by Harun al-Rashid (786–809), was also the most significant Jacobite centre in the Jazira (and in the caliphate) throughout the period circa 780–880. Al-Rashid's foundation incorporated the ancient city of Callinicum as well as the military colony of Rafiqa.<sup>82</sup> Raqqa was the site of synods and the consecration of patriarchs, and influence with the Arab governors of Raqqa was central to patriarchal authority. Three of the four patriarchs who ruled in this period were from Raqqan monasteries.<sup>83</sup>

The second of the Jacobite church's active regions was Syria, which, in the usage of the chronicles, corresponds to the lands west of the Euphrates. However, we should note that Jacobite monasteries tended to be distributed inland, and the major cities of Roman Syria, Antioch and Apamea, remained in Chalcedonian hands. The official residence of the patriarch lay in the monastery of Eusebona, on the outskirts of Antioch (though Raqqa seems to have been much more important in practice).<sup>84</sup> There were also Jacobite sees further to the south, in Damascus and Jerusalem, but we hear very little of the activity of their bishops. This silence may be explained by the fact that most of our sources were produced in a small number of significant monasteries, and places without connections to these nurseries of patriarchs fell outside the sources' interest.

The third region that I discuss is Iraq. It is sometimes referred to in Syriac as 'Beth Parsaye', the land of the Persians, because it was the portion of the Jacobite church that had lain in the former Sasanian empire.<sup>85</sup> A Jacobite presence had been established here through refugees fleeing Roman persecution and through missions that targeted the Arab groups that lived between the Roman and Persian empires, as well as settled populations.<sup>86</sup> The most

81. See the discussion in chapters 2 and 4.

82. Heidemann 2006, 2011 and 2016 set out the economic context for the creation of the Raqqa conurbation. Eger 2014: 154–57 observes that Raqqa and the Balikh valley are unusual in having a higher settlement density under the Abbasids than in the late Roman period.

83. Note MS appendix III and the biographies in BH HE I.

84. MS XII. 11 (IV, 507 / III, 49).

85. E.g., MS XI. 14 (IV, 488 / II, 498).

86. Fiey 1970a: 127–30; Grillmeier and Hainthaler 2013: 192–95.

significant sees in this region were Takrit in central Iraq, whose bishop held preeminence over the other bishops of the east, and Mosul, whose Jacobite bishop traditionally resided in the monastery of Mar Mattai. A Jacobite bishop was also appointed for Baghdad soon after the foundation of the city. Most of the Jacobite bishops of the east were appointed by the bishop of Takrit, and Takrit's degree of autonomy from the patriarch of Antioch was a recurrent bone of contention.<sup>87</sup> This part of the Jacobite community was the first to use Arabic as an intellectual and liturgical language, often alongside Syriac, and this may be one reason for the flourishing of Takritian Jacobite intellectuals in the ninth century.<sup>88</sup>

Finally, we will also be tangentially concerned with the Jacobites' relations with Miaphysites in Egypt, known locally as Theodosians.<sup>89</sup> The Miaphysite patriarch of Alexandria was the only other Miaphysite patriarch in this period besides Antioch, and the mutual recognition of the two patriarchs was a major factor in assuring the legitimacy of both. Miaphysite churches in Nubia and Ethiopia were notionally subject to the patriarch in Alexandria.<sup>90</sup> Syrian Jacobites were heavily involved in Egyptian affairs around the turn of the seventh century, when the patriarch Damian of Alexandria may have controversially attempted to unite the two patriarchates into a single authority.<sup>91</sup> But these links became more attenuated after the Arab conquests, and it is only from about 740 that we see the reestablishment of regular contact between the patriarchs.<sup>92</sup> The close relationship between the Theodosian and Jacobite churches is a particularly marked feature of the reign of Dionysius, and Dionysius' account of his own visit to Egypt is a key feature of his history.

87. See the discussion in chapter 5. For Jacobites in Khurasan and Segestan, see Fiey 1973.

88. Vollandt 2015: 30–32.

89. For Theodosius of Alexandria (d. 567), who was styled the 'ecumenical patriarch' of the Miaphysites, see Wood 2010: 181–82; Winkler 1999; Grillmeier and Hainthaler 1996: 53–59.

90. For Christianity in Nubia and Ethiopia, see Grillmeier and Hainthaler 1996: 263–335 and Mikhail 2016: 191–203.

91. Blaudeau 1997.

92. I address aspects of the renewal of links between the patriarchs in chapter 7. One exception to the pattern stated here is the election of the Syrian Simeon: *History of the Patriarchs*, *Patrologia Orientalis* (PO) 10:28. Mikhail 2016: 193 discusses the influence of Syrian theological terminology in Egypt. Contact between Antioch and Alexandria in the seventh to ninth centuries is the subject of a forthcoming article by Phil Booth.

## Chalcedonians and the Church of the East

Three other Christian confessions also enter the story: the Melkites, the Maronites and the Church of the East (sometimes referred to as ‘Nestorians’). Both the Melkites and the Maronites were Chalcedonians, the confession that had been the Roman imperial orthodoxy since 512. Chalcedonians are Dyophysites, who believe in the dual human and divine natures of Christ. In various versions, Chalcedonianism continued to be the faith of the emperor, and there were Chalcedonian patriarchs in Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem. So in addition to being a significant force in the Middle East, especially in Palestine and the region of Damascus, Chalcedonians were also the only Christian confession to be in communion with Christians in the far west.<sup>93</sup> What is more, they, like the Jacobites, had colonies in Iraq and in places further east, extending into Central Asia.<sup>94</sup>

Chalcedonians had traditionally used Greek as a liturgical language in the eastern Mediterranean, but many Middle Eastern sees also employed Syriac. Hellenophone Melkite communities were among the first Christian populations to shift to Arabic, and the first places in the Levant in which Christians used Arabic as a literary language were the Chalcedonian monasteries of Sinai and Mar Sabas in Palestine.<sup>95</sup> However, there continued to be Melkites who used Syriac, especially in Edessa, and the Melkite monasteries on the Black Mountain near Antioch housed Syriac scriptoria.<sup>96</sup>

Chalcedonianism was splintered in the seventh century by two attempts at compromise formulas by the emperor Heraclius (610–41). In the aftermath of his victory over the Persians, Heraclius’ patriarch Sergius (d. 638) proposed two Christological initiatives, Monenergism and Monotheletism, which sought to bridge differences between different movements among the Chalcedonians and the Miaphysites by asserting that Christ’s natures enjoyed a single united energy or a single united will. This compromise was, initially, very successful in winning over both Chalcedonians and Miaphysites in the Levant. But it shattered as Heraclius and his successors faced defeat by the

93. D. Reynolds n.d.; Griffith 2008a: 138; Griffith 2008b.

94. Nasrallah 1976.

95. Vollandt 2015: 27–28; Eddé, Micheau and Picard 1997: 94, 100–101, 152–54; Griffith 2002g.

96. Possekel 2015; Thomson 1962 and Mouterde 1932 on Edessa; Brock 1990 on the Black Mountain.

Arabs and Monotheletism was eventually abandoned at a council in Constantinople in 680/81.<sup>97</sup>

The Chalcedonians who followed the post-681 orthodoxy were known as Melkites ('followers of the king'), whereas those who opposed it and continued to adhere to Monotheletism were known as Maronites, after the famous monastery of Mar Maron in central Syria.<sup>98</sup> By the ninth century, the Melkites were clearly the dominant group, and Muslim historians of the time tend to divide the Christians into three groups, the Melkites, the Jacobites and the 'Nestorians', often ignoring smaller groups such as the Maronites and the Julianists or discussing them separately.<sup>99</sup>

The third major confession of the Middle East was the Church of the East, which had been the main Christian confession in the Sasanian empire. It adopted a heavily Dyophysite theology that could sometimes be reconciled with Chalcedon. Christians in the Sasanian world had suffered periodic persecution at the hands of the shahs, but this was interrupted by various experiments by the shah to give a measure of authority to the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon and to try to influence the behaviour of Christians through church institutions.<sup>100</sup> The bishops of Seleucia-Ctesiphon are normally referred to as catholicoi, nominally autocephalous leaders of a part of the patriarchate of Antioch, but from the mid-sixth century onward they began to style themselves patriarchs, that is, of the same rank as Antioch, Constantinople and Alexandria.<sup>101</sup>

The Church of the East was probably the greatest beneficiary of the dissolution of the frontiers between Rome and Persia and the creation of a new capital in Baghdad. After the seventh century the church created new sees outside its traditional territory, both in the west (in Jerusalem, Damascus, Edessa and Egypt) and in the east (in Khurasan, Central Asia and China).<sup>102</sup> The church

97. See Booth 2013a and Jankowiak 2009 for their detailed discussions of these controversies.

98. Griffith 2008b: 218. For the appropriation of the term 'Melkite' as a polemical term that was accepted by the community (as referring to Christ as king of heaven, rather than the Roman emperor), see Treiger 2014b. Dionysius tends to refer to the 'Melkites' of his own day as Chalcedonians, but I have not followed his usage because the Maronites were also Chalcedonians.

99. Mas'udi, *Muruj*, II, 282; al-Jahiz, *Refutation of the Christians*, 4.27; Biruni 282; Conrad 1981: 97. For Mas'udi's separate discussion of the Maronites, allegedly drawn from one Qays, a Maronite historian, see *Tanbih*, 211–12, 217–18.

100. Wood 2013.

101. Macomber 1968: 194–97. Cf. Fiey 1967.

102. Dauvillier 1948: esp. 273–74 on the western sees; Wood 2013: 237–38.

transferred its patriarchate to Baghdad as well, and it was successful in preventing other confessions from establishing clergy above the rank of bishop in the city.<sup>103</sup> Like the confessions of the Levant, the Church of the East employed Syriac as a scholarly and liturgical language, written in its distinctive ‘eastern’ script, but this was increasingly supplemented by Arabic in the second half of the eighth century.<sup>104</sup>

### The Term ‘Jacobite’

I employ the term ‘Jacobite’ to denote Miaphysite Christians under the patriarchate of Antioch. This appellation differentiates them from Miaphysites in Egypt and Armenia, but it includes Miaphysites in Iraq who also fell under Antioch’s authority (and are of interest to the West Syriac historians I discuss). It also distinguishes them from other groups of Miaphysites who had rejected Severus’ theology, such as the Julianists, who enjoyed a following in Syria, Iraq, Armenia and Arabia.<sup>105</sup>

The term Jacobite derives from the missionary Jacob Baradeus, who was responsible for consecrating a Miaphysite patriarch of Antioch after a substantial hiatus. It is the standard term used for Miaphysites in the patriarchate of Antioch by many medieval commentators in Arabic, both outsiders<sup>106</sup> and ‘Jacobites’ themselves.<sup>107</sup> It has also become part of the normal terminology of modern scholarship in Christian Arabic.<sup>108</sup> One of the advantages of this term is its stress on the crystallization of a distinct historical tradition and church institutions after the end of the Roman empire. Another is its clear differentiation of this group of Miaphysites from others.

103. For the ability of the Church of the East to block Melkite attempts to place a patriarch in Baghdad, see Fiey 1980: 129–30. In the tenth century the major coup by the Church of the East was to be recognized as the final court of appeal for all Christians in the caliphate, leading Fiey to refer to it as the unofficial second religion of the caliphate (Fiey 1980: 29, 208–10). For the appropriation of the originally polemical term ‘Nestorian’, which came to be used as a non-controversial autonym in Arabic, see Rassi 2015: 158–62.

104. Vollandt 2015: 33. For the evolution of eastern Syriac script out of the monumental *estrangela* script used at Edessa, see Briquel-Chatonnet 2001.

105. Jugie 1937. For Julian of Halicarnassus and his rivalry with Severus, see Moss 2016c.

106. See, e.g., Mas‘udi, *Muruj*, II, 329; Biruni, 282.

107. See, e.g., the Jacobite Takritian Ibn Jarir. Khoury-Sarkis 1967: 308.

108. Griffith 2008a; Griffith 2013; Platti 2015; Thomas 2008; Roggema 2009.



We should also note that the term ‘Jacobite’ is attested as an autonym in Syriac as well as in Arabic. It is used by John of Ephesus in his *Ecclesiastical History* to refer to the party of Miaphysites that was supported by Jacob during a schism in the late sixth century. By the following century, it could be applied to the whole confession in the Levant. A Syriac *Life of Jacob Baradeus*, falsely attributed to John of Ephesus, reports:

When the heretics and the orthodox met, they would ask, ‘Who are you?’ and the orthodox would answer, ‘We, for our part, are of the faith of Jacob, the first apostle (who was termed the brother of Our Lord in the Flesh), which this divine Jacob also proclaims to us’, while the adversaries would answer, ‘Of the faith of Ephrem of Amida [a famous Chalcedonian persecutor of the sixth century]’ . . . and hence throughout Syria and in the lands of Persia and of the Armenians<sup>109</sup> the expression ‘We are of the faith of Jacob’ became current, and in Alexandria and in Egypt ‘We are of the faith of Theodosius.’ Hence, on this account, believers in Egypt were named Theodosians and the Suryaye were called Jacobites.<sup>110</sup>

This account recognizes that ‘Jacobite’ had become a widespread term for the confession. It is understandably defensive, because only heretical groups were generally known by the name of a founder; accordingly, the author refers to his own group as ‘the orthodox.’ Use of the term for Levantine Miaphysites seems to have been sufficiently widespread at the time of writing that the author provides an additional etymology for it, linking it to Jacob the lesser, brother of Christ, to blunt any potential criticism that the Jacobites were followers of a heresiarch.<sup>111</sup> Dionysius places the term ‘Jacobite’ in the mouth the

109. The author may refer here to communities in Armenia that fell under the patriarch of Antioch rather than under the Armenian catholicos at Dvin. For these communities, see Honigmann 1954: 114.

110. John of Ephesus, *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, PO 19:256. This text was written between 628 and 741, when it was copied in the monastery of Peshilta in the Jazira (Saint-Laurent 2015: 99). Given the absence of allusions to Muslims I would veer toward a seventh-century date. Saint Laurent 2015: 105–7 suggests that the text attributes to the Jacobites *in general* the saint’s holy poverty.

111. For parallels in the appropriation of originally polemical terms for Melkites and Nestorians, see Treiger 2014b and Rassi 2015: 158–62, respectively. The term ‘Theodosian’ is attested as an autonym for Egyptian Miaphysites in the *History of the Patriarchs*. However, in the long term, Muslim governments tended to recognize only Jacobites, Melkites and ‘Nestorians’ as Christian confessions, forcing Egyptian Miaphysites to present themselves as Jacobites. Given

caliph al-Ma'mun, a patron to whom he was sympathetic, so he does not seem to have found the term polemical and recognized its common currency as a public term for the community.<sup>112</sup>

Some scholars have preferred to use the terms 'West Syrian' or 'Syrian Orthodox' to describe the group that I call Jacobite. These terms use the regional or ethnic adjective 'Syrian' to describe a confession (in the manner of early modern and modern Orthodox churches, like Russian Orthodox or Bulgarian Orthodox). Implicitly, this usage also stresses the use of the Syriac language. The relationship between language, region and ethnicity was debated in antiquity, and much of the surviving source material is in Syriac, which was also the main liturgical language. But the church does not map neatly onto the Syria of either Roman or caliphal administrative geography (with capitals in Antioch and Damascus, respectively, both of which were Chalcedonian centres).<sup>113</sup> Nor were all Levantine Miaphysites speakers of Syriac: others spoke Greek or Arabic, and it is not clear which ethnonym they might have used for themselves. The term 'Syrian Orthodox' is attested in sources of the period, but very rarely,<sup>114</sup> and I avoid it here because its conflation of ethnicity, religion, language and confession mostly belongs to a later period. I use the term 'West Syriac' to refer to literature that was written in western Syriac scripts but transcended the confessional boundaries of Jacobites, Melkites and Maronites.<sup>115</sup>

## The Sources

My discussion draws mainly on the Syriac history of Dionysius of Tel-Mahre, which does not survive independently but is quoted extensively in medieval compilations, especially the *Chronicle* of Michael the Syrian. Dionysius was the Jacobite patriarch during the reigns of the caliphs al-Ma'mun and al-Mu'tasim (833–42). He was a monk from Qenneshre, the famous nursery of patriarchs and centre of scholarship. But he was elected patriarch without any former ordination. At the death of the patriarch Cyriacus, the assembled

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that Jacob Baradeus had no connection to Egypt, this renaming spawned various attempts to identify the Jacob after whom they were named; see Seleznyov 2013.

112. MS XII. 14 (IV, 518 / III, 67) and MS XII. 12 (IV, 510 / III, 57).

113. Note the useful maps in Frend 1972 for the situation in the sixth century.

114. See, e.g., *Life of Theodota*, 115.

115. Baumstark 1922: 335–43 surveys the Syriac literature of the Melkites and the Maronites, which is ignored entirely in some surveys (e.g., Ortiz de Urbina 1965).

bishops had been considering Mar Atunos, a learned theologian and biblical commentator, until a bishop named Theodore of the monastery of Mar Jacob of Kaishum recommended the young Dionysius, who had been staying at the monastery for two years.<sup>116</sup>

Dionysius does not tell us directly why he was selected as patriarch, and he hides behind a protestation of modesty. But in the course of his narrative he highlights his close relations with al-Ma'mun, his good command of Arabic and his knowledge of Islamic culture more generally, and it may be that he believed that these diplomatic skills made him peculiarly suited to the role. Connected to these skills was Dionysius' own aristocratic background as the scion of the Rusafaye and Gumaye families of Edessa, whose fortunes he charts in his history.<sup>117</sup>

Dionysius composed a chronicle in sixteen books, which covered the period from 582 to 842, up to the deaths of the Byzantine emperor Theophilus and the caliph al-Mu'tasim. Eight of the books were devoted to ecclesiastical history, and these were probably placed before the secular sections.<sup>118</sup> This innovative division of material was highly influential for Dionysius' medieval successors, who praised him for his reliability.<sup>119</sup> Rudolf Abramowski, whose 1940 work is the only monograph on Dionysius, describes him as a Syriac Thucydides for his complex vision of the politics of his own day.<sup>120</sup> Yet Dionysius, like many other Christian authors from the caliphate in the eighth and ninth centuries, has not been included alongside seventh-century figures such as Ishoyahb of Adiabene (d. 659) or Jacob of Edessa (d. 708) in academics' general knowledge of Christianity in the Near East.<sup>121</sup>

116. MS XII. 10 (IV, 502 / III, 41). Qenneshre had been pillaged a few years earlier, which is why Dionysius had been at the monastery of Jacob of Kaishum: MS XII. 11 (IV, 597 / III, 49).

117. For further discussion, see chapters 1–2.

118. Palmer et al. 1993: 86–87. There are general treatments in Wright 2001: 196–200, which gives a clear narrative, though Wright wrongly thought that the *Chronicle of Zuqnin* was a short recension of Dionysius' history; Hoyland 1997: 416–19; Barsoum 2003: 386–87; Hilken 2018: ch. 19; and Debié 2015a: 143–49. Tel-Mahre has been identified as Tell Sheikh Hasan, a site on the Balikh River some forty kilometres south of the modern Turkish-Syrian border. It may have been a village owned by Dionysius' family (Debié 2015a: 144).

119. Weltecke 2003: 197–208.

120. R. Abramowski 1940: 116.

121. See, for example, the distribution of entries in the *New SCM Dictionary of Church History* (Benedetto 2008).

In the preface to his text, Dionysius provides important details on his own sources and models. He addresses the work to his spiritual son, John the metropolitan of Dara, who, he says, has been trained in orthodoxy ‘from the softening of [his] fingernails to the whitening of [his] hair’:

Although wise men have written about the earliest times, from the beginning of Creation until the time of Constantine the believing king, and told about the making of creatures and the succession of generations since Adam and the number of their years and about the kings who have ruled and the size of their territories, their writings are not termed histories but chronographies, that is time writings, such as those made by Josephus, Andronicus, Africanus, Annianus, George of Raggath, John of Antioch and Eusebius son of Pamphilus [of Caesarea].

The first to write ecclesiastical history, on the other hand, was the same Eusebius, followed by Socrates, Sozomen, Theodoret, Zachariah [of Mytilene], Elijah, John of Asia [of Ephesus] and last of all the priest Cyrus of Batna.

Other men charted the succession of the years; I mean Jacob of Edessa and John the stylite of Litarba.

Narratives resembling ecclesiastical history have been written by Daniel son of Moses of Tur Abdin,<sup>122</sup> John son of Samuel of the western region [i.e., Syria and the coast?],<sup>123</sup> a certain Theophilus and Theodosius, metropolitan of Edessa.<sup>124</sup> But those whom we have just mentioned made their narratives in a brief and fragmentary way, without preserving either chronological exactitude or the interrelatedness of events. One of these writers was Theophilus of Edessa, a Chalcedonian who regarded it as his birthright to loathe the orthodox. His presentation of all events that involved one of our number is fraudulent.

So we will start with traditional practice and begin where Cyrus of Batna left off; we shall . . . take from this man some details here and there from parts which are reliable and do not deviate from the truth.<sup>125</sup>

122. Barsoum 2003: 352.

123. Baumstark 1922: 273. Cf. Brooks 1906.

124. Debié 2015a: 144 notes that this Theodosius was Dionysius’ brother and, like him, a monk of Qenneshre. He was highly trained in Greek, Syriac and Arabic and, like Dionysius, was a client of the general ‘Abd Allah ibn Tahir and the caliph al-Ma’mun. He served the patriarch Cyriacus in Iraq and accompanied his brother to Egypt. See further below.

125. MS X. 20 (IV, 378 / II, 357–58). Translation in Palmer et al. 1993: 91–92.

Dionysius is not, technically speaking, providing a list of his sources here but rather commenting on the different ways in which writing about the past has been undertaken and which of his predecessors he proposes to follow.<sup>126</sup> He may have also used Arabic<sup>127</sup> and Greek<sup>128</sup> sources as well as other Syriac texts.<sup>129</sup> I read his preface as a statement that he draws his model from the ecclesiastical historians from Eusebius to Cyrus of Batna, and this determines his starting point. He is aware of other writers who have been active more recently and who have composed chronological tables (like Jacob of Edessa) or more fluent narratives (like Daniel of Tur Abdin). But he differentiates historians such as Daniel from ecclesiastical historians proper because the former, in his view, are not concerned with chronology or with relating events to one another. Dionysius seems to have taken pride in his ability to link events that took place at different times, to track long-term trends and to use

126. Palmer et al. 1993: 92.

127. Anthony 2010 discusses Dionysius' use of an Arabic Muslim source on the assassination of Umar I. Yarbrough 2016a: 190 indicates that he used an Arabic Muslim source on Umar II. Conterno 2014 suggests that some of the material shared by Dionysius, Agapius and Theophanes Confessor derives from an Arabic Muslim source rather than from Theophilus of Edessa. Debié 2015b: 379 argues for Dionysius' use of a Muslim Arabic source on the conquest of Cyprus (which has been transmitted by a Christian intermediary) and Muslim Arabic sources on the deaths of the caliphs Uthman and Yazid I.

128. Among these is a Greek source critical of the emperor Nikephoros: MS XII. 15 (IV, 530 / III, 70); see the discussion in Dickens 2010: esp. 16–18 and Hilkens 2018: 270. Debié 2015b: 378 argues for Dionysius' use of several Greek sources for the seventh and early eighth centuries. One is an account of the reigns of Heraclius and Constans II. This is shared with Theophanes and is well informed about matters in Constantinople as well as the frontier. A second is an account of Constantine IV deposing his brothers that Theophanes did not share.

129. Dionysius may have had access to Syriac documentary sources such as letters (e.g., the letter to Severus bar Mashqa in XI. 14) or synodical lists (e.g., the union with the Armenians in XI. 20). Brooks 1906 identifies a source that Dionysius shares with the ninth-century Greek historian Theophanes that extended to 746. Because of its Jacobite slant, Brooks suggested that this might be John son of Samuel, but this is speculative. Debié 2015b: 378 suggests that John son of Samuel is the author of material that describes natural disasters in northern Syria, the fall of Arwad to the Arabs and the succession of bishops in Apamea. Brock 1973: 337 notes the use of a Syriac account of Maximus the Confessor attributed to one Shem'un of Qenneshre (drawing on Syriac Maronite sources), by both X1234 and MS. Both chronicles probably obtained their knowledge of Shem'un through Dionysius.

chronological tables to situate and interrelate the various sources that were available to him.<sup>130</sup>

Dionysius gives special prominence to Theophilus of Edessa. Theophilus was a Maronite<sup>131</sup> who had written a history while serving as an astrologer at the court of al-Mahdi.<sup>132</sup> Dionysius objects to his treatment of Jacobite affairs, but if the ‘man’ in the final paragraph does indeed refer to Theophilus, Dionysius also seems to feel the need to apologize for making such extensive use of him.

Given that Dionysius presents himself as a continuator of Eusebius, whose ecclesiastical history celebrated the conversion to Christianity of the Roman emperor Constantine, it is worth stressing how disinterested he is in the ecclesiastical history of the Roman empire of his own day. Dionysius’ ecclesiastical history is restricted to the caliphate, to the Miaphysite sees of Antioch and Alexandria (perhaps with occasional glances to other confessions, but always located in the caliphate). It is hard to discern how Dionysius dealt with the aftermath of the Arab conquests and the separation of ecclesiastical politics in the caliphate from the influence of the Byzantine emperors. It may be that Michael’s *Chronicle* preserves an editorial statement from Dionysius, located around 720 in his text, in which he explains his omission of the succession of the patriarchs outside the caliphate with reference to their persecution of the Miaphysites, the political boundaries that now separated the churches and the descent of the Byzantine church into deeper heresy.<sup>133</sup> I intend to discuss the seventh-century material in Michael’s *Chronicle* in future work.

We should always bear in mind that we do not have a discrete text for Dionysius’ history.<sup>134</sup> The attribution of material to Dionysius is often a matter of opinion, based on the reuse of his work by four medieval historians: Bar Hebraeus (in part 1 of his *Ecclesiastical History* and in his *Secular Chronicle*), the author of the *Chronicle to 1234* (for which only the secular part is fully extant), Elias of Nisibis (who draws notices on Jacobite ecclesiastical history after 754

130. Palmer et al. 1993: 88–89 and 93.

131. Wright 2001: 163–64.

132. On Theophilus, see Hoyland 2011, but note the objections to Hoyland’s attempts to attribute material to him in Conterno 2014, Papaconstantinou 2013 and Debié 2015a: 27–31 and 139–42. There is a summary of the state of the debate in Hilkens 2014: 363–66.

133. MS XI. 18 (IV, 452–54 / II, 486–87). This passage is translated in Palmer et al. 1993: 93–94, which attributes it to Dionysius. I also discuss it in Wood 2019.

134. One fragment survives, translated in R. Abramowski 1940: 19, in which Dionysius describes heresy in the late sixth century.

from Dionysius)<sup>135</sup> and, most importantly, Michael the Syrian in books 10 to 12 of his *Chronicle*.<sup>136</sup> These compilers may have added their own observations to their sources<sup>137</sup> and are likely to have drastically abbreviated their material in many instances.<sup>138</sup> Finally, there is also the possibility that the fragmentary *Chronicle to 813* is also a summary of Dionysius, since it covers a similar mix of Jacobite ecclesiastical history and the political history of the Jazira and Byzantium.<sup>139</sup>

Even when material in the medieval compilations does seem likely to derive from Dionysius, we cannot be sure whether it has been summarized by the medieval compiler himself or by an intermediate source.<sup>140</sup> One possible candidate for such an intermediate source, which was used by Bar Hebraeus, the *Chronicle to 1234* and Michael the Syrian is the *Chronicle* of Ignatius of

135. Elias of Nisibis 175/83 is the first use of Dionysius (the death of the patriarch Iwannis). Elias also quotes Daniel of Tur Abdin ('son of Moses') for the election of Athanasius Sandalaya (168/80) and the entry of Marwan II into Damascus (170/81). Unfortunately, there is a lacuna in our manuscript of Elias that covers the reigns of Cyriacus and Dionysius, i.e., where one would expect him to have made greatest use of Dionysius.

136. On Michael and Bar Hebraeus in general, see Debié 2015a: 149–55; on Michael, see also Weltecke 2003: esp. 44, 163–78 for the innovative layout of the text into columns treating ecclesiastical history, secular history and natural disasters. Hilkens 2018 discusses the *Chronicle to 1234*.

137. This is a marked feature of Bar Hebraeus' histories in particular. Note, for instance, his eyewitness testimony on the gates of Rafiqa (BH Chron 124/160) and his statement that the people of Cyrrhus had converted to Islam, which seems to reflect the situation of his own day rather than that of the ninth century (BH HE I, 337). He also retrojects the term 'maphrian' onto the leaders of the eastern Jacobites, an anachronism that conceals the many different titles that were (sometimes controversially) employed in the period under study.

138. Van Ginkel 1998 observes that in the third part of John of Ephesus' *Ecclesiastical History*, which is extant and allows us to trace Michael's editing methods, Michael has reduced the length of the material by about 80 percent. Michael also removes references to the Tritheist movement, which was significant only in John's own lifetime.

139. All the scenes in the *Chronicle to 813* are attested in Michael, though the former is often less detailed. There are some changes of emphasis: the *Chronicle to 813* is more critical of patriarchs who held diplomas, for instance. The *Chronicle* is dated paleographically to the tenth or eleventh century, and the fragment as we have it lacks both a beginning and an end. See further Brooks 1900.

140. Palmer et al. 1993: 89–90. Mazzola 2017: 446 describes the working methods of these compilers, 'selecting, excerpting, possibly shortening or modifying the excerpts and finally organizing the excerpts in a new composition according, respectively, to thematic and chronological criteria.' Michael, Mazzola suggests, was happy to use earlier authors' abbreviations if they suited his purposes.

(continued...)

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