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# Christian - Muslim Relations Some Historical Remarks from a Christian-Syriac Perspective

by Jobst Reller

## 1 Preliminary remarks

Might history of Syriac Christians teach relevant insights for contemporary encounter and dialogue of Christians and Muslims? This article is inclined to believe that - displaying on the one hand historical attitudes about Muslim rule before 1300 AD in books of Christian-Syriac authors and pointing to the instance of a common scholarly language based on Aristotle in the 9th century on the other hand.<sup>1</sup> The author is fully aware of the fact that all the historical material originates from times passed away and is not apt to be copied or applied to modern political more or less pluralistic societies in a simple way. The historical details unfolded here are mostly unknown in the West, but deserve to be taken into regard in order to avoid simplifications. Current public debates on integration in Germany f. ex. seem to be confined to contradictory statements whether Islam »belongs« to present Germany or not. The respective answer seems to correlate with attitudes uniting people from all political parties who intend to defend privileges. Cultural and political interaction between Islam and Christianity in Europe throughout the centuries is not paid attention to in an adequate way. But this subject would deserve to be dealt with in another article. The mere debate underlines the relevance of more profound knowledge about Christian Muslim relations.

Some facts about Christians under Muslim rule in the Orient should be kept in mind before hand:

- ♦ The proportional share of Christians in the total population in the Near East varied regionally around 1200 AD. Christianity had faded away in the Arabic regions by force before 800 AD because of Islam as national religion of the Arabs. This is deplorable from a modern perspective. Christianity remained to be the religion of the majority in former Greek-, respectively Syriac speaking regions until 900 AD in northern Mesopotamia.

- ♦ Arabic became the vernacular language at the same time – around 900 AD.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Cf. Jobst RELLER, Christian Views of Muslims before 1300 AD. Some remarks on Christian-Muslim-relations, in: *Ostkirchliche Studien* 59 (2010) 55-69. The author started to develop the article during his dissertation work at the University of Göttingen. A gathering of Church leaders from Southern Sudan in Hermannsburg / Germany in Dec. 2004 offered an opportunity to present the ideas, at that time envisaging the division of Sudan, which has come true in 2011. The discussion with the Church leaders tended to generalize specific events and stereotypes and to integrate them in a negative image of Islam as cruel, in-

tolerant, abusing political and legal power for religious subjection. Many Church leaders used this »enemy« as framework for their own contextual national Christian theology in Southern Sudan. Intermingling politics, economy, nation and religion obviously occurred on both sides and blocked chances for dialogue. The author did not want to ignore specific Islamic atrocities – which deplorably happened too both in history and present times, but provide a more diversified image opening for encounter and dialogue.

2 Sidney H. GRIFFITH, Answering the Call of the Minaret: Christian Apologetics in the world of Islam, in: *Redefining Cristian identity*. Cultural interaction in the Middle-East since the rise of Islam, ed. by J. J. VAN GINKEL / H. L. MURRE-VAN DEN BERG / T. M. VAN LINT (OLA 134), Leuven / Paris / Dudley, MA 2005, 91-126, 94: 850 AD; ID., From Aramaic to Arabic: The Languages of the Monasteries of Palestine in the Byzantine and early Islamic Periods, in: ID., *The Beginnings of Christian Theology in Arabic* (Variorum Collected Studies Series), Ashgate 2002, V.



- ♦ Christianity remained to be an important religion until 1300 AD in many regions, although Christians were underprivileged, and a remarkable share of Christians chose to become Muslims because of social advantages.
- ♦ Persecution and harassment occurred occasionally and locally.<sup>3</sup>

## 2 Michael the Great

Most information about Oriental, especially Syriac and Arabic Christians in Mesopotamia from 632 through 1200 is provided by Michael, Patriarch of Antioch in Syria from 1166-1199 AD, one of the great Syriac historians. The exact date of his birth is not known. But as he had been abbot of the famous monastery of Bar Sawma since 1156 AD it is reasonable, that he was born around 1130 AD. The monastery was situated between Samosata as capital of Kommagene and Melitene, today Malatya, capital of Kappadokia, on a hill close to Nemrud Dag in Southern Turkey. Michael the Syrian – as he is called – used the monastery as patriarchal residence beside the residence in Amid, today Diyarbakir. The monastery was situated not far away from the border of the former county of Edessa, erected by Christian crusaders around 1098 AD. Michael lived in the times of the crusades, when Western and Eastern cultures both benefited from each other – f. ex. by introducing Arabic numbers in the West –, but also clashed ultimately with connotations still effective today.

Christian crusaders had conquered Jerusalem and large territories in the Near East in 1099 AD. All this happened with cruel brutality. Reading both Pope Urban II sermon and the reports about the siege of Jerusalem one can not prevent the impression, that war had got a religious connotation including annihilation of non-Christian religions. The county of Edessa was abandoned by Emir Zengi in the days, when Michael grew up – the first crusader state to disappear in 1144 AD. North of Bar Sawma Turkish tribes, called Rum-Seldshuks, had been ruling since 1071 AD. They had embraced Sunnite-Islam. South of Bar Sawma remnants of the old Abbasid caliphate of Baghdad regained power. One may conclude: Michael had to lead the Syrian Orthodox Church under mostly Muslim governments of different nations in times of civil war. The Muslim governors were not able to establish law and order.

The monastery of Michael had to be constructed as a fortress in these days. Situated on the summit of a hill, four watchtowers were erected between 1069-1183 AD, mainly not to fight the government, but to keep off criminal gangs of robbers – mostly made up by the newcomers in the region – the Kurds. When the monastery burned down on the 30th of July 1183 AD Michael was able to reconstruct it in a more excellent shape than before.<sup>4</sup>

The regions in focus had been affected by wars and times of absence of war (which does not mean peace!) since the 10<sup>th</sup> century, when the Christian emperor of Constantinople had regained control for some time. In fact the absence of government-authority was the

3 Wolfgang HAGE, *Die Syrisch-Jakobitische Kirche in frühislamischer Zeit*, Wiesbaden 1966, 76ss; Jobst RELLER, *Mose bar Kepha und seine Paulinen-auslegung nebst Edition und Übersetzung des Kommentars zum Römerbrief* (Göttinger Orientforschungen I Reihe Syriaca 35), Wiesbaden 1994, 54ss (reference to the classic studies of Jean Maurice Fiey on the history of the Church in Syria).

4 Peter KAWERAU, *Ostkirchengeschichte I. Das Christentum in Asien und Afrika bis zum Auftreten der Portugiesen im Indischen Ozean*, Löwen 1983, 132ss.

5 Friedhelm WINKELMANN, *Die Kirchen im Zeitalter der Kreuzzüge* (11.-13. Jahrhundert; Kirchengeschichte in Einzeldarstellungen I/10), Leipzig 1998, 75ss (2nd rev. edition).

6 Wolfgang HAGE, *Das Christentum im frühen Mittelalter* (Zugänge zur Kirchengeschichte 4), Göttingen 1993, 49ss.

7 *Chronique De Michel le Syrien, Patriarche Jacobite D'Alexandrie* (1166-1199) I-IV, ed. syr./tr. fr. by J. B. CHABOT, Paris 1899-1910. 8 *Ibd.*, 119 (*Chronique* 16,1 Vol. 3, 222).



real effect and this resulted in flourishing criminality both from Christian and Muslim sides. This meant decay also within the Church, low education standards among the priesthood, low moral standards among them and the Christian laity. Intrigues by Christians trying to gain advantages for themselves were eagerly used. It did not play a role, whether one might betray a Christian by a Muslim or vice versa.<sup>5</sup>

It is astonishing, that Christian theologians like Michael could use these deplorable political circumstances to inaugurate a rebirth of Christian Syriac culture which would last for approximately 200 years. There was no support from the Churches in Byzantium, in the Latin crusader-states or in the Armenian kingdom of Kilikia. Muslim rulers North or South of Bar Sawma didn't hinder this development. Christian culture in the Near East would flourish unto that time in history, when Mongolian rulers like Timur Lenk, Tamerlan, Timur the Lame, 1369-1405 AD, discovered Islam as political ideology for their empire around 1400 AD.<sup>6</sup>

It may be concluded that Syriac Christians did not have the same privileges like Muslims since the beginning of the caliphate, having to pay »head-tax«. It's clear, but not just from the perspective of today, that Arabic Christians because of their nationality and language had been forced to accept Islam by early Umayyad Caliphs, 661-750 AD. It's clear that embracing Islam only was allowed in a one-way direction. But Christians lived generally with local and religious autonomy under Muslim governors in spite of continuous political clashes for quite a long time, more than 700 years.

One has to keep in mind, that it were Christians from the West who invaded the Holy Land in 1099 AD by military forces and that they did not intend to leave again, but to conquer and turn the Near East into a colonial empire. Aspects of militant Islam have to be seen in this context. Holy-War-Concepts were developed on both sides.

### 3 Michael's views on Christianity and Islam

Michael is known as promoter of Syriac culture, reformer of the Syriac liturgy. In this context he is focussed as historian. His history of the Church is large, contained in 4 volumes in the modern Syriac-French edition by J. B. Chabot.<sup>7</sup> Friedhelm Winkelmann<sup>8</sup> summarizes Michaels view on his times in his recent history of the crusades: »The Syriac Monophysites had regarded the orthodox Byzantines as enemies ever since the 6th century. The image of Byzantium taken from these views was also effective with regard to the crusades. One emphasized that the Byzantines never had been trustworthy. The crusaders were only blamed for one thing, i. e. that they had intended to conquer Constantinople from the very beginning. The following quotation from the work of Michael the Syrian expresses this attitude clearly: <The Franks, that is the Romans, who conquered Antioch and Jerusalem, had bishops in their states. Bishops of our Church were right among them without being persecuted or harassed. Although agreeing with the Greeks in the doctrine of the two natures (of Christ), the Franks distinguished themselves from them in many aspects of doctrine anyway, as they did in many customs. ... They never caused troubles in doctrinal issues (for us) – not even in order to achieve a common creed for all nations and languages of Christians, but regarded everybody as a Christian, who venerated the cross – without inquisition or investigation. The Turks themselves, who had occupied most of the countries, inhabited by Christians, had no knowledge of the holy mysteries and regarded Christianity as heresy, they did usually neither check the creeds, nor persecute anybody on account of his creed, as the Greeks did, an evil and heretical nation.>«



Byzantine Orthodoxy is regarded as an imperial ideology, Western Latin Christianity is not perceived in that way by Michael. With a closer look at the West he would have seen that Christianity is an imperial ideology there also. When the crusaders took Constantinople in 1204 AD, their attitude against the Oriental Christians changed dramatically. But this happened 5 years after Michael's death. Michael recalls only one attack by Franks on his monastery. Count Joscelin II of Edessa attacked Bar-Sawma together with Armenian soldiers in 1148 AD in order to rob its possessions. But Michael states, that not all the Franks cooperated. This was an action by a warlord, deprived of his county, motivated by wealth, not by religion.<sup>9</sup>

In spite of this basic view Michael tries to be fair against Byzantine political action. When the Byzantine emperor is defeated by the Seldshuk Sultan Qilig Arslan II close to Myrokephalaion in 1176 AD, Michael states:<sup>10</sup> »This was the deplorable end of the raid of the Greek emperor. Who would not confess, that nothing on earth happens without consent from above according to inexplicable plans?« He reflects the basic conviction of Oriental Christians and probably Muslims also who trust in the guidance of God, the almighty creator and Lord of history – whether it favours or hinders them for the moment. Naturally God's action is in charge of Muslim action, too.

The Sunnite Turks or Seldshuks are nothing but a political power not interested in religious oppression in spite of their different religion. Michael knows their history and their customs. He identifies them with Gog and Magog in the Apocalypse of John, the last book of the bible, saying, that the Muslim nations play their part in Gods eschatological history.<sup>11</sup>

When emir Zengi seizes Edessa in 1144 AD, Michael bursts out into lamentations: »Oh, what a sad report! The city of Abgar, the friend of Christ, trodden under their feet because of our sins, the priest murdered, the deacons slaughtered, the sub-deacons annihilated, the temples robbed, the altars destroyed! Woe, what a deplorable event!« But Michael knows: All this happened for our sins. We Christians started aggression, now we have to stand cruel reactions, which do not make any difference between Oriental Christians and others.<sup>12</sup>

One may conclude: Michael regards Christian Byzantium as never trustworthy in its political actions. His Church had to endure too much persecution by these Christian brothers, making orthodoxy the ideology of their empire. The Christian Franks were invaders like others, as long as they were tolerant. The same view is applied to the Muslim Sunnite Turks! The issue is not religion in the first run, but power.

But all history is confined in God, whose thoughts are higher than human ones. Michael regards setbacks as divine punishment of sins. One might ask, why Michael refers to Muslim empires in this mainly positive way? Michael is honoured by Sultan Qilig-Arslan in 1181 and 1182 AD, Sultan Saladin remains neutral during the schism when Theodore bar Wah-

9 Ibid., 69 (*Chronique* 17,9; 21,2; 19,7, vol. 3, 283-288, 391-393, 340-342).

10 Ibid., 113 (*Chronique* 1,1; 20,5, vol. 1,2; 3, 372, 352).

11 Ibid., 43 (*Chronique* 14,1-5, vol. 3, 149-157).

12 Ibid., 56 (*Chronique* 17,2; vol. 3, 2615).

13 *Chronique*, vol. 3, 404; D. WELTECKE, *Die Beschreibung der Zeiten von Mor Michael dem Großen* (1126-1199) (CSCO 594 Subs. 110), Louvain 2003, 125.

14 *Chronique*, vol. 3, 359; Peter NAGEL, Michael I. † 1199, in: *Syrische*

*Kirchenväter*, ed. by Wassilios KLEIN, Stuttgart 2004, 228-239, 233ss.

15 A mostly ignored fact, which was proved by Rudolf Abramowski from comparisons with Bar Hebrew in: *Dionysius von Tellmahre – Jakobitische Patriarch von 818-845 – Zur Geschichte der Kirche unter dem Islam* (AKM XXV,2), Leipzig 1940: Michael preserves the Church history of Dionysius for the history before 843.

16 HAGE, *Christentum* (see note 6), 49 (*Chronique*, vol. 2, 412f).

17 Friedhelm WINKELMANN, *Die östlichen Kirchen in der Epoche der christologischen Auseinandersetzung*

(*Kirchengeschichte in Einzeldarstellungen* I/6), Leipzig 1994, 122 (*Chronique* 11,3, vol. 2, 412).

18 British Museum 861 Additumum 17193, fol. 73r-75v, ed. by Francois NAU, *Un colloque du patriarche Jean avec l'Emir des Aparéens et faits divers des années 712 à 761*, in: *Journal asiatique*, Ser. 11, Vol. 5 (1915) 225-279; Johannes I. SEDRA, *Einleitung, Syrische Texte, Übersetzung und vollständiges Wörterverzeichnis*, ed. by Jouko MARTIKAINEN (Göttinger Orientforschungen Reihe 1: Syriaca), Wiesbaden 1991, 455.



bun (d. 1193 AD) grasps after the patriarchal dignity. Michael follows a tradition in Syriac historiography, but freely extends historical statements to his own times in spite of the fact that he did not experience grace alone by Muslim rulers. When Jerusalem is reconquered in 1187 AD by Saladin, Oriental Christians have to stand vengeance. Michael is also free to state: »To which extent Muslims were mocking at the persecuted Christian people, spitted to them and were unjust, in Damascus, Aleppo, Harran, Edessa, Amid, Merdin, Mossoul and in the rest of their empire, no word is able to express that.«<sup>13</sup> He had been arrested by the emir of Mossoul Sayf ed-Din (»Sword of faith«) twice after 1174 AD because of intrigues, initiated by the schismatic bishop Denha-Iwannis of Qalliniqe. His apology in front of Sayf ed-Din proves both political loyalty and distinction of faith and political power: Three religious bodies exist side by side, based on their holy Scriptures, the Jews with the Torah, the Christians with the Gospel and the Muslims with the Koran.<sup>14</sup> Michael was able to write history authentically representing both sides. No tendency of flattering authorities is likely.

#### 4 Views about early Islam around 800 AD

Michael's attitude towards Muslim government is not a single phenomenon in Oriental Church History before 1300. Michael seems to represent the common view of his Church on Muslim rulers. He quotes in his book from the Church History of one of his predecessors, patriarch Dionysius of Tellmahre, on the chair of Antioch from 818 through 845 AD. Dionysius' book comes to an end in 843 AD and covers all the history from the rise of Islam after 632 AD. Dionysius holds the same views as Michael did 300 years later.<sup>15</sup> Dionysius acted as patriarch when the Abbasid Caliphate was at its height. Best known is Harun ar-Raschid, who ruled from 786-809 AD as Abbasid Caliph in Baghdad. The classical collection of stories »lajla walajla«, »1001 nights« in German, became world literature, although most of the stories actually were taken from other oriental traditions.

Dionysius writes about the arrival of the Arabic forces after 632 AD: »The Lord of Revenge, who alone has power in all affairs and makes human empires decline, as he wants, [...] made the sons of Ishmael, (that is the Arabs), come from the country in the South, in order to set us free from the hands of the Byzantines. In spite of that that we had to suffer also at some degree [...], we gained quite a lot, because we were delivered from Byzantine cruelty, their evilness, their fury and their cruel eagerness against us. We were in peace then.«<sup>16</sup>

Muslim troops are regarded as those, who liberate Christians from their Christian brothers, and all that as clear revelation of Gods will in history. That Syriac Christians suffered from the Arabic troops also, does not diminish the role of the Arabs as liberators in Dionysius' view.

Dionysius puts things that way, that Syriac bishops prayed for the advancement of Arabic expansion before the Hegira: »Lord, observing the evilness of the Byzantines, looting cruelly our Churches and monasteries, where ever they rule, let the sons of Ishmael come from the South to deliver us from the hands of the Byzantines!«<sup>17</sup>

The statement of Dionysius is strong after 200 years of Muslim superiority. Dionysius himself must have had sources from that time at his disposal. There is at least one episode in early Syriac Church History which may shed light on Dionysius' sources. John Sedra served as Patriarch of Antioch from 630-648 AD, when Arabic forces seized Damascus in 635, Jerusalem in 637 and Antioch in 638.<sup>18</sup> A manuscript, dated 874 AD and representing a collection of legal documents, reports a meeting between John and emir Umayr ibn Sa'd on 9<sup>th</sup> of May 644 AD. The emir invites the patriarch. One day is spent with the question



whether there is one law for all denominations of the Christians in the Gospel which may be proved from the Pentateuch or not. Although the emir requires the demonstration of the Christian laws in the Gospel or conversion to the Muslim law, the meeting is closed without final decision. It's obviously this report which was known to Dionysius too.<sup>19</sup> Dionysius may add that the emir had decreed that crosses should be removed from the walls of the Churches and no longer be visible in the public. Dionysius emphasizes that Melkite Christians confessing the formula of Chalkedon regarded the Monophysite patriarch as their representative. Another detail, reported by Dionysius, is interesting, because two Arabic speaking tribes were present, the Tanuh Aqulaj and Tu'aj. The emir asked John to translate the Gospels from Syriac into Arabic without mentioning Christ's divinity, baptism or the cross.<sup>20</sup> John replies that he would not please God by changing the least dot or letter »jod« in the Gospel. John does not pay any attention to the presence of the armed forces of the emir. Dionysius preserves obviously a report about a very early but single attempt by a Muslim emir to annihilate the Christian faith. His way to adapt a Muslim concept of Law to the Gospel and demonstrate the exclusive priority of Islam in terms of reason had to fail because of different theological presuppositions. It's hard to imagine that this story lacking any contemporary analogy should have been made up later.<sup>21</sup> It strengthens the credibility of Dionysius and his sources. The story matches with all what we know about Patriarch John Sedra's wide activities for Christological and hierarchical reorganisation of his West Syrian Church, although the »letter of Mar Yohannan (John) the Patriarch« may have served as an apology and redefinition of the Monophysite identity in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> century. It's typical for the earliest sources on the Arab invasion that endured hardship is exposed. One may refer to Patriarch Sophronios of Jerusalem (d. around 639 AD) and his Epiphany sermon from the mid 630's: »Why is the cross mocked? Why is Christ, who is the dispenser of all good things and the provider of this joyousness of ours, blasphemed by alien mouths ...«. <sup>22</sup> The fact that occasional endured hardship is mentioned underlines the astonishing aspect of the pro Arab option of Syriac Christians.

There is more evidence how Syriac Christians before Dionysius perceived the Arab conquerors. One would have to differentiate between primarily historical works, reports on dialogues and philosophical or theological treatises.<sup>23</sup> It's not useful to expose the whole range of evidence, but to reduce it to some examples.

19 *Chronique*, vol. 2, 431s.

20 Bruce M. METZGER, *Der Text des Neuen Testaments. Eine Einführung in die neutestamentliche Textkritik*, Stuttgart/Berlin/Köln/Mainz 1966 (= Oxford 1964), 85; Metzger accepts a translation of the NT after the rise of Islam. More reluctant are Kurt and Barbara Aland, conceding nothing but an old Arabic translation of Ephrem the Syrian's Diatessaron: *Der Text des Neuen Testaments. Einführung in die wissenschaftlichen Ausgaben sowie in Theorie und Praxis der modernen Textkritik*, Stuttgart 1982, 199.

21 Against Georg GRAF, *Geschichte der christlich arabischen Literatur*, Vol. 1, Città del Vaticano 1944, 35. See also Arthur VÖÖBUS, *Reorganisation der Westsyrischen Kirche in Persien*, in: *Oriens Christianus* 51 (1967) 106-111, 106.

22 GRIFFITH, Answering (see note 2), 92 with reference to Hoyland; Gerrit J. REININK, The beginnings of Syriac Apologetic literature in response to Islam, in: *OC* 77 (1993) 165-187, 182, is more doubtful about early discussions motivated by primarily religious issues.

23 See the instructive survey in Sidney H. GRIFFITH, *Disputes with Muslims in Syria. Christian Texts: From Patriarch John (d. 648) to Bar Hebraeus (d. 1286)*, in: *IO.*, *The beginnings of Christian Theology in Arabic* (see note 2), V.

24 Anton BAUMSTARK, *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur mit Ausschluß der christlich-palästinensischen Texte*, Bonn 1922, 210s.

25 REININK, The beginnings (see note 22), 167.

26 Michael G. MORONY, *History and Identity in the Syrian Churches*, in: *Redefining Christian identity* (see

note 2), 1-33, 20, 32s; REININK, The beginnings (see note 22), 168 n. 17

27 Jan J. VAN GINKEL, The perception and presentation of the Arab conquest in Syriac Historiography: How did the changing social position of the Syrian Orthodox community influence the account of their historiographers?, in: *The encounter of Eastern Christianity with early Islam* (The history of Christian-Muslim relations 5), Leiden/Boston 2006, 180.

28 HAGE, *Kirche* (see note 1), 66ss.

29 Seppo RISSANEN, *Theological Encounters of Oriental Christians with Islam during Early Abbasid Rule*, Åbo 1993, 9.

30 BAUMSTARK, *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur* (see note 24), 269, with reference to *Chronique*, Vol. 2, 480, 490s, 449s.

31 RELLER, *Mose bar Kepha* (see note 3), 54.



While Dionysius represents the Monophysite or Jacobite side, one has to refer to John of Penkaye for the Nestorian side. He wrote a »Book of the central issues of the history of the world and time« in 15 books ending in 686 AD. Meditating the meaning of history theologically the course of world history is described.<sup>24</sup> John could identify Muhammad as the »guide« and the »instructor« of the Arabs, »to worship the One God, in accordance with the customs of the ancient law«. The Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I. was talking in a similar way one century later. But John of Penkaye is not flattering Muhammad: »the Barbarian kingdom of the Arabs was, in his opinion, called by God as a temporary tool of divine wrath«.<sup>25</sup> The biblical model, interpreting a setback as divine punishment for sin in order to provoke repentance and future correction, is exposed at a very early stage – on the same line as Dionysius and Michael do it later. It's likely that John recalls the peaceful period under Muawja I. (661-680 AD) in the more oppressive times of Abd al-Malik erecting the »Dome of the Rock« in Jerusalem in 691 AD. It's also likely that John may have hoped in an apocalyptic sense that the Second Arab Civil War would put an end to the Muslim Arab empire, as one might argue from the apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodios. But Bar Hebrew will express the same piety in the 13<sup>th</sup> century when Mongol forces put an end to the Abbasid caliphate. All these historical elements do not alter the fact that there is a continuity in Syriac views on Muslim authority through centuries.

Apparently Syriac Christians lived with relative autonomy in peace, although persecutions, harassment and pressure could occur locally and temporarily. There is consent about that in spite of differences in the historical judgement.<sup>26</sup> Patriarchs used government diplomas and police force in order to rebuke schismatic opponents! Recent research has pointed out that Muslim authorities were accepted as legitimate governments because of their power and strength. This happened on the foundation of Biblical models. Caliph Umar II, 717-720 AD, is said to have edited the so called constitutions of Umar.<sup>27</sup> They stated, that Christians f. ex. had to wear special clothes and were prohibited to carry arms during festivals, to use public baths during Muslim prayer times, to sell wine in the cities, to show crosses in the public and to arrange public processions, where a cross was carried around, that recently erected or rebuilt Churches had to be destroyed. But it is quite clear, that these prohibitions have not been applied except locally at certain times.<sup>28</sup> May be the famous Orthodox theologian John the Damascene had to leave the Umayyad court in Damascus because of these constitutions and did not decide to return later, although this might have been possible.<sup>29</sup> According to Dionysius Patriarch Elijah, 641-723 AD, was the first who was able to reside in Antioch after Severus of Antioch. Caliph Walid I had received him in Damascus in 720 AD and opened the way.<sup>30</sup>

## 5 Aspects of Syriac Christianity and Islam in the 9th century

Dionysius himself tells some stories from his own time. A bishop of Tagrit, called Basilius, tried in 820 AD to collect head-tax not only from the Christian laity, but also from the Muslim citizens. The latter ones appealed to the caliph. Bishop Basilius had to flee. Military action was taken, in order to regain control in Tagrit. Many examples show, that military action was a reaction against local rebellions.<sup>31</sup> The same bishop Basilius of Tagrit opposed the patriarch Dionysius of Tellmahre in the same year. The patriarch asked the caliph for assistance and got help. It seems that the Christians among themselves were sometimes less able to preserve peaceful relations between the different Christian parties than the



Muslim caliph. Many examples show, how Christians asked the caliph for intermediation in internal Christian debates!

Patriarch Dionysius accompanied several caliphs on journeys to Egypt. It's not unlikely that he tried to establish some kind of »imperial« Church in the Muslim empire of the Abbasids. The Coptic patriarch of Alexandria seems to have had similar intentions!<sup>32</sup> And we know also another high cleric of the so called Nestorian Church, who had really good contacts with some of the caliphs in Bagdad, Catholicos Timothy I, 780-823 AD. A report about a religious dialogue with caliph al-Mahdi is preserved.<sup>33</sup> Al-Mahdi had enacted the constitutions of Umar locally, but Timothy I was able to rebuild some destroyed Churches and send missionaries to Yemen, India, Tibet and China.<sup>34</sup> Timothy I could expand the Nestorian Church. Timothy I had close relations to caliph Harun ar-Rashid, 786-809 AD. Caliph al-Mamun, 813-833 AD, one of the successors of Harun ar-Rashid, attended a Palm-Sunday mass in the upper monastery in Mossoul, a centre of Nestorian Liturgy. He was deeply impressed.<sup>35</sup> It's not likely that any patriarch or Catholicos would have had the idea to establish an »imperial« Church, if the relations to the Muslim emperor had been basically and generally difficult.

Some details from the history of the 9th century may be added. There is evidence,<sup>36</sup> that the Islamic law on apostasy was not applied when a girl from a Muslim family married into a Christian family. Bishop Moshe bar Kepha (d. 903 AD) at least interprets 1 Cor. 7, 14 in this regard: Non-believers are sanctified by their partners. One may suppose that there is a mixed population on the banks of the Tigris and an increasing number of mixed marriages between Christians and Non-Christians, i. e. Muslims also. Christians must not fear this, but try to prevent Christian women from getting married to non-believing husbands. The main intention is to convert non-believers to Christianity. Conversion to Christianity is obviously possible around 900 AD in Northern-Mesopotamia. Moshe refers to canonical decrees of the fathers. Nothing hints at Muslim persecution of Christians because of debates on true religion or conflicts originating from different customs in eating a. s. o.

This is true in spite of the fact that Caliph al-Mutawakkil, 847-861 AD, may have been the first one who tried to discriminate Christians more systematically by special clothes, hats and belts or building mosques within Christian cathedrals, which had been used simultaneously before. It's probable that he tried to remove Christian festivals from the public area. The constitutions of Umar II were already mentioned. Moshe bar Kepha tells the story of the Armenian Patrician Bagarat Bagratoony who tried to establish an independent Armenian empire because of weakness in the Abbasid Caliphate in 851 AD. Moshe is sure: Bagarat should have known from Astronomy that he did not act according to the will of God who would let the Arabic forces win.<sup>37</sup> But it took obviously some centuries, before Bar Hebrew

32 As Abramowski argued, *passim*.

33 BAUMSTARK, *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur* (see note 24), 217; ed. by Alphonse MINGANA, Discussion with Caliph al-Mahdi, in: *Wood-broke Studies*, Vol. 2, Cambridge 1928.

34 RISSANEN, *Theological Encounters* (see note 29), 27, 236ss., emphasizes that the Abbasids favoured the more rationalistic concepts of Aristotle as basis for Islamic Theology. Philosophy should unite the multi-fold empire. This meant a change compared to the more traditionalistic

Umayyads, but also a link with the Christian contemporary theologians, using Aristotle themselves.

35 KAWERAU, *Ostkirchengeschichte* (see note 4), 127.

36 RELLER, *Mose bar Kepha* (see note 3), 55s.

37 *Ibid.*, 39-41. It was Ashod Bagratoony who managed to make Armenia independent in 887 AD.

38 *Geschichte der Philosophie im Islam*, Stuttgart 1901.

39 *Development of Muslim Theology, Jurisprudence and Constitutional Theory*, Lahore 1903.

40 *The Controversial Theology of Theodore Abu Qurrah* (c. 750-c. 820 A.D.), unpubl. Diss. the Catholic University of America 1978 and other contributions.

41 *Early Muslim dogma*, Malta 1981.  
42 *Le probleme des attributs divins dans la doctrine d'al-Ash'ari et de ses premiers grands disciples*, Beyrouth 1965.

43 *The Metaphysics of Created Being according to Abu l'Hudhayl al'Alaf*. A Philosophical Study of Earliest Kalam, Leiden 1966.



could regard the constitutions of Umar II as common within the Muslim empires in the 13th century. But how would Christian regulations on special clothes for Jews in the West during the medieval ages have to be commented?

## 6 The Rise of Aristotelian Philosophy

Closely linked with traditional history of the 9<sup>th</sup> century is the history of philosophy. It's quite obvious that the philosophy of Aristotle more and more dominates as basic system of thought. Christian Theology in Greek and Syriac has adopted Aristotelian categories to quite an extent, Muslim Theology will do the same within the course of the 9<sup>th</sup> century as Byzantine Theology will do in the 11<sup>th</sup> century or Latin Western Theology in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. A scientific Theology developed beside traditional monastic Theology. It might be the case that now arising Muslim systematic Theology based on philosophy challenged the formation of Sunnite Theology as reaction - based on revelation. The systematic Theologians working on the basis of Aristotle were at least referred to as »Mu'tazilites« by their pious opponents, i. e. the deviators, who leave the (right) way, because they ended up by conclusions like f. ex. that one that the Quran was created.

The crucial point with Christian-Muslim interactions in Theology during the early reign of the Abbasids in research seems to be the question of direct dependence and chronology. On the one hand scholars like T. J. de Boer,<sup>38</sup> Duncan B. Macdonald<sup>39</sup> and Sidney Griffith<sup>40</sup> argued for a more or less polemical Christian origin of Islamic Theology, on the other hand Michael Cook<sup>41</sup>, Michel Allard<sup>42</sup>, Richard M. Frank<sup>43</sup>, W. Montgomery Watt<sup>44</sup> and Joseph van Ess<sup>45</sup> argued for a more independent and self reliant evolution of Islamic Theology. In between these positions Seppo Rissanen and Sarah Stroumsa<sup>46</sup> pointed out that Theology also had something to do with common backgrounds f. ex. in Greek Philosophy and it's specific procedure or method of thinking.<sup>47</sup>

No final consensus seems to be at hand. But some questions are really exiting anyway: Was there a chance that Christian and Muslim Theology could discuss issues of faith on the basis of common philosophical grounds in a more or less scientific way? Had Christians adopted Aristotelian categories within the course of the conflicts on Christology<sup>48</sup> while Aristotelian ideas seemed to be guiding principles on the Nestorian side as early as in the 5th century?<sup>49</sup> Did Aristotle promote the vision of settling conflicts in Theology by reason (arab. *kalam*) with prospects of striking and unresistable universal religious and imperial unity? Which expected benefit made Aristotelian empirical realism promising purpose related development<sup>50</sup> dominant in the East in the 9th century?<sup>51</sup> The hope to benefit in

44 *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought*, Edinburgh 1973.

45 The beginnings of Islamic Theology, in: *The Cultural Context of Medieval Learning* (Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science XXVI), ed. by J. E. MURDOCH/E. D. SYLLA, Dordrecht 1975.

46 The beginning of the Mu'tazila, in: *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 13 (1990) 265-294.

47 RISSANEN, *Theological Encounters* (see note 29), 17: »Even though there prevails in research a certain agreement of the existence of parallelism in Christian and Islamic thinking in this period, the role of crucial elements is interpreted in ways which radically differ from each other. A theory which could explain how the intellectual and political issues affected the theological process in Christianity and Islam during the second century A[fter] H[egira] might help us understand the possibilities of these religions for a dialogue today.« Vgl. Ulrich RUDOLPH, *Christliche*

Bibelexegese und Mu'tazilitische Theologie. Der Fall des Moses bar Kepha (gest. 903 n. Chr.), in: *Oriens* (1994) 294-313, 300s.

48 ADOLF VON HARNACK, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, Bd. II, Freiburg 1888, 325-333, 383s: »[...] the Antiochene Theologians, characterized by methodical studies in the scriptures, sober thinking following Aristotle [...]«

49 BAUMSTARK, *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur* (see note 24), 102. See the entry »Aristoteles« in the index.



medicine, development and technology? Where did the impulse start from? Was it the Abbasid emperor, who founded or supported the house of wisdom, in the same line as the Byzantine emperor in the 11th century<sup>52</sup> or Popes in the West in the 13th century favoured Aristotelianism?<sup>53</sup> Was it the decline of the Abbasside empire after 900 AD that put an end to the reception of Aristotle and promoted Sunnism?

No doubt exists with regard to the fact that it were Syriac Christians of Nestorian provenance who provided knowledge from Aristotle in Arabic for Muslims. Clerics from the Nestorian Church usually also had a medical profession as doctors. Many of them served as private physicians of the caliphs in Baghdad. A famous Nestorian Christian Hunayn ibn Ishak, 809-873 AD, worked at the university of Baghdad, the »house of wisdom« (bajt ul-hikma). He helped like many other Christians with him to further Arabic philosophy and medicine by translations into Arabic. Accurately searching for the best text he produced an Arabic edition of the famous writings of the ancient physician Galen from both Greek and Syriac manuscripts. The same happened with works of Aristotle and Plato.<sup>54</sup>

We know Christian Theologians and their Muslim »rationalistic« (arab. mu'takallimun) counterparts: Theodore Abu Qurra and the Mu'tazilite al-Murdaq (d. 841? AD), Ammar al-Basri und Abu l-Hudail (d. 841? AD), Job of Edessa and Nazzam (d. 847 AD). The problem is that no texts from these early Muslim Theologians exist any longer, while the Christian ones have been transmitted to our times.<sup>55</sup> That there was a vivid discourse on Theology in terms of reason between Christians and Muslims around 800 AD is beyond doubt. Lorenz Schlimme and Ulrich Rudolph noticed that Moshe bar Kepha, Commentary on the Hexaemeron, Book I, unfolds typical ideas about divine unity on the basis of Aristotelian philosophy – in quite the same way as Islamic treatises would deal with unity (arab. tauhid). Rudolph<sup>56</sup> is inclined to believe that the monophysite Syriac Theologian Moshe bar Kepha simply rendered a Mu'tazilite Muslim treaty in Arabic in Syriac and included it in his commentary. This is completely possible, but not very likely: Moshe bar Kepha usually formulates introductory problem commentaries in his exegetical and dogmatical works. While quoting silently and widely in the body of his works these introductory commentaries seem to be his own compilations from Theological school discussions,<sup>57</sup> neither unique in thought nor wording but representing his learning outcome in a somehow systematic way. What is most heavy weighing is the fact that no Muslim dogmatic treaty is available before Moshe bar Kepha (d. 903 AD). Moshe's book on the Hexaemeron is to be dated after 860 AD.<sup>58</sup> The in many regards striking parallel is by Abu Mansur al-Maturidi (d. 944 AD) respectively two Jewish authors Sa'adya Gaon (d. 942 AD) and Dawud ibn Marwan al-Muqammis (d. around 900 AD). It is easy to show that elements used later in the standardized form of the treaty, were relevant in older systems of Christian Theology, f. ex. in the »Source of Knowledge« by the Aristotelian<sup>59</sup> John of Damascus. Anthropomorphism is a topic there too: In which regard might it be adequate to assign a locally defined place

50 Curt FRIEDLEIN, *Geschichte der Philosophie*. Lehr- und Lehrbuch, Berlin 1992, 15th rev. ed., 52ss.

51 BAUMSTARK, *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur* (see note 24), 216: »The turn from the 8th to the 9th century marks the moment of the largest extension of Nestorian Christianity to the East [...] not less in it's inner spiritual life and it's expression in literature a remarkable summit and turningpoint [...] a period of highly flourishing literary production [...] oc-

cupation with ecclesial law [...] and the law executed by Church authorities [...] multiple interest in Aristotelian philosophy [...].«

52 WINKELMANN, *Kreuzzüge* (see note 5), 28ss: the conflict with Michael Psellos (\*1018) and Ioannes Italos (\*1025).

53 Volker LEPPIN, *Theologie im Mittelalter* (Kirchengeschichte in Einzeldarstellungen I/11), Leipzig 2007, 96ss; Karl-Hermann KANDLER, *Christliches Denken im Mittelalter* (Kirchen-

geschichte in Einzeldarstellungen I/11), Leipzig 1993, 74ss.

54 HAGE, *Christentum* (see note 6), 48.

55 RUDOLPH, *Christliche Bibel-exegese* (see note 47), 302.

56 RUDOLPH, *Christliche Bibelexegese* (see note 47), 305 with reference to Lorenz SCHLIMME, *Der Hexaemeronkommentar des Moses bar Kepha*. Einleitung, Übersetzung und Untersuchungen (Göttinger Orientalforschungen, Reihe I: Syriaca 14),



to God (I, 13; Moshe bar Kepha I, 7; al-Maturidi 67-77)?<sup>60</sup> As already stated it does not seem profitable to claim the authorship for this type of Theological treaty on divine unity for one of the monotheistic religions involved but for the Theological milieu in Syria in the 9<sup>th</sup> century which obviously created an atmosphere for discussion on a philosophical basis dominated by Aristotle. The discussion would not have started if Islamic monotheism had not challenged Christian and Jewish Theologians to argue for their creed. All religions contributed to this discussion, formulated consent and dissent. Ideas on divine unity could be perceived as universal for Judaism, Christianity and Islam and develop some kind of standardized formulations - at least to some extent. All religions would build contradicting each other on this foundation, Moshe ends up with the Trinitarian essence of God and a typically monistic Christology. No Mu'tazilite Theologian might follow him in that conclusion<sup>61</sup> and did not meet the standards of Sunnite orthodoxy anyway. This is really that, what is amazing about the spiritual atmosphere in Syria and Iraq in these days. It reflects unbroken Christian and Jewish identities and a proud Muslim identity shaping itself in interaction and dialogue.

## 7 Scholarly debates

Scholarly research paid intensive attention to early Christian-Muslim relations in Syria during the last three decades. The oddness of these early Syriac statements challenged to examine the authenticity and historical context. J. Moorhead opened the discussion in 1980 AD with *The Monophysite Response to the Arab Invasion*, followed by Sebastian Peter Brock in *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles* (1993) and Robert Hoyland in *Seeing Islam as Others saw it* (1997).<sup>62</sup> A whole research-project was inaugurated at the University of Groningen in 1995 AD. J. J. van Ginkel, H. L. Murre-van den Berg and T. M. van Lint edited a large volume *Redefining Christian identity. Cultural interaction in the Middle-East since the rise of Islam*.<sup>63</sup> Emmanouela Grypeou, Mark N. Swanson and David Thomas edited *The encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam* at the University of Erfurt. Scholars were more doubtful with regard to the historicity of those earliest texts about the Arab invasion presented above. One tried to integrate them under the headline of »Christian Apologetics«. Van Ginkel summarizes the opinion in a representative way:<sup>64</sup> »The accounts, which portray the Arabs in a positive way, fit very well with Christian attempts of the eighth/ninth century to ›reinvent‹ the history of the seventh century so as to assert the antiquity of the special status of the various Christian communities. It is in this period that the so-called ›Covenant of Umar‹, with its rules and regulations for non-Muslims in society, seems to have become more prominent in Christian-Arab relations.« Reinvention for apologetic purposes or historical authenticity or may be something in between these

Wiesbaden 1977, 30s., hints at al-Tabari's (d. 923 AD) Commentary on the Quran.

<sup>57</sup> Jobst RELLER, Iwannis von Dara, Mose bar Kepha und Bar Hebräus Über die Seele, traditionsgeschichtlich untersucht, in: *After Bardaisan. Studies on Continuity and Change in Syriac Christianity in Honour of Professor Han J. W. Drijvers*, ed. by G. J. REININK / A. C. KLUGKIST, Leuven 1999, 254-268, 268.

<sup>58</sup> RELLER, *Mose bar Kepha* (see note 3), 80ss.

<sup>59</sup> HARNACK, *Lehrbuch* (see note 48), 411s.

<sup>60</sup> RUDOLPH, *Christliche Bibel-exegese* (see note 47), 308s.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. RISSANEN, *Theological Encounters* (see note 29), 238: »The intellectual closeness between Timothy and the Mu'tazila assisted in the interreligious dialogue. Even in the most difficult issue about the relationship between God's oneness

and Trinity it was possible to find concepts that were acceptable for both parties.«

<sup>62</sup> VAN GINKEL, *The perception* (see note 27), 172-184, 172s.

<sup>63</sup> OLA 134, Leuven/Paris/Dudley, MA 2005.

<sup>64</sup> VAN GINKEL, *The perception* (see note 27), 180.



positions – there is a variety of options. The scholarly debate is still open. While German scholars felt more inclined to admit the historicity, scholars from the Netherlands, Britain and the States were more doubtful in that regard.

Recent research has f. ex. pointed out, that Michael revised his sources in one regard. Quoting from John of Ephesus he emphasized the evilness of the Chalcedonian Byzantines.<sup>65</sup> Tendencies like these may have had a certain apologetic function in the 9<sup>th</sup> century because they could underline the utmost enmity against the Byzantines and loyalty with the legitimate Abbasid government. But they had certainly none in the time of Michael when the Byzantine emperor was weak. Without stressing the historical question too much one may refer to one fact. The crucial point of judgement is the question, whether the anonymous chronicle of AD 1234, which is younger, but parallel to Michael in many texts, at least in parts represents the work of Dionysius. On that assumption one may state as van Ginkel does, that Dionysius had a tendency to make the Arabs nobler than what they actually were. The chronicle of AD 1234 is the only one to include the human instructions for the Arab troops conquering the Roman Empire. Michael does not quote this tradition. To decide whether he knew it and omitted it consciously or not is speculation. What should have prevented him from incorporating that story which would fit in the scope of his book? What about a pro-Arab tendency in the anonymous chronicle originating from Dionysius if it also includes the story about the slaughter of anti-Chalcedonian ascetics and monks on the mountain near Merdin by Arabic forces, as Michael and other Syriac chronicles do?<sup>66</sup> Pro-Arab and anti-Arab texts are present in all available preserved texts. Conclusions on tendencies remain hypothetical in many respects. Scholars like Abramowski focussed on the critical synthesis of Syriac historiography by the learned Bar Hebrew (d. 1286), one century after Michael. Bar Hebrew usually follows Michael and Dionysius.

May be future research will be able to include Muslim sources too and shed new light on probable tendencies in Syriac historiography. There is evidence from Muslim discussions on the ownership of conquered land from the beginning of the 9th century. Al-Walid ibn Muslim (d. around 810 AD)<sup>67</sup> from Damaskus reminds his Muslim fellows of the fact that the Muslim conquerors of the 7th century did neither deprive Christian subjects from their lands nor buy their land, because collecting taxes from Non-Muslim subjects was more favourable than owning and cultivating the land themselves. Christians becoming Muslims would have to leave their land in order to keep the amount of tax collected from Christians on the same level! Christian subjects had opted for this solution as early as in the times of conquest by pointing to their loyalty with the Arab forces and gained the status of dhimmi because of this loyalty: Christians had asked for grace in advance, resigned from supporting the Byzantines and fighting and showed hospitality to the conquerors. In the first run the text clearly proves the pro-Arab and Anti-Byzantine tendency of the Syriac Christians from

65 Ibid., 174, 178, blames Michael for this alteration. Why should Michael have done that 700 years after John of Ephesus, if Dionysius and other centuries before him didn't do it?

66 Ibid., 180 referring to *Chronique*, vol. 4, 414/vol. 2, 419 and Brooks, *Chronica II*, 148/114.

67 Tilmann NAGEL, *Mohammed. Leben und Legende*, München 2008, 520s (Ibn Hagar: Tahdih XI, 153-155 Nr. 254). Nagel mentions examples for Anti-Byzantine Christian support from Arabic sources f. ex. 411, 480.

68 M. GERVERS/R. J. BIKHAZI (eds.), *Conversion and Continuity. Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands Eight to Eighteenth Centuries* (Papers in Medieval Studies 9), Toronto 1990.

69 RELLER, *Mose bar Kepha* (see note 3), 41.

70 Disputatio Christiani et Saraceni, ed. by Kotter in: *Patristische Texte und Studien* 7, 47-146. See also Theodor Abu Qurra (\*around 750 AD): *Contra saracenos theopaschitas*, PG 97, 1583s. BAUMSTARK, *Ge-*

*schichte der syrischen Literatur* (see note 24), 211, mentions Abraham of Bet Hale (around 660 AD) with his »Book against the Arabs« as the first Christian polemist.

71 These views are checked and documented in Andreas FELDTKELLER, *Die »Mutter der Kirchen« im »Haus des Islam«*. Gegenseitige Wahrnehmungen von arabischen Christen und Muslimen im West- und Ostjordanland (Missionswissenschaftliche Forschungen N. F. 6), Erlangen 1998.



the 7th century, secondly the text seems to indicate that ownership structures changed in Christian countryside regions in Syria around 800 AD. But learned Muslims warned their fellow Muslims not to surrender to that temptation. In a conservative perspective Christian landownership implied both relative autonomy and the affordable duty to pay taxes. On the other hand the whole situation would change if conversion to Islam would imply land ownership and liberty from tax obligations. Pressure on the dhimmis would increase and conversion become highly attractive.<sup>68</sup> Both Muslims and Christians recall the loyalty of the latter ones!

## 8 Conclusions

Someone who deals with Christian-Muslim relations should take the period from 632-1300 AD in Syria into regard: According to the views of Syriac historians this is a history of about 600 years of comparatively great tolerance shown by Muslim governors against their Christian subjects. Christians in general lived with religious and local autonomy under Muslim rulers. They did not only live, but also cooperate in politics, science and medicine. The 9<sup>th</sup> century seems to be a highly flourishing time of cultural interaction. A more or less close alliance was often true in spite of the lack of privileges compared to Muslim citizens, in spite of oppressions and persecutions, occurring from time to time, in spite of compulsory conversion of all Arabic sometimes former Christian tribes before 800.

One might question, how and why this specific view could come into being. Did it serve any special somehow apologetic purpose with regard to the rulers? Did Christian theologians some kind of »fishing for compliments« in order to pacify Muslim rulers with regard to their Christian subjects? One might argue that competent 9<sup>th</sup> century bishops like Dionysius of Tellmahre or Timothy I would have been able to rewrite their history in order to influence the Abbasid caliphs. But there is little evidence for that. The earliest sources on Syriac Church History deal with both positive and negative incidents. Syriac Christians wanted to perceive their history, as it was, as God's history, not to create a historical fiction in a modern way. They wanted to understand the fact that Christian emperors had lost power in favour of non Christian ones. They were aware of the difference between intercessions for Christian or non Christian kings in their liturgies.<sup>69</sup> Although they could hand over traditions about peaceful and tolerant Muslim rulers theological differences were known quite well at all times from the very beginning. John the Damascene's dispute between Christians and Saracens – whether real or fictive – is followed by others.<sup>70</sup> But they were able to use the same philosophical language and to distinguish between dogmatic, moral and political issues, between political actors, acts and religious concepts – at least to some extent and in certain periods. One might presume that this ability could contribute to more peaceful conditions.

The Syriac view on tolerant Muslim rulers was kept in spite of continuous military clashes between Muslim and Christian forces, either Byzantine or Western-Europeans during the time of the crusades, the so called »Franks«. This view passed away when Muslim governors discovered Islam as political ideology as the Mongols did for their empire around 1400 AD. But confusion of religion and politics was also that what the Byzantine Empire or the Latin crusaders would have to be blamed for. It must not be forgotten that the crusades shaped a new understanding of Christianity in Muslim consciousness, which is still effective in many regards but does not represent the whole common history.<sup>71</sup> The further course of history blocked gates of understanding. But why should this part of history be allowed to hide other periods which were more open for dialogue?



### Abstract

The article has three main goals: 1) to provide information about the historical ideas formed by Syriac Christian authors with regard to Islamic and Muslim rule between 632 and 1300 C. E.; 2) to highlight the intellectual atmosphere of the early Abbasid period in the 9<sup>th</sup> century during which there was an attempt to develop common philosophical prolegomena for both Muslim and Christian theology; 3) to stimulate current discussions about Muslim-Christian encounter by removing prevalent, but historically dubious clichés. Dialogue presupposes a bilateral agreement to use history honestly. Viewed in its historical context, Syriac Christians, using an apocalyptic pattern of thought, frequently considered Muslim rule to be initiated by God as the Lord of history. They referred to Muslim rule as being tolerant to a large extent and preferred it to Byzantine rule.

### Zusammenfassung

Der Artikel verfolgt drei Hauptziele: 1) Information zu den historischen Ideen zu liefern, welche von christlich-syrischen Autoren in Bezug auf islamische Herrschaft zwischen 632 und 1300 n. Chr. geformt wurden; 2) die intellektuelle Atmosphäre in der frühen Abbasidischen Periode im 9. Jahrhundert herauszustellen, in welcher ein Versuch lanciert wurde, gemeinsame philosophische Grundsätze für muslimische und christliche Theologie zu entwickeln; 3) die nunmehr angestoßenen Diskussionen in Bezug auf muslimisch-christliche Begegnung anzuregen, indem vorherrschende, aber historisch fragwürdige Klischees aus dem Weg geräumt werden. Dialog hat eine reziproke Übereinkunft zur Vorbedingung, die Geschichte ehrlich zu bedienen. Im historischen Kontext gesehen haben syrische Christen, indem sie apokalyptisches Denken heranzogen, sehr oft die muslimische Herrschaft als von Gott als dem Herrn der Geschichte herbeigeführt betrachtet. Sie bezogen sich auf muslimische Gesetzgebung als eine in großen Zügen tolerante und zogen diese der byzantinischen Gesetzgebung vor.

### Sumario

El artículo persigue tres fines principales: 1) Informar sobre las ideas históricas que autores cristiano-sirios han dado sobre la dominación islámica entre 632 y 1300; 2) resaltar la atmósfera intelectual en el primer periodo abasida del siglo IX, en el que se intentó desarrollar principios filosóficos comunes para la teología musulmana y cristiana; 3) fomentar las discusiones abiertas recientemente sobre el encuentro islamo-cristiano, quitando de en medio algunos prejuicios presentes, pero que son históricamente cuestionables. El diálogo tiene como premisa el recíproco acuerdo de ser honestos con la historia. En un contexto histórico, los cristianos sirios, sirviéndose del pensamiento apocalíptico, han interpretado frecuentemente la dominación musulmana como algo dirigido por Dios como Señor de la historia. Interpretaron la legislación musulmana como una legislación en gran medida tolerante y la prefirieron a la legislación bizantina.