Christian-Muslim Relations
A Bibliographical History

Volume 15. Thematic Essays
(600-1600)

Edited by
Douglas Pratt and Charles Tieszen

with David Thomas and John Chesworth

BRILL

LEIDEN · BOSTON
2020

CONTENTS

Chapter 16
Martyrdom and conversion

Christian C. Sahner

Introduction

At the time of the Arab conquest in the 7th century, much of the greater Middle East was predominantly Christian, including areas such as North Africa, Egypt, Syria, Mesopotamia and Anatolia.[1] By the early modern period, however, many of these regions had become majority Muslim, in the process, abandoning traditionally Christian languages such as Latin, Coptic, Syriac and Greek for Arabic, Persian and Turkish. There were regional variations in the process, of course, as well as moments when the pace of conversion sped up and slowed down. But the broad arc of religious change in the medieval period is indisputable: Islam waxed as Christianity waned.[2]

Despite the steady pace of Islamisation, the conversion of the Christian population was not inevitable, especially at the beginning of the Islamic period. Indeed, history furnishes numerous examples of the process unfolding in reverse, in which instead of conversion to Islam, we find Muslim conversion to Christianity. Along with this, we also find examples of Christians challenging the Islamic social and political order through acts of blasphemy. Christians sometimes recorded these episodes in the form of martyrdom narratives, that is, stylised hagiographical accounts of violence, often but not exclusively at the hands of Muslim

[1] This essay draws and expands upon C.C. Sahner, *Christian martyrs under Islam. Religious violence and the making of the Muslim world*, Princeton NJ, 2018.

[2] For the most important studies, see T.W. Arnold, *The preaching of Islam. A history of the propagation of the Muslim faith*, London, 1896; D.C. Dennett, *Conversion and the poll tax in early Islam*, Cambridge MA, 1950; R.W. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the medieval period. An essay in quantitative history*, Cambridge MA, 1979; M. Gervers and R.J. Bikhazi (eds), *Conversion and continuity. Indigenous Christian communities in Islamic lands*, Toronto, 1990; J.-M. Fiey, 'Conversions à l'islam de juifs et chrétiens sous les Abbasides d'après les sources arabes et syriaques', in J. Irmscher (ed.), *Rapports entre juifs, chrétiens et musulmans*, Amsterdam, 1995, 13-28; D.J. Wasserstein, 'Conversion and the *ahl al-dhimma*', in R. Irwin (ed.), *The new Cambridge history of Islam*, vol. 4. *Islamic cultures and societies to the end of the eighteenth century*, Cambridge, 2010, 184-208; A.C.S. Peacock (ed.), *Islamisation. Comparative perspectives from history*, Edinburgh, 2017.

officials. The subjects of these narratives were revered as saints, with annual feasts and pilgrimages held and churches built in their honour.[3]

The concept of martyrdom is as old as Christianity itself. For the martyrs of later generations, Jesus himself served as the prototype of finding strength through weakness and achieving victory through defeat. Many of his earliest followers – including all but one of the Apostles – were martyred. These were followed by large numbers of martyrs killed during bouts of persecution in the Roman Empire, when many Christians refused to sacrifice to pagan gods or take part in the imperial cult. Martyrdom largely came to an end after Constantine's (r. 306-37) conversion to Christianity in the early 4th century, but it carried on outside Rome's borders in the Zoroastrian Sasanian Empire. Along with these, there were martyrs killed amidst intra-Christian disputes, including Donatist martyrs in North Africa and Miaphysite martyrs in the Levant and Mesopotamia.

The rise of Islam in the 7th century provided Christians with new occasions for martyrdom. Often called 'neomartyrs', or 'new martyrs', these saints and the cults that grew up around them emphasised a sense of continuity between the sufferings of the early Church and those of the present. Instead of pagans persecuting Christians, however, it was Muslims who were now portrayed as forcing Christians to choose between life and death; between converting to Islam – for Christians, effectively a form of 'heathenism' – and preserving their Christian faith. The earliest recorded examples of martyrdom under Islam come from the 7th century, and they continued to be recorded through to the early modern period. Indeed, Christians across the greater Middle East still commemorate the victims of inter-religious violence as saints in the modern day.[4] Accounts of martyrdom come from nearly every corner of the medieval Middle East where Christians and Muslims lived side-by-side, including

[3] Along with Sahner, *Christian martyrs under Islam*, see especially Ḥ. Zayyāt, 'Shuhadā' al-naṣrāniyya fī l-islām', *Al-Machreq* 36 (1938) 459-65; R.G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as others saw it. A survey and evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian writings on early Islam*, Princeton NJ, 1997, pp. 336-86; S.H. Griffith, 'Christians, Muslims, and neo-martyrs. Saints' lives and Holy Land history', in A. Kofsky and G.G. Stroumsa (eds), *Sharing the sacred. Religious contacts and conflicts in the Holy Land, first to fifteenth centuries CE*, Jerusalem, 1998, 163-207; D.H. Vila, 'Christian martyrs in the first Abbasid century and the development of an apologetic against Islam', St. Louis MO, 1999 (PhD Diss. Saint Louis University); C. Foss, 'Byzantine saints in early Islamic Syria', *Analecta Bollandiana* 125 (2007) 93-119; and most recently, S.J. Shoemaker (trans.), *Three Christian martyrdoms from early Islamic Palestine*, Provo UT, 2016.

[4] See M. Mosebach, *The 21. A journey into the land of the Coptic martyrs*, Walden NY, 2019.

al-Andalus, Egypt, Syria, Mesopotamia, Armenia and Georgia. They survive in a kaleidoscope of languages, reflecting the wide geographical area in which they occurred.

This essay explores the history of Christian martyrdom in the medieval Middle East, as both a historical and a literary phenomenon. It investigates the legal and historical context of the violence; some key martyrs of the early period (7th-10th centuries); the development of the tradition in the later Middle Ages; the characteristics of the genre of martyrology, or narratives of martyrdom; and finally, the apologetic purposes of the written accounts of martyrdom.

Apostasy and blasphemy in Islamic history

Apostasy was not considered a capital offence during the Prophet's lifetime. The Qur'an, for example, makes no provision for the execution of apostates, and in fact, urges forgiveness of those who leave Islam (see Q 2:109). It took until after Muḥammad's death for this to change, particularly as a consequence of the Ridda Wars (c. 632-3), when numerous Arab tribes 'apostatised' from Islam by refusing to pay taxes to the Prophet's successor, Abū Bakr. In the wake of this tumult, a strong consensus emerged that abandoning Islam was forbidden and should be punished by death.[5]

Despite this, apostasy did occur from time to time. In the early period, at least, it seems to have happened most frequently among recently converted populations, whose attachment to Islam could be described as contingent or tentative. The early legal sources bear this out through the anecdotes they use to describe the phenomenon of apostasy. These anecdotes almost never focus on individuals from longstanding Muslim families or tribes, but instead on Christian or pagan converts who experienced a change of heart and wished to return to their natal faiths.[6] The legal texts focus on the circumstances in which such individuals might

[4] For overviews of apostasy in Islamic law and theology, see Y. Friedmann, *Tolerance and coercion in Islam. Interfaith relations in the Muslim tradition*, Cambridge, 2003, pp. 121-59; W. Heffening, art. 'Murtadd', in *EI2*; W. Hallaq, art. 'Apostasy', in *EQ*; F. Griffel, art. 'Apostasy', *EI3*; R. Peter and G.J.J. de Vries, 'Apostasy in Islam', *Die Welt des Islams* 17 (1976) 1-25; J.L. Kraemer, 'Apostates, rebels and brigands', *Israel Oriental Studies* 10 (1980) 34-73; F. Griffel, *Apostasie und Toleranz im Islam*, Leiden, 2000; D. Cook, 'Apostasy from Islam. A historical perspective', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 31 (2006) 248-88.

[5] E.g. the Christian apostate al-Mustawrid al-'Ijlī, discussed in Sahner, *Christian martyrs under Islam*, pp. 256-63.

re-join the Muslim community – usually after making an act of repentance. Most jurists believed the authorities had to offer the chance to repent three times. If an apostate refused, he or she could be killed.[7]

Across the medieval period, most converts remained committed to Islam, presumably due to a combination of 'carrots' and 'sticks'. That is, they were incentivised to remain Muslim by the social, economic and political benefits that came from practising the faith of the ruling class. At the same time, they were discouraged from leaving by the threat of the punishment that awaited them if they were ever caught. Still, as we shall see in the case of the neomartyrs, flip-flopping to and away from Islam happened to a far greater extent than many historians have generally acknowledged.[8] In many ways, this was a symptom of a much wider culture of porosity between religious groups, especially in the early period: as the first Muslims settled on certain core doctrines and practices, they intermarried with non-Muslims, adopted their cultures and social customs, and held to many of the same religious beliefs.[9] In rare instances in this mixed-up world, Muslims could be tempted to go back to Christianity or adopt it anew.

The largest group of neomartyrs in the medieval Middle East was apostates of one kind or another, but a second important group included blasphemers, who were executed after verbally attacking the Prophet Muḥammad. Attitudes about blasphemy in Islam were much slower to crystallise than those about apostasy.[10] For example, the Qur'an says nothing specific about blasphemy, though it condemns those who dare to challenge the Prophet's mission and reputation. We also know from later biographical sources that Muḥammad executed individuals who had insulted him, and such behaviours seem to have fed into later legal texts, which urge fierce punishments for blasphemers, including execution. Blasphemy was often treated as a subcategory of apostasy in Islamic

---

[6] F.M. Denny, art. 'Tawba', in *EI2*; Sahner, *Christian martyrs under Islam*, pp. 168-70.

[7] U.I. Simonsohn, 'Halting between two opinions. Conversion and apostasy in early Islam', *Medieval Encounters* 19 (2013) 344-72. Sahner, *Christian martyrs under Islam*, esp. pp. 33-8.

[8] On the porosity of the early Muslim community more broadly, see F.M. Donner, *Muhammad and the believers. At the origins of Islam*, Cambridge MA, 2012; M.P. Penn, *Envisioning Islam. Syriac Christians and the early Muslim world*, Philadelphia PA, 2015, pp. 142-82; J. Tannous, *The making of the medieval Middle East: Religion, society, and simple believers*, Princeton NJ, 2018, especially pp. 225-504.

[9] For overviews of blasphemy in Islamic law and thought, see L. Wiederhold, art. 'Shatm', in *EI2*; Friedmann, *Tolerance and coercion*, pp. 149-52; M.H. Kamali, *Freedom of expression in Islam*, Cambridge, 1997, pp. 212-58; Sahner, *Christian martyrs under Islam*, pp. 120-5.

law and so does not figure prominently as a topic for deliberation in early legal sources. Yet many of the leading lights of early Islamic jurisprudence, including Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855) and numerous Mālikīs from North Africa and al-Andalus, treated the matter in detail. Several, for example, were keen to distinguish between different tiers of blasphemous speech, such that non-Muslims were free to state points of disagreement between themselves and Muslims, but were not free to 'weaponise' these disagreements in the form of blasphemous speech. Interestingly, our earliest stand-alone treatises on blasphemy date to the later Middle Ages, written by jurists such as Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) and Tāqī l-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 1355).[11] As with apostasy, another rich source of evidence about blasphemy laws comes from Christian hagiographical texts of the early medieval period, particularly as it pertains to the implementation and perception of these laws in daily life.

Converting and returning

The single largest group of martyrs from the early Islamic period consisted of Christian converts to Islam who then returned to Christianity.[12] As we have seen, this behaviour is well attested in Islamic legal sources, along with Islamic and Christian chronicles. The very earliest neomartyr of all falls into this category: George the Black, who died in Damascus sometime in the mid-7th century. A profile of him is given by the Greek-speaking churchman Anastasius of Sinai (d. c.700) in *The edifying and supportive tales*.[13] George was born to a Christian family, possibly in Syria or across the frontier in Byzantium, before being captured and sold into slavery among Muslims. He reportedly converted to Islam at the age of eight, but returned to his original religion as an adult, worshipping in secret for fear that his Muslim master might discover him. He was eventually betrayed by another slave who had converted to Islam and was killed. George's experience mirrors that of other martyrs from the period who also converted to Islam and returned to Christianity in the

[10] Ibn Taymiyya, *Al-ṣārim al-maslūl ʿ alā shātim al-rasūl,* ed. I. Shams al-Dīn, Beirut, 2009; Tāqī l-Dīn al-Subkī, *Al-sayf al-maslūl ʿalā man sabba l-rasūl,* ed. I.A. al-Ghawj, Amman, 2000.

[11] Sahner, *Christian martyrs under Islam*, pp. 29-79.

[12] A. Binggeli, 'Anastate le Sinaïte. *Récits sur le Sinaï* et *Récits utiles à l'âme*. Édition, traduction, commentaire', Paris, 2001 (PhD Diss. Université Paris–IV) p. 252 (Greek), p. 567 (French); Sahner, *Christian martyrs under Islam*, pp. 40-1; also on this work, see A. Binggeli, 'Anatasius of Sinai', in *CMR* 1, 193-202, pp. 198-200.

context of captivity. These include Vahan of Gołt'n (d. 737) and the Martyrs of Syracuse (d. c. 875-86).[14] Slavery was a major engine of Islamisation in the post-conquest period, and most slaves who converted in this way remained Muslims. But the martyrs demonstrate how, on occasion, slaves could resist the pressure to join the faith of the ruling class and cling to their Christianity instead.

Another category of martyrs who converted and then returned did so in highly contested circumstances. These martyrs shed light on the process of conversion more broadly, especially the way it could be instantiated through certain ambiguous symbols and gestures. A good example is Elias of Helioupolis, who was killed in Damascus in 779 and whose biography was written in a Greek text.[15] According to this text, Elias was around ten when he and his family set out from Helioupolis (Baalbek) for Damascus. Upon arriving in the former Umayyad capital, Elias found work making camel saddles in the shop of a Syrian Christian who had recently converted to Islam. This man was attached – possibly as a client (Greek *parasitos*, from Arabic *mawlā*?) – to a wealthy Arab Muslim, whose son, in turn, enlisted the Syrian and his workers to serve at the birthday party of his own infant child. In the course of the evening, the Muslims heckled Elias, asking why he was not a Muslim and inviting him to convert and join them as an equal. Elias deflected their taunts, and the guests soon relented, allowing him to celebrate with them regardless of his religion. One of the Muslims, however, coaxed the Christian onto the dance floor, furtively loosening the boy's belt in the process. This was allegedly to allow him freer movement as he danced, but in the process of stripping away the belt, the Muslim removed what was also a key marker of Elias's Christian faith – in effect, converting him to Islam without his realising it. The next morning, Elias went to pray at a local church. One party-goer noticed him leaving and asked where he was going. When he replied, the man asked, 'Did you not deny your faith last night?' Denying that he was a Muslim, Elias rushed out in fear: the accidental convert to Islam was now the accidental apostate to Christianity. He was eventually charged for renouncing Islam and was executed.

[13] For Vahan, see R.W. Thomson, '*The Martyrdom of Vahan*', in *CMR* 1, 281-3; for the Martyrs of Syracuse, see B. Flusin, '*Synaxarion of the Great Church*', in *CMR* 3, 574-85, p. 576. For discussion, see Sahner, *Christian martyrs under Islam*, pp. 41-5.

[14] S. Efthymiadis, '*The martyrdom of Elias of Helioupolis* (Elias of Damascus)', in *CMR* 1, 916-18; Sahner, *Christian martyrs under Islam*, pp. 53-9. Since the publication of the entry in *CMR* 1, a new publication on Elias has appeared: T. Sizgorich, 'The dancing martyr. Violence, identity, and the Abbasid postcolonial', *History of Religions* 57 (2017) 2-27.

The central scene in the story is the removal of Elias' belt. This was one of a variety of garments Christians were required to wear to distinguish them from Muslims in mixed settings.[16] As a result, medieval sources sometimes describe the process of conversion to Islam as culminating in the removal of the belt, and indeed, the decision to return to Christianity was often signalled by the decision to refasten this belt.[17] Such articles of clothing took on great importance at a time when Muslims and Christians might look the same, speak the same languages, inhabit the same cities, and even share the same marital beds. To emphasise difference in this way was to fight against the prevailing culture of resemblance.[18] That Elias could be understood to convert by removing and donning such a garment suggests the central importance of symbols such as the *zunnār* (belt). It also suggests the ways in which they could be interpreted ambiguously. We see something similar in the Syriac *Life* of Cyrus of Ḥarrān (d. 769), in which the martyr is accused of converting after registering himself as a Muslim in the public tax rolls; or the Arabic *Life* of ʿAbd al-Masīḥ al-Ghassānī (d. mid-8th century), in which the martyr is represented as converting almost passively while fighting alongside Muslims on the frontiers between the caliphate and Byzantium.[19]

A third group of convert martyrs were born into religiously mixed families.[20] Such unions were relatively common in the medieval Middle East and al-Andalus, facilitated by Islamic law which allowed Muslim men to marry up to four women from the People of the Book (*ahl al-kitāb*, meaning Christians and Jews) without these women having to convert.

---

[15] On this theme more broadly, see Ḥ. Zayyāt, 'Simāt al-naṣārā wa-l-yahūd fī l-islām', *Al-Machreq* 43 (1949) 161-252; A. Noth, 'Problems of differentiation between Muslims and non-Muslims. Re-reading the "Ordinances of ʿUmar" (*al-Shurūṭ al-ʿUmariyya*)', in R.G. Hoyland (ed.), *Muslims and others in early Islamic society*, Farnham, 2004, 103-24; M. Levy-Rubin, *Non-Muslims in the early Islamic empire. From surrender to coexistence*, Cambridge, 2011, pp. 58-98; L.B. Yarbrough, 'Origins of the *ghiyār*', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 134 (2014) 113-21.

[16] Sahner, *Christian martyrs under Islam*, p. 58, with further references.

[17] M.J. Kister, '"Do not assimilate yourselves …" *Lā tashabbahū*', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 12 (1989) 33-52.

[18] For Cyrus, see A. Harrak, 'Piecing together the fragmentary account of the martyrdom of Cyrus of Ḥarrān', *Analecta Bollandiana* 121 (2003) 297-328; and the text from which it comes, A. Harrak, 'Joshua the Stylite of Zuqnīn', in *CMR* 1, 322-6. For ʿAbd al-Masīḥ, see D.H. Vila, '*The Martyrdom of ʿAbd al-Masīḥ*', in *CMR* 1, 684-7. For discussion of both, see Sahner, *Christian martyrs under Islam*, pp. 45-53.

[19] For general comment on interreligious marriage, see A. Fattal, *Le statut légal des non-musulmans en pays d'islam*, Beirut, 1958, pp. 129-37; Friedmann, *Tolerance and coercion*, pp. 160-93; J.M. Safran, *Defining boundaries in al-Andalus. Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Islamic Iberia*, Ithaca NY, 2013, pp. 103-6, 125-67; Sahner, *Christian martyrs under Islam*, pp. 59-62; Tannous, *Making of the medieval Middle East*, pp. 437-56.

Muslim women, however, were forbidden from marrying non-Muslim men. Jurists explained this ban by appealing to the principle of *kafā'a*, that is, the need for parity between a husband and a wife, whereby a woman could only marry a man of equal or higher social, tribal or religious standing, and hence, only a Muslim. One example of martyrdom occurring in the context of a religiously mixed family is the *Life* of the Egyptian saint George the New (d. 978), written in Arabic.[21] Muzāḥim, as the martyr was known at birth, was the son of a Muslim man and a Christian woman from the Nile Delta. As such, he was considered a Muslim under the law. That being said, he used to accompany his mother to church and was reportedly so impressed by the piety of the Christians that he would beseech God to permit him to convert. His mother would not allow this, however, for fear of his father's reaction, though she did allow him to take the unconsecrated bread at the end of the liturgy. Eventually discovering his son's interest in Christianity, the father flew into a rage, and George fled. He was baptised, taking the name 'George', and he married the daughter of a local priest. He was eventually killed for his apostasy. There were other martyrs whose conversions away from Islam were nurtured by Christian relatives, especially Christian mothers and sisters, as we see in the case of the Palestinian saint Bacchus (d. 787-8), several of the Córdoba martyrs (d. 850-9), and in a slightly later period, the Egyptian saint, Dioscorus (d. 1279-90).[22] These stories underscore the possibility of a residual Christianity surviving in mixed families – as we see especially in the case of the 'crypto-Christians' of Córdoba. One assumes, however, that these dilemmas mostly disappeared over time, as family trees in which one parent had once been a Christian became thoroughly Muslim in later generations.

[20] M.N. Swanson, 'The monk Mīnā', in *CMR* 2, 460-3; Sahner, *Christian martyrs under Islam*, pp. 68-70.

[21] For Bacchus, see S. Efthymiadis, *'The Life of Bacchus the younger'*, in *CMR* 1, 597-9. For the Córdoba martyrs, see J. Tolan, 'Eulogius of Cordova', in *CMR* 1, 679-83. For Dioscorus, see M.N. Swanson, 'The Copto-Arabic Synaxarion', in *CMR* 4, 937-45, p. 940. For general comment, see Sahner, *Christian martyrs under Islam*, pp. 62-77. For the dating of the martyrdom of Dioscorus, see A. Khater, 'Nouveaux fragments du Synaxaire arabe', *Bulletin de la Société d'Archéologie Copte* 17 (1963-64) 75-100, esp. pp. 94-6.

True apostasy

Although the majority of convert-martyrs were born as Christians, a small but fascinating group were born into Muslim families and converted without any prior knowledge of their new religion. We might label these individuals 'true apostates', to borrow the words of David Cook.[23] Such figures are extremely difficult to detect in historical sources, presumably because true apostasy was rare, given the stiff disincentives against it. Furthermore, most Muslims who converted to Christianity and got away with it probably wished to be discreet and disguise their actions, and thus, are less visible to the eyes of history. Martyrdom narratives, however, provide an unparalleled window onto this phenomenon.

A fascinating case of true apostasy comes from Georgia, the northernmost limit of Muslim expansion during the conquest period, where Abo of Tiflīs was killed in 786 (see his *Life*, written in Georgian).[24] Abo was reportedly an Arab Muslim from Baghdad who worked as a perfumer. Somehow he became attached to the Georgian duke, Nerse, who was released from prison in 775 on the accession of the new ʿAbbasid caliph, al-Mahdī (r. 775-85). Nerse then made his way back to Georgia with Abo in tow, presumably to serve as a purveyor of perfumes at his reconstituted court. In Georgia, Abo came into contact with Christianity and even learned to speak and write the local language. Since the region was under Muslim control, he could not convert publicly, but his chance arose when Nerse was forced to flee north to the land of the Khazars, and Abo was baptised there. Eventually, Abo returned to the ʿAbbasid capital at Tiflīs (Georgian, Tbilisi), where he felt compelled to announce his conversion and to convert other Muslims like him. He was eventually captured and executed.

The most famous neomartyr of the early Islamic period was also a true apostate: Anthony al-Qurashī (d. 799), an alleged descendant of the Prophet Muḥammad who converted to Christianity in Damascus and was killed by Hārūn al-Rashīd.[25] Along with his original Arabic biography, mentions of him are found in Syriac chronicles, an Ethiopic translation of his *Life*, and even a notice about him in the work of a Muslim

[22] Cook, 'Apostasy from Islam', pp. 260-6; more broadly, Sahner, *Christian martyrs under Islam*, pp. 80-117.

[23] G. Shurgaia, 'Ioane Sabanisdze', in *CMR* 1, 334-7; Sahner, *Christian martyrs under Islam*, pp. 96-100.

[24] D.H. Vila, *'The Martyrdom of Anthony* (*Rawḥ al-Qurashī*)*'*, in *CMR* 1, 498-501; Sahner, *Christian martyrs under Islam*, pp. 84-92.

writer, the famous Iranian polymath al-Bīrūnī (d. 1050). His conversion was precipitated by two miracles he allegedly witnessed in a church near his home in Damascus, the first connected to an icon of St Theodore, and the second connected to the Eucharist, which he saw transformed into a lamb. Convinced by these experiences that Christianity was true, he headed south and was baptised in the River Jordan. Thereafter, he became a monk and returned to Damascus, where he disputed with his Muslim relatives and various state officials. He was eventually tried by the caliph and killed at al-Raqqa.

The *Life* of Anthony has many elements that seem to reflect a real historical environment, though it also contains numerous elements of fantasy, as befitting the *Life* of a Christian martyr who hailed from the tribe of Quraysh (to which Muḥammad and the early caliphs also traced their ancestry). Perhaps not surprisingly, many elements in the story started circulating in other texts, in which we also find accounts of aristocratic Muslims (often described as members of the Umayyad and ʿAbbasid royal families) who converted to Islam after witnessing miracles connected to icons and the Eucharist.[26] These fictional stories of apostasy and martyrdom expressed a widespread desire among Christians for a second 'Constantinian moment', that is, the conversion of a non-Christian sovereign who would bring about the conversion of a pagan empire. The boldest example of this genre is found in a lengthy hagiographical novel known as the *Life of Theodore of Edessa* (in Greek and Arabic).[27] Among other things, it tells the story of how a Melkite bishop named Theodore baptised a caliph – modelled on the figure of al-Maʾmūn (r. 813-33) – who then suffered a martyr's death after announcing his Christian faith in public.

Blasphemy

The third major group of martyrs comprised those killed for blasphemy.[28] Although they did not undergo conversions like members of the other two groups, their outbursts may be interpreted as reactions to many of

[25] See especially A. Binggeli, 'Converting the caliph. A legendary motif in Christian hagiography and historiography of the early Islamic period', in A. Papaconstantinou, with M. Debié and H. Kennedy (eds), *Writing 'true stories'. Historians and hagiographers in the late antique and medieval Near East*, Turnhout, 2010, 77-103 (published subsequently to the relevant entry in *CMR*); Sahner, *Christian martyrs under Islam*, pp. 105-13.

[26] K.-P. Todt and M.N. Swanson, *'Life of Theodore, Bishop of Edessa'*, in *CMR* 2, 585-93.

[27] Sahner, *Christian martyrs under Islam*, pp. 118-59.

the same social pressures. These include the mounting pace of conversion to Islam, along with the widespread embrace of Arabic language and culture. Our richest information about Christian blasphemy comes from Córdoba, the capital of the independent Umayyad emirate of al-Andalus, where 48 Christians were executed between 850 and 859. Their deeds were recorded in a large body of Latin biographical and apologetic texts written by the priest Eulogius (who was himself executed in 859) and his friend, the layman Paulus Alvarus.[29] Although some of the martyrs were killed for apostasy, the vast majority were executed for blasphemy.

A good example is Perfectus, a priest who was the very first martyr to die in 850.[30] According to Eulogius, Perfectus was on the road one day when he encountered a group of Muslims, who peppered him with questions about Christianity, specifically his opinion about the Prophet Muḥammad. Knowing the risks of speaking too frankly in such a setting, Perfectus initially demurred. But the Muslims pressed him, promising that they would not harm him in exchange for expressing his views very frankly. Per their agreement, Perfectus explained in Arabic how Muḥammad had been a false prophet consumed with lust. The Muslims departed, at first leaving him alone. But the next day, fuming with rage at his blasphemous speech, they captured and handed him over to the authorities, who had him killed.

Despite their evident hatred of Islam, several of the Córdoba martyrs were deeply embedded in Islamic culture and society. Isaac, for instance, who was killed in 851, hailed from one of the noble Christian families of Córdoba[31] and so had acquired a powerful position at the Umayyad court, serving as the *exceptor rei publicae* (probably corresponding to the Arabic *mustakhrij*), responsible for the affairs of the Christian community with the state, especially the collection of taxes. For unclear reasons, he left his post to become a monk at the neighbouring monastery of Tabanos, where several other martyrs are known to have lived. He spent three years there, only to return suddenly to Córdoba, where he confronted the chief *qāḍī* – probably Saʿīd ibn Sulaymān al-Ghāfiqī, who may have been a former colleague at court. He proceeded to disparage

[28] K.B. Wolf, 'Paul Alvarus', in *CMR* 1, 645-8; Tolan, 'Eulogius of Cordova'. See also K.B. Wolf (trans.), *The Eulogius corpus*, Liverpool, 2019. (This is the first complete English translation of Eulogius's writings, published subsequently to the entry on Eulogius in CMR).

[29] I. Gil (ed.), *Corpus scriptorum Muzarabicorum*, Madrid, 1973, vol. 2, pp. 369, 377-8, 397-401; Sahner, *Christian martyrs under Islam*, pp. 145-9.

[30] Gil, *Corpus scriptorum Muzarabicorum*, vol. 2, pp. 367-9, 402; Sahner, *Christian martyrs under Islam*, pp. 149-52.

the Prophet and various Muslim doctrines, which led to his being thrown in prison and eventually executed. Isaac is emblematic of many of the 9th century Andalusī martyrs, who in an earlier phase of life profited from professional contacts with Muslims, mastered Arabic language and literature, and often belonged to religiously mixed families. Yet for some reason, their attitudes towards the surrounding culture suddenly soured, and they expressed this dissatisfaction through acts of blasphemy.

There are many theories as to why this episode occurred, some wilder than others. What seems clear is that the mid-9thcentury was a time of rapid Islamisation and Arabisation in the Iberian Peninsula, at least in the eyes of its Christian population. There are hints in the Islamic sources that this may have been true. For example, at precisely this moment we find new markers of a distinctively Islamic society emerging, including rising numbers of Muslim scholars, mosques and religious texts, and a new determination to structure Andalusī society around Islamic norms. This process also seems to have manifested itself in new anxieties about mixing between Muslims and non-Muslims, which had been relatively common in the century or so after the conquest (c. 711). The increasing segregation and stratification of society along religious lines, in turn, may have prompted the martyrs to protest about their situation through vicious outbursts in public.[32]

As a cause of martyrdom, blasphemy is relatively poorly attested outside al-Andalus. That being said, we do have interesting examples of the phenomenon from the eastern reaches of the caliphate, most prominently in the *Life* of Peter of Capitolias (d. 715).[33] Peter was a village priest from Capitolias (Arabic, Bayt Rās) in north-western Transjordan, who witnessed large numbers of his fellow Christians converting to Islam under duress. Determined to provide them with an example of courage and resistance, he publically disparaged the Islamic faith before the city's Muslims. The authorities initially believed Peter was sick or mad, but when he repeated his blasphemous tirades, he was sent to Damascus for trial. There, the Caliph al-Walīd (r. 705-15) interrogated him and sentenced him to death. He was returned to Capitolias and executed. As with the martyrs of Córdoba, the *Life* of Peter demonstrates the close connection between the perceived erosion of Christianity and the

[31] Sahner, *Christian martyrs under Islam*, pp. 154-9.

[32] Peter's *Life* is in Georgian, but was probably based on a Greek original. See S. Efthymiadis, *'The martyrdom of Peter of Capitolias'*, in *CMR* 1, 419-22; Sahner, *Christian martyrs under Islam*, pp. 130-40. After the publication of the entry in *CMR*, the first complete translation of the text appeared in Shoemaker, *Three Christian martyrdoms*, pp. 1-65.

impulse to blaspheme. If it has any basis in reality, the text also testifies to the crystallisation of blasphemy laws at this relatively early point in Islamic history.

Other forms of martyrdom

Not all martyrs died for explicitly religious reasons. Even as hagiographers strove to demonise Muslims as bloodthirsty and cruel, it is obvious that some martyrs died in the context of what were mainly political disputes, military operations or random non-religious violence. Two exemplary martyrdoms of this kind are the *Passions* of the Sixty Martyrs of Gaza (d. c. late 630s)[34] and the Sixty Martyrs of Jerusalem (d. 725).[35] The Gaza martyrs were a group of Byzantine soldiers captured by the Arabs at the time of the conquest.[36] After being thrown in prison, they were told they could convert to Islam or die. The famous patriarch of Jerusalem, Sophronius (d. 638), reportedly ministered to them, encouraging them to remain steadfast in their faith. Indeed, not a single one of the soldiers apostatised, and they were all eventually killed. A similar story unfolds almost a century later, when we read about an otherwise unattested battle between the Caliph Sulaymān ibn ʿAbd al-Malik (r. 715-17) and the Byzantine Emperor Leo III (r. 717-41), which resulted in a seven-year truce between the two powers.[37] Among other things, this truce guaranteed the safe passage of Christian pilgrims from Byzantium to the Holy Land. The story resumes in the seventh year of the treaty, as a group of heavily armed Byzantine archons visited Jerusalem. Not realising that the truce had expired, the group was captured, imprisoned and offered the choice of conversion or death. Some of the soldiers apostatised, but the vast majority of them held fast to their religion and were killed. In both instances, martyrdom occurred as a result of political and military disputes, to which hagiographers later added thick layers of religious significance.

The same applies to the Forty-Two Martyrs of Amorion – rare examples of neomartyrs who were commemorated on both sides of the Islamic-Byzantine frontier – a group of soldiers who were captured during a

[33] The texts are in Latin, based on a Greek original.
[34] The accounts of these are in Greek but possibly based on a Syriac-Aramaic original.
[35] D. Woods, *'The passion of the sixty martyrs of Gaza'*, in *CMR* 1, 190-2.
[36] S. Efthymiadis, *'The Sixty martyrs of Jerusalem'*, in *CMR* 1, 327-9; Sahner, *Christian martyrs under Islam*, p. 18, on the language of the text.

Muslim raid on the fortress of Amorion in Anatolia in 838. They became the subjects of numerous hagiographical works in Greek.[38] Another group martyrdom in this vein is that of the *Passion* of the Twenty Martyrs of Mar Saba (d. 788/797).[39] Written by the Sabaite monk Stephen Manṣūr – who was also responsible for the *Passion* of the martyr Romanus (d. 780)[40] – it tells the story of a Bedouin raid on the famous monastery of Mar Saba near Bethlehem. The attackers seem to have been Muslims, but there was nothing about the violence to suggest it was motivated by religious concerns. Indeed, it seems that the raiders were driven by a desire to plunder what was simply a wealthy and vulnerable institution (which had experienced sometimes difficult relations with the local nomads since Late Antiquity).

A good example of a martyrdom arising in the midst of a political dispute comes from the *Passion* of Christopher, the Melkite bishop of Antioch (d. 967).[41] Born near Baghdad, Christopher rose through the church hierarchy and was eventually appointed patriarch through the help of his ally, the Ḥamdānid emir, Sayf al-Dawla (d. 967). Christopher engaged in charitable works, especially efforts to gain relief from the *jizya* for individual Christians. In the background of the story, swirl two key factors: the threat of Byzantine invasion (which would eventually occur in 969) and a local Muslim rebellion against Sayf al-Dawla. Through this tumult, Christopher remained loyal to the emir, which the emir's enemies used as a premise to conspire against the bishop. In a *fatwā*, they accused Christopher of plotting against the city by helping the Byzantine emperor capture it. The conspiracy succeeded, and Christopher was eventually beheaded. The text is anomalous for its lack of interest in confessional or theological issues; indeed, Christopher's death is presented

[37] There are several recensions of the story: A. Kolia-Dermitzaki, 'Michael the Synkellos', in *CMR* 1, 627-32; A. Kolia-Dermitzaki, '*The forty-two martyrs of Amorion* (BHG 1212)', in *CMR* 1, 636-8; A. Kolia-Dermitzaki, '*The forty-two martyrs of Amorion* (BHG 1214c)', in *CMR* 1, 639-41; A. Kolia-Dermitzaki, 'Euodius the monk', in *CMR* 1, 844-7.

[38] D.H. Vila, 'The Martyrdom of the twenty martyrs of Mār Saba', in *CMR* 1, 393-6; Sahner, *Christian martyrs under Islam*, pp. 100-1, 204-5. After the publication of the entry in *CMR*, the first complete translation of the text appeared in Shoemaker, *Three Christian martyrdoms*, pp. 67-147.

[39] The text of this is in Georgian, but based on a Greek original. See M. Nanobashvili, 'The Martyrdom of Romanus the Younger', in *CMR* 1, 390-3; Sahner, *Christian martyrs under Islam*, 206-8. After the publication of the entry in *CMR*, the first complete translation of the text has appeared in Shoemaker, *Three Christian martyrdoms*, pp. 149-97.

[40] J.C. Lamoreaux, 'Ibrāhīm ibn Yuḥannā al-Anṭākī', in *CMR* 2, 611-16. See also J. Mugler, 'A Martyr with too many causes: Christopher of Antioch (d. 967) and local collective memory', Washington DC, 2019 (PhD Diss. Georgetown University).

within the matrix of high power politics in northern Syria during the mid-10th century, not of rivalry between Christianity and Islam as such.

Later developments

The golden era of martyrdom writing in the medieval Middle East lasted from the late 7th to the 10th century. Thereafter, Christians continued writing hagiographical accounts of apostasy and blasphemy, but generally in areas far away from the Arabic-speaking heartlands where the genre was pioneered.

The most prolific writers of martyrdom narratives in the late medieval period were Armenian Christians. Peter Cowe has identified more than 20 examples of such texts, mostly dating from the early 13th to the mid-16th century.[42] They were written across a wide geographical area, from eastern Anatolia to Armenia itself, and Iran. What is striking about these sources is that, although the identity of the Muslim opponents is changed from the hagiographical narratives of the early period – no longer Umayyads and ʿAbbasids, but now Seljuks, Kipchaks, Turkmen and Mongols – the general arc of the narratives does not change. This is a testament to the conservatism of the genre and also the fairly consistent ways in which social conflict could erupt between Muslims and Christians in different times and places. These, in turn, were shaped by common demographic realities and legal norms.

An interesting case is the martyrdom of the leatherworker Awag (d. 1390), who originally came from Salmas in what is today Iranian Azerbaijan.[43] Apprenticed to a Muslim master as a youth, Awag later moved to Bitlis in what is today eastern Turkey near Lake Van. In his new home, a Muslim from Salmas accused him of apostatising from Islam. He was

[41] In addition to the texts discussed below, see S.P. Cowe, 'Martyrology of Tʿēodoros Kesaracʿi', in *CMR* 4, 94-7; S.P. Cowe, 'Kirakos Ganjakecʿi or Arewelcʿi', in *CMR* 4, 438-42; S.P. Cowe, 'Dawitʿ erēcʿ Baluecʿi', in *CMR* 4, 620-23; S.P. Cowe, *'Martyrology of Bishop Grigor of Karin'*, in *CMR* 4, 794-7; S.P. Cowe, 'Yovhannēs vardapet', in *CMR* 4, 911-13; S.P. Cowe, 'Martyrology of Archbishop Stepʿanos Sebastacʿi', in *CMR* 5, 199-202; S.P. Cowe, 'Martyrology of Zakʿaria, catholicos of Ałtʿamar', in *CMR* 5, 216-19; S.P. Cowe, 'Martyrology of Tʿamar Mokacʿi', in *CMR* 5, 250-3; S.P. Cowe, 'The martyrology of Vardan Bałišecʿi', in *CMR* 5, 339-41; S.P. Cowe, 'Aṙakʿel Bałišecʿi', in *CMR* 5, 346-50; S.P. Cowe, 'Martyrology of the Confessor Stepʿannos', in *CMR* 5, 549-52; S.P. Cowe, 'Priest Yovhannēs', in *CMR* 7, 572-5; S.P. Cowe, 'Martyrology of Xačʿatur Kołbecʿi in 1517', in *CMR* 7, 588-91; S.P. Cowe, 'Grigoris Ałtʿamarcʿi', in *CMR* 7, 599-607; S.P. Cowe, 'Mkrtičʿ Abełay', in *CMR* 7, 608-14; S.P. Cowe, 'Yovasapʿ Sebastacʿi', in *CMR* 7, 644-9; S.P. Cowe, 'Mec Paron', in *CMR* 7, 668-72.

[42] S.P. Cowe, 'Martyrology of Awag Salmastecʿi', in *CMR* 5, 207-9.

brought before the local Kurdish emir, who referred the case to the *qāḍī*. Before he could reach the judge, however, the saint was attacked and killed by a Muslim mob. The description of the mixed workplace and the disputed conversion calls to mind the life of Elias of Helioupolis and other hagiographical texts set centuries earlier, which hinge on related concerns about ambiguity, identity and belief. Similar themes surface in the *Life* of the martyr Yovhannēs Xlat'ec'i (d. 1438).[44] According to the text, Yovhannēs was a young bard from the western shore of Lake Van, revered by both Christians and Muslims for his skill in singing. Local Kurds, however, resented his abilities and falsely accused him of having sexual relations with a Muslim dancer and singer. They offered him the choice of converting to Islam and going free, or remaining Christian and facing death. He initially accepted their offer and was paraded through the city in celebration. That same day, however, he regretted this choice and called on several Armenian priests to bring him communion. The priests refused, doubting his sincerity. Eventually, the *qāḍī* and the emir demanded that he formally renounce Christianity and undergo circumcision. Yovhannēs refused and was stoned to death by a mob. Once again, disputed conversion, promiscuous social interactions and a perilous workplace feature prominently in accounts of Christian martyrdom under Islam.

We gain a completely different view of the phenomenon of martyrdom from the *Life* of Yovhannēs, bishop of Tarōn (d. 1463), in what is today eastern Turkey.[45] As bishop, he began restoring old monastic churches throughout the region, and this provoked the ire of the Kurds (who were presumably upset by this resurgence of Christian building, which technically violated the dictates of Islamic law). Arrested, Yovhannēs refused their offer to convert, then condemned Islam and was killed. Quite clearly, there were limits to how active a Christian leader could be in such an environment, especially when it came to expanding the footprint of Christian institutions in a mixed area. A final example is the martyrdom of Mirak' Tawrizec'i, a Christian magnate in the Iranian city of Tabriz, who often interceded with the local Qara Quyunlu and Aq Quyunlu rulers to help other Christians in need.[46] A Muslim courtier, however, became upset with his political influence, especially his efforts to protect a church that was slated for destruction. Instructed to convert

[43] S.P. Cowe, 'Martyrology of the youth Yovhannēs Xlat'ec'i', in *CMR* 5, 370-4.
[44] S.P. Cowe, 'Martyrology of Yovhannēs bishop of Tarōn', in *CMR* 5, 478-80.
[45] S.P. Cowe, 'Martyrology of Mirak' Tawrizec'i', in *CMR* 5, 553-6.

to Islam or face death, Mirak‘ nonetheless held fast to his beliefs and was killed. In this and the previous example, we witness how martyrdom narratives, far from revealing the passivity of Christian communities under Islamic rule, sheds light on their agency and ability to exercise power in a Muslim-dominated society.

Another region that generated martyrologies in the later Middle Ages was Egypt.[47] In fact, one of the latest surviving prose compositions in Coptic (the Coptic language was later eclipsed by Arabic) was a martyrology, namely, the *Life* of John of Phanijōit, who died at the beginning of the 13th century.[48] It tells the story of a Christian flax merchant and deacon who entered into a relationship with a Muslim woman in Cairo, assimilating into Islamic culture. He eventually returned to Christianity and publically professed his faith, which led to his execution. The Copts commemorate a number of martyrs in the Mamlūk period, too, though one of our most vivid accounts of violence in this context actually comes from the Byzantine statesman, scholar and litterateur Theodore Metochites, not from an Egyptian. He describes the death of a saint named Michael the New, who was born near Smyrna in coastal Anatolia. He was captured by Turks and sold into slavery in Egypt.[49] Michael was converted to Islam while still a youth and assigned to the Mamlūk forces, where he enjoyed great success and rose through the ranks. Said to have realised the error of his ways, Michael resolved to return to Christianity and flee from Egypt. He heard of a Byzantine embassy departing for Constantinople from Alexandria. Dressed as a monk, he attempted to board the vessel but was discovered and handed over to the authorities. He was eventually killed after refusing to renounce his Christian faith.

The final large group of martyrs in Islamic lands falls outside the chronological scope of this volume, and these are the Ottoman neomartyrs.[50] Nevertheless, they bear mentioning here, given their close geographical

[46] For later Egyptian martyrs, see T. el-Leithy, ‘Coptic culture and conversion in medieval Cairo, 1293-1524 A.D.’, Princeton NJ, 2005 (PhD Diss. Princeton University), pp. 101-39; M.M. Shenoda, ‘Lamenting Islam, imagining persecution. Copto-Arabic opposition to Islamization and Arabization in Fatimid Egypt’, Cambridge MA, 2010 (PhD Diss. Harvard University), pp. 121-71; F. Armanios, *Coptic Christianity in Ottoman Egypt*, New York, 2011, pp. 41-90.

[47] J.R. Zaborowski, ‘The Martyrdom of John of Phanijōit’, in *CMR* 4, 128-31.

[48] J. Pahlitzsch, ‘Theodore Metochites’, in *CMR* 4, 808-14.

[49] N. Vaporis, *Witnesses for Christ. Orthodox Christian neomartyrs of the Ottoman period*, Crestwood NY, 2000; T. Krstić, *Contested conversions to Islam. Narratives of religious change in the early modern Ottoman empire*, Stanford CA, 2011; M. Greene, *The Edinburgh history of the Greeks, 1453 to 1768. The Ottoman Empire*, Edinburgh, 2015, pp. 74, 146-51.

and thematic connections to the earlier generations of saints. These texts were written primarily in Greek, along with Old Russian and other languages from the Balkans. They have been the subject of extensive research, but by and large have not been compared with older martyrological traditions from other areas under Islamic control.

The texts

As we have seen throughout this essay, most of our information about the Christian martyrs of the first millennium of Islamic history comes from the genre of *Lives*, or *Vitae*, to use the common Latin term.[51] These are stand-alone biographies written independently of larger historical or literary works. Some of these biographies run for as much as 40 pages in modern printed editions (such as the *Passion of the Twenty Martyrs of Mar Saba*), others for as little as four pages – as with the *Passion of the Sixty Martyrs of Gaza*. Most of the early martyrdom narratives have been edited, but not necessarily translated into modern European languages. Many of the later narratives, especially those in Armenian, remain in manuscript form or are untranslated from the original.

Another important source of information about the martyrs is liturgical calendars. Known as *synaxaria* in Greek (and cognate languages), they detail the feasts celebrated in the course of the church year. In some instances, they identify a saint with a single line of information, though in others they contain longer biographies, which may be based on now-missing independent works. Chronicles are another source of insight into martyrdom. Unlike hagiographical texts, however, chronicles do not always make clear whether a given Christian who was killed by Muslims was also venerated as a saint. Some pseudo-hagiographical works actually come from this genre, including the *Life of Cyrus of Ḥarrān*, which appears as the epilogue of a longer historical work known as *The chronicle of Zuqnīn*. We sometimes have information about martyrs in the form of edifying tales, sermons and orations, which cannot be called strictly biographical or hagiographical.

The languages of the martyrdom narratives are as diverse as the places in which they are set. In the post-conquest period, Greek was an extremely important language of martyrdom-writing, especially in the

[50] This and the following paragraphs draw on Sahner, *Christian martyrs under Islam*, pp. 14-22.

monasteries of southern Palestine and the Sinai. Here and throughout the Middle East, Arabic eventually became the dominant language of Christian life, and indeed, some of the earliest original compositions in Christian Arabic are martyrdom texts (see, for example, the *Lives* of ʿAbd al-Masīḥ al-Ghassānī and Anthony al-Qurashī). On the periphery of the caliphate, ancient Christian languages continued to be used, including for hagiography, as we see with Latin texts from al-Andalus, along with Armenian and Georgian texts from the south Caucasus. Interestingly, Syriac – one of the most important Christian languages of the Middle East in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages – furnishes almost no records of martyrdoms under Islam.

Because of the strong theological, political and economic ties among Christian communities in the greater Middle East, martyrdom narratives were frequently translated from one language to another. In some instances, we have multiple recensions of the same text (e.g. the *Life* of Anthony al-Qurashī, which was originally written in Arabic, but also exists in Georgian and Ethiopic). In other instances, the original version of a saint's *Life* has disappeared, but translations into other languages survive, such as the *Life* of Peter of Capitolias, originally written in Greek but surviving only in Georgian, or the *Life* of Romanus, probably written in Arabic but also surviving only in Georgian. Thus, Georgian emerges as an extremely important language with respect to the preservation of these texts. This was a function of the close ties between the Georgian Orthodox Church and its Melkite counterpart in the Levant, where many Georgian monks were dispatched to copy and translate texts, especially at sites such as the Black Mountain near Antioch, the Holy Cross Monastery in Jerusalem, and St Catherine's Monastery at Mount Sinai.[52]

There is no hard and fast rule about the date of the texts. In many but not all instances, it seems that the lives of the martyrs were written in relatively close chronological proximity to the events that they describe. Some texts show great knowledge of local topography, and can therefore be trusted as products of the immediate worlds they describe (e.g.

[51] On the role of Georgian in the transmission and preservation of Oriental Christian literature, see P. Peeters, *Orient et Byzance. Le tréfonds oriental de l'hagiographie byzantine*, Brussels, 1950, pp. 155-64; T. Mgaloblishvili, 'The Georgian Sabaite (Sabatsminduri) literary school and the Sabatsmindian version of the Georgian *Mravaltavi* (Polykephalon)', in J. Patrich (ed.), *The Sabaite heritage in the Orthodox Church from the fifth century to the present*, Leuven, 2001, 229-33; S.F. Johnson, 'Introduction. The social presence of Greek in Eastern Christianity, 200-1200 CE', in S.F Johnson (ed.), *Languages and cultures of Eastern Christianity. Greek*, Farnham, 2014, 1-222, especially pp. 81-4. On Georgian in the martyrologies, see Sahner, *Christian martyrs under Islam*, pp. 17-18, 237.

the *Life* of Peter of Capitolias, the Córdoba martyr texts; and so forth). Other texts were composed in one place but rewritten later far away from their original context, and thus may have lost much of their original colour (e.g. the *Life* of Bacchus, the surviving version of which comes from Constantinople, not Palestine where the saint lived and where a prior recension must have been written). In some instances, we know the names of the hagiographers, such as those of the *Lives* of Abo of Tiflīs and Christopher of Antioch, but in other cases the authors are completely anonymous.

The question of authorship bears directly on the question of reliability: are most martyrdom narratives accurate descriptions of real events, or are they pious fantasies with little grounding in fact?[53] It would be imprudent to generalise about a body of texts spanning nearly a millennium of history and many thousands of miles. Suffice it to say, while some *Lives* are plainly fictional (e.g. the *Lives* of Michael of Mar Saba and Theodore of Edessa), many seem to reflect real events, though stylised to meet the expectations of the genre. We can often contextualise our sources using Islamic texts in a range of languages, which provide information about characters, events and places described in the course of the Christian narratives. We can also contextualise them by exploring the legal context for the violence, especially Islamic norms about conversion, apostasy and blasphemy. Very often, Islamic legal principles are clearly and precisely reflected in Christian accounts of violence. While many martyrs are otherwise unattested in medieval sources – as one would expect of such a wide array of sub-elites, including farmers, soldiers, traders and minor clergy – more often than not the stories strike the reader as plausible. Their original audiences must have responded similarly, with the result that they merited copying and studying, and the martyrs were venerated in their own time. This is not to deny that, like all hagiographical narratives, these texts trade on a significant element of fantasy, often encased in literary tropes. But it is also to say that a judicious reading of the sources can help us glimpse worlds that are otherwise invisible from more conventional kinds of evidence.

[52] For a methodological exercise regarding this question, see Sahner, *Christian martyrs under Islam*, pp. 253-63.

The purposes of martyrdom narratives

A final question to consider is why Christians bothered writing martyrdom narratives after the rise of Islam. What were readers supposed to get out of these vivid accounts of religious violence? As with hagiography of any period, the saints' *Lives* were composed to encourage imitation. The martyrs were models of the Christian life, mirrors of Christ himself, exemplifying the virtues of forbearance, courage and devotion to God. Not all martyrs were the same, of course, and each biography conveyed a slightly different message.[54] The *Lives* of the martyrs who converted to Islam and returned to Christianity were probably designed to encourage other recent converts to abandon Islam. In the process, they conveyed a message of unconditional forgiveness to those who were also contemplating returning to the church, especially given the risks involved. Far from facing stigmatisation or rejection, returnees could expect to be absolved of their sins and celebrated as heroes of the faith.

As for biographies of Muslim converts to Christianity, especially those written in Arabic, such as the *Life of Anthony al-Qurashī*, some have gone so far as to argue that they were written with Muslim audiences in mind.[55] By drawing on motifs, themes and key words familiar to Muslims, they may have aimed to provide support and succour to individuals considering this difficult leap from the mosque to the church. We cannot rule out this possibility, but what is even more likely is that these biographies were meant to assert the superiority of Christianity over Islam, specifically by showcasing high-status Muslims debasing themselves and embracing the church. Finally, the *Lives* of blasphemers were composed to articulate the perceived falsehoods of Islam and to encourage Christians to stick up for their beliefs at a time when they felt besieged by conversion and assimilation.

The *Lives* of the martyrs offered models to emulate, but they also highlighted models to avoid. The most important was a recurring character found in numerous texts: 'the unrepentant apostate', who began life as a Christian and converted to Islam.[56] Unlike the martyr, however, this figure refused to admit his or her error and remained a Muslim. The unrepentant apostate appears in a variety of hagiographical texts from

[53] Sahner, *Christian martyrs under Islam*, pp. 200-2.

[54] T. Sizgorich, 'For Christian eyes only? The intended audience of the martyrdom of Antony Rawḥ', *ICMR* 20 (2009) 119-35, esp. p. 121.

[55] Sahner, *Christian martyrs under Islam*, pp. 202-8.

the medieval period, often serving as a narrative foil for the martyr, even precipitating the martyrdom itself, as we see in the *Lives* of George the Black, Elias of Helioupolis and Romanus. An interesting variation on the character of the unrepentant apostate is the unrepentant aristocratic apostate, an especially prominent figure in hagiographical texts from al-Andalus and the Caucasus.[57] There, as throughout the Middle East, lay nobles played an important intermediary role between local churches and the Muslim authorities, and so there was often extra pressure on them to convert, and in so doing preserve their elite status in the new Islamic order. Hagiographers demonised aristocrats who chose this path, portraying them as traitors to their communities and their faiths. Without the leadership of such individuals, churches were more vulnerable to the whims of the authorities and susceptible to conversion. Thus, hagiographers strove to demonise elites who opted for Islam over their natal faith.

When it comes to the first three centuries after the Arab conquests, martyrdom narratives seem to highlight an emergent split between Christians who wished to accommodate Islamic rule and Arab culture, and those who wished to resist these forces.[58] The *Lives* of the saints seem to emanate from the latter group. This chasm is not evident in every setting in which narratives were written, and indeed, one suspects there were many shades of grey between these two positions. But we can see the divide clearly in Umayyad Córdoba, where Eulogius and Paulus Alvarus – the authors of biographical and apologetic texts about the martyrs of the 850s – spoke bitterly about Christians who wished to paper over disagreements with and alleged abuses by their Muslim rulers.[59] Even if Christian communities elsewhere in the greater Middle East were not as polarised as their counterparts in al-Andalus, it is easy to see how churches could have become divided over such disagreements. The accounts of martyrs represent the literary residue of those factions that urged resistance.

The most prolific writers of martyrdom narratives in the early Islamic period were Melkites, the Chalcedonian Christians who remained in communion with Constantinople after the conquest (also known as

[56] Sahner, *Christian martyrs under Islam*, pp. 208-12.

[57] Sahner, *Christian martyrs under Islam*, pp. 212-25.

[58] My thinking draws on I. de las Cagigas, *Los mozárabes*, Madrid, 1947-48, pp. 179-209; J.A. Coope, *The martyrs of Córdoba. Community and family conflict in an age of mass conversion*, Lincoln NE, 1995, pp. 55-69; C.L. Tieszen, *Christian identity amid Islam in medieval Spain*, Leiden, 2013, pp. 45-97.

Arab Orthodox or *Rūm*).[60] Their greater affinity for martyrdom-writing, at least in contrast to other communities (e.g. the West Syrians, Copts and East Syrians), might be explained by reference to certain social and ideological factors. There is limited but important evidence that Melkites sometimes faced a higher degree of scrutiny by Muslim officials because of their putative loyalties to the Byzantine emperors, who remained the sworn enemies of the caliphs. Indeed, there are a number of Melkite saints' *Lives* in which violence is triggered by accusations of spying or collusion with the Byzantines. What is more certain is that the Melkites seem to have been jarred by the Arab conquests to a greater extent than their counterparts in other Christian groups. After all, they had enjoyed the patronage of the Byzantine Empire for centuries before the advent of Islam. But with the arrival of Arab armies, they were demoted to merely one of a variety of Christian sects under the thumb of Islamic rule, all equals as second-class citizens. This experience of triumph and fall must have been especially disorienting for the Melkites, in contrast to other Christian sects, all of whom had experience of living outside the mainstream of imperial power, whether in the staunchly Chalcedonian Byzantine Empire (West Syrians and Copts) or in the Zoroastrian Sasanian Empire (East Syrians). If this is true, it is easy to imagine why tales of protest and resistance may have been especially appealing for Melkites.

Conclusion

For the social historian, one of the most exciting payoffs of studying martyrdom narratives is the possibility of tracking the ebb and flow of Islamisation in the greater Middle East across the medieval period. This is not the appropriate forum to speculate on this complex process in detail. Suffice it to say, it seems that the conversion of the region happened not gradually – like a tap that slowly fills a sink with steady drops of water. Instead, it probably happened in fits and spurts, with short periods of intense violence giving rise to floods of converts, filling the sink, as it were, all at once.[61] In Egypt, for example, scholars speculate that the predominantly Christian population became Muslim over the course of the Middle Ages during several periods of heightened tension. These include the tax revolts of the 8th and 9th centuries, the persecutions

[59] Sahner, *Christian martyrs under Islam*, pp. 225-39.

[60] Sahner, *Christian martyrs under Islam*, pp. 191-8 (especially the non-Muslim rebellions discussed here), 248.

under the Fatimids, especially al-Ḥākim (r. 996-1021), and the economic and bureaucratic pressures of the Mamluk period, from the end of the 13th until the middle of the 14th century.[62]

If this is true, one suspects that the martyr accounts – as records of actual violence and as literary works that resonated among Christians in the wake of the tumult – can help us understand the fits and spurts of conversion more broadly. This was a process that varied by region and time, such that a truly comprehensive history of Christian martyrdom in the medieval Middle East would need to compare and contrast settings as varied as Syria in the 8th century and Armenia in the 16th. It would also entail embedding the martyrdom narratives in a broader matrix of texts written by Christians and Muslims across a range of different languages. If this can be achieved – probably as the work of an entire team of scholars, not a single individual – we may come closer to understanding the process whereby the majority of the population of the Middle East ceased to be Christian and eventually became Muslim.

[61] I.M. Lapidus, 'The conversion of Egypt to Islam', *Israel Oriental Studies* 2 (1972) 248-62; G. Frantz-Murphy, 'Conversion in early Islamic Egypt. The economic factor', in Y. Rāġib (ed.), *Documents de l'islam médiéval. Nouvelles perspectives de recherche*, Cairo, 1991, 11-17; Y. Lev, 'Persecutions and conversion to Islam in eleventh-century Egypt', *Asian and African Studies* 22 (1988) 37-50, 73-91; D.P. Little, 'Coptic conversion to Islam under the Bahrī Mamlūks, 692-755/1293-1354', *BSOAS* 39 (1976), 552-69; El-Leithy, 'Coptic culture and conversion', pp. 34-65, 457-79; Y. Rapoport, *Rural economy and tribal society in Islamic Egypt. A study of al-Nābulusī's 'Villages of the Fayyum'*, Turnhout, 2018.