Swimming against the Current: Muslim Conversion to Christianity in the Early Islamic Period

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This article explores Muslim conversion to Christianity using a body of hagiographical sources in Arabic, Armenian, Georgian, Greek, and Latin. Through these lives of Christian martyrs, the article seeks to understand why Muslims undertook the surprising journey from "mosque to church" in the early centuries after the conquests. Many studies of Islamization are teleological, aiming to explain the large-scale conversion of the Middle East by the end of the Crusades. In contrast, this article aims to show why Islamization—especially in the Umayyad and early ʿAbbāsid periods—could be highly contingent, even fragile, at a time when Muslims formed a numerical minority in many regions under their control.

I. Introduction

Historians often imagine the process of religious change in the medieval Middle East as a one-way street, flowing from church to mosque, and indeed it was for most of the region's Christian inhabitants. Sometime after the Crusades, scholars surmise, the Middle East went from being a predominantly Christian world (with sizeable numbers of Jews, Zoroastrians, Manicheans, and others) to one whose majority population practiced Islam.[1] This was an uneven process, plagued by ramp-ups and slow-downs connected to the vicissitudes of conquest and the varying fortunes of missionaries. It was also a process of remarkable regional diversity.[2] Just as there were areas that crossed the threshold of a Muslim numerical majority early on, there were others that held out for centuries, including parts of Upper Egypt, the mountains of Lebanon, and northern Mesopotamia, some of which remain predominantly Christian to this day.

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1. For basic bibliography on conversion in the early Islamic period, see D. C. Dennett, *Conversion and the Poll Tax in Early Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1950); R. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1979); M. Gervers and R. J. Bikhazi, eds., *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands, Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990); D. J. Wasserstein, "Conversion and the Ahl al-Dhimma," in *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, vol. 4: *Islamic Cultures and Societies to the End of the Eighteenth Century*, ed. R. Irwin (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 184–208.

2. E.g., for Greater Syria, see N. Levtzion, "Conversion to Islam in Syria and Palestine and the Survival of Christian Communities," in *Conversion and Continuity*, ed. Gervers and Bikhazi, 289–311; R. Schick, *The Christian Communities of Palestine from Byzantine to Islamic Rule: A Historical and Archaeological Study* (Princeton: Darwin, 1995), 139–58; M. Levy-Rubin, "New Evidence Relating to the Process of Islamization in the Early Muslim Period: The Case of Samaria," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 43,3 (2000): 257–76; R. S. Humphreys, "Christian Communities in Early Islamic Syria and Northern Jazira: The Dynamics of Adaptation," in *Money, Power and Politics in Early Islamic Syria: A Review of Current Debates,* ed. J. Haldon (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 45–56; T. Carlson, "Contours of Conversion: The Geography of Islamization in Syria, 600–1500," *JAOS*, 135, 4 (2015): 791–816.

Despite this, conversion to Islam should not be regarded as the only religious option in the early period. While it is undeniable that most of the region's Christians (and non-Muslims more broadly) did convert to Islam gradually, there were many who chose a less "popular" direction. These included Christians who initially embraced Islam, but regretted their decision and returned to their original faith; the children of mixed marriages who spurned their fathers' Islamic faith and embraced their mothers' Christianity;[3] and a small but significant group that historians have all but ignored (and whose existence some have even denied[4]): Muslims from entirely Muslim families who converted to Christianity. This group—which I shall refer to as "true apostates"[5]—are the subject of the following essay.

Religious Change in the Post-Conquest Middle East

Understanding this particular form of conversion—indeed, most kinds of religious change in the early Islamic Middle East—requires us to abandon the image of conversion that much of our society has today, which owes a great debt to the likes of Paul of Tarsus, Augustine of Hippo, and the Second Great Awakening. This model understands conversion as an outward manifestation of a changing interior or emotional reality. Though this may describe some conversions in the premodern period, it is woefully inadequate for understanding the vast majority of conversions in the early medieval Middle East, which were often not a matter of spiritual conviction but the result of an array of social and political factors detached from questions of high theology and doctrine.[6] In fact, the line between religious conversion and cultural assimilation was often very blurry. For this reason, historians of other periods—such as Linford Fisher, a scholar of Christianity among Native Americans in the colonial period[7]—prefer to speak of a process of religious "engagement" or "affiliation" rather than outright "conversion," a distinction that works for our period, too.

The issue of religious change in the post-conquest Middle East raises a still more fundamental question that tends to be overlooked when scholars discuss conversion: what kind of Islam were these early Muslims practicing, and what kind of Christianity were they adopting? When we think back to the seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries, we must keep in mind that "Islam" and "Christianity" meant something very different than they do today. Levels

3. Both examples constitute acts of apostasy in Islamic law. For introductions to the subject, see "Murtadd" (W. Heffening), *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. (henceforth *EI*2) (Leiden: Brill, 1960–2004), 7: 635–36; "Apostasy" (W. Hallaq), *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān* (Leiden: Brill, 2001–6), 1: 119–22; "Apostasy" (F. Griffel), *Encyclopaedia of Islam Three* (Leiden: Brill, 2007–), online; R. Peters and G. J. J. de Vries, "Apostasy in Islam," *Die Welt des Islams* 17,1 (1976): 1–25; J. L. Kraemer, "Apostates, Rebels, and Brigands," *Israel Oriental Studies* 10 (1980): 34–73; Y. Friedmann, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam: Interfaith Relations in the Muslim Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003), 121–59; D. Cook, "Apostasy from Islam: A Historical Perspective," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 31 (2006): 248–88; U. Simonsohn, "'Halting Between Two Opinions': Conversion and Apostasy in Early Islam," *Medieval Encounters* 19 (2013): 344–72. A less scholarly treatment by an early twentieth-century Protestant missionary is S. Zwemer, *The Law of Apostasy in Islam* (London: Marshall Brothers, Ltd, 1924).

4. M. Ayoub, "Religious Freedom and the Law of Apostasy in Islam," *Islamochristiana* 20 (1994): 75–91. For concurring opinions that downplay the incidence of apostasy, as well as the death penalty for apostates, see S. B. Ahmad, "Conversion from Islam," in *The Islamic World from Classical to Modern Times*, ed. C. E. Bosworth et al. (Princeton: Darwin, 1989), 3–25; for uncritical engagement with Ahmad, see D. O'Sullivan, "The Interpretation of Qur'anic Text to Promote or Negate the Death Penalty for Apostates and Blasphemers," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 3,2 (2001): 63–93, esp. 86–87; cf. Kraemer, "Apostates, Rebels, and Brigands," 72.

5. I borrow this term from Cook, "Apostasy from Islam," 260–66.

6. This is not to deny that converts could not be sincere in their beliefs, for which caveat, see P. Crone, *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2011), 14.

7. L. Fisher, *The Indian Great Awakening: Religion and the Shaping of Native Cultures in Early America* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012), esp. the introduction.

of lay catechesis were probably very low, and in the cities and villages of Egypt, Syria, and Palestine where Muslims and Christians first rubbed shoulders, it was not always clear where the practice of one faith ended and the other one began. Theological uncertainty was compounded, in turn, by deep social and cultural similarities between the two populations, especially as the ranks of the Muslim community swelled with converts from non-Arab, non-Muslim backgrounds.[8]

As Jack Tannous has shown, medieval sources are filled with vivid reports about the state of confusion on the ground: recent converts from Christianity who requested baptism for their Muslim children; Muslims reciting pagan poetry from the pulpits of mosques because they confused it with the sound of the Quran; small children tasked with leading the Friday prayers because no one in their communities mastered Scripture as well; caliphal missions to catechize new Muslims who had no idea how to pray; and Muslims who sought spiritual counsel at the feet of Christian holy men.[9] These anecdotes, scattered across a range of Muslim and Christian sources, reveal an exceptionally fluid world in which it was easy to cross boundaries and still easier to miss the mark on what religious elites came to understand as "orthodox Islam." There were many reasons to stay within the Muslim fold, but as these anecdotes reveal, conversion did not always instill a deep sense of attachment to other Muslims or necessarily endow a rigorous understanding of Islamic belief and practice. In fact, as Nehemia Levtzion has put it, a good many converts entered the community through a process of "passive adhesion to Islam"[10]—brought about by the mass conversion of an Arab tribe, for instance, not after a long process of spiritual deliberation. It is this culture, fluid and occasionally confused, that provides the backdrop for our study of Muslim converts to Christianity.

The Christian Martyrs of the Early Islamic Period

Although true apostates are nearly invisible in conventional Muslim sources of the period, we can learn much about them thanks to a relatively untapped corpus of Christian hagiographic texts written during the first four centuries of Islamic rule. These sources recount the lives of Muslims who converted to Christianity and, with one exception, were executed for apostasy, for which they were commemorated as "saints." They belong to a larger cohort of Christian "martyrs" from the Umayyad and ʿAbbāsid periods, whose lives were recorded in a kaleidoscope of languages, including Greek, Arabic, Latin, Georgian, Armenian, and Syriac.[11]

8. In this respect, the transition from Christianity to Islam was probably little different from the sometimes muddy shift from paganism to Christianity centuries before; cf. R. MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire (A.D. 100–400)* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1984).

9. J. B. V. Tannous, "Syria between Byzantium and Islam," Ph.D. diss., Princeton Univ., 2010, 407–29.

10. N. Levtzion, "Toward a Comparative Study of Islamization," in *Conversion to Islam*, ed. N. Levtzion (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1979), 1–23, at 20.

11. For orientation, see C. C. Sahner, "Christian Martyrs and the Making of an Islamic Society in the Post-Conquest Period," Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2015; Ḥ. Zayyāt, "Al-Shuhadāʾ al-naṣrāniyya fī l-Islām," *al-Mashriq* 38 (1936): 459–65; R. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton: Darwin, 1997), 336–86; S. H. Griffith, "Christians, Muslims, and Neo-Martyrs: Saints' Lives and Holy Land History," in *Sharing the Sacred: Religious Contacts and Conflicts in the Holy Land, First–Fifteenth Centuries CE*, ed. A. Kofsky and G. G. Stroumsa (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben Zvi, 1998), 163–207; D. H. Vila, "Christian Martyrs in the First Abbasid Century and the Development of an Apologetic against Islam," Ph.D. diss., St. Louis Univ., 1999; C. Foss, "Byzantine Saints in Early Islamic Syria," *Analecta Bollandiana* 125 (2007): 93–119; C. C. Sahner, "Old Martyrs, New Martyrs and the Coming of Islam: Writing Hagiography after the Conquests," in *Cultures in Motion: Studies in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods*, ed. A. Izdebski and D. Jasiński (Krakow: Jagiellonian Univ. Press, 2014), 89–112.

The use of hagiography for historical purposes raises an obvious methodological question: can these sources be trusted? After all, saints' lives are notoriously formulaic, filled with miracles and theological polemics. The German historian Bruno Krusch went so far as to call them *kirchliche Schwindelliteratur*,[12] and it is no wonder that we use the term "hagiographic" today to refer to biographies that are uncritically glowing or historically suspect. What is more, virtually no Muslim sources of the period mention any Christian martyrs by name.[13] How can we cope with this dilemma?

Before mining the texts for historical details on true apostasy, we have to understand their literary aims. As Sidney Griffith, Mark Swanson, Thomas Sizgorich, and others have shown, the lives of the neomartyrs are fundamentally works of exhortation.[14] They were written by monks and priests at a time when many Christians were either converting to Islam or embracing the Arabic culture of the conquerors. Therefore, their authors set out to encourage loyalty to the church by celebrating models of resistance to Islam. These models included Christians who embraced Islam and then returned to Christianity, Muslims who converted to Christianity for the first time, and Christians who challenged Islam by publically disparaging the Prophet. For these various crimes, Christians could be killed by the state and venerated as martyrs within their communities.

Although our picture of the martyrs is heavily colored by the apologetic agenda of their biographies, we should not ignore the thick stratum of historical information inside them. As Griffith points out, with rare exception, the modern scholars who edited these texts also accepted their basic veracity—leaving aside clearly literary elements, such as reports of miracles, set speeches, and dialogues. What is more, a large number of martyrologies contain incidental information that can be verified using outside sources, including the names of Muslim officials who executed martyrs, topographical details of where martyrs lived, and dates of their births and deaths.[15] These, in turn, instill confidence that the authors were writing about real people, places, and events, although embellishing them to advance their aims. Even if we assume that the sources contain minimal information about real happenings, there is historical value to be gained by understanding how authors narrated their stories. As a genre, the martyrologies were successful precisely because they portrayed what many readers understood as possible: they represented a spectrum of intelligible behaviors with which readers could identify and from which they could draw strength. Therefore, contrary to some scholars who regard these texts as literary fictions, I believe that a great many martyrologies can be read as stylized accounts of what were, in most cases, actual events. Even if we cannot be certain that they happened as described, at least we can be confident that the scenarios they recount were plausible in the eyes of their readers. This is not to ignore the exhortatory nature of the texts. Rather, it is to propose a sensitive reading of them in order to mine them for information about which Muslim sources are largely silent—including conversion from Islam to Christianity.

12. B. Krusch, "Zur Florians- und Lupus-Legende: Eine Entgegnung (Fortsetzung)," *Neues Archiv der Gesellschaft für Ältere Deutsche Geschichtskunde* 24 (1899), 533–70, at 559; cited in J. Kreiner, "Social Functions of Merovingian Hagiography," Ph.D. diss., Princeton Univ., 2011, 3.

13. The sole exception is a text that refers to a particular saint in order to cast doubt on his actual existence; see R. Griveau, "Les fêtes des Melchites, par al-Birouni," *Patrologia Orientalis* 10 (1915): 289–312, at 299.

14. Griffith, "Christians, Muslims, and Neo-Martyrs," esp. 200–205; M. N. Swanson, "The Martyrdom of ʿAbd al-Masīḥ, Superior of Mount Sinai (Qays al-Ghassānī)," in *Syrian Christians under Islam: The First Thousand Years*, ed. D. Thomas (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 107–29; T. Sizgorich, "For Christian Eyes Only? The Intended Audience of the Martyrdom of Antony Rawḥ," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 20,2 (2009): 119–35.

15. In addition to the examples below, see the life of Peter of Capitolias (d. 715), which contains a wealth of incidental historical detail that can be confirmed using Islamic sources; the text also demonstrates an intimate acquaintance with local topography; cf. P. Peeters, "La passion de S. Pierre de Capitolias († 13 janvier 715)," *Analecta Bollandiana* 57 (1939): 299–333.

II. TRUE APOSTASY: LEGAL, LITURGICAL, AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

Before beginning, it is worth acknowledging that the view of scholars who downplay the incidence of "true apostasy" is not entirely unreasonable. Conversion from Islam to Christianity was rare in the early Middle Ages. Not only did apostates face the possibility of death (apostasy constitutes a capital offense under Islamic law), but they enjoyed few material benefits because of their conversions. What is more, they must have suffered severe social penalties, including ostracism by family and friends, loss of work, and even exile.

Early jurists were aware that apostasy (Ar. *irtidād*, *ridda*) took place and tried to discourage it through harsh punishments. For example, figures such as ʿAṭāʾ b. Abī Rabāḥ, Ibn ʿAbbās, Layth b. Saʿd, Mālik b. Anas, al-Shāfiʿī, and various Shiʿite jurists differentiated between the apostasy of Muslims by birth and the apostasy of recent converts from non-Muslim backgrounds—the latter were entitled to make an act of repentance (*tawba*) while the former were not.[16] Beyond this, the archetypal apostate in works of *fiqh* and hadith is the Christian (or Jewish or Zoroastrian) recidivist—like al-Mustawrid al-ʿIjlī, a Christian killed by ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib and mentioned frequently in early discussions of apostasy[17]—and not the Muslim convert under consideration here. On the Christian side, we find several rites of abjuration of Islam by Byzantine[18] and Coptic authors,[19] but these seem to be concerned with former Christians returning to the fold rather than Muslims converting to Christianity for the first time.

Muslim historical texts contain scattered references to true apostasy, often in the context of warfare, captivity, and enslavement.[20] Evidence of voluntary conversion, however, is hard

16. For discussion, see "Murtadd," *EI2,* 7: 636; Kraemer, "Apostates, Rebels, and Brigands," 42; Friedmann, *Tolerance and Coercion*, 134. For Muslim jurists, see Ibn Qudāma, *al-Mughnī*, ed. M. Sharaf al-Dīn Khaṭṭāb et al., 16 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1996), 12: 105–6; al-Shāfiʿī, *Kitāb al-Umm*, ed. R. F. ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib, 11 vols. (al-Manṣūra: Dār al-Wafāʾ li-l-Ṭibāʿa wa-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzīʿ, 2001), 2: 570–72; Ḥurr al-ʿĀmilī, *Wasāʾil al-Shīʿa*, ed. M. al-Rāzī, 20 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, n.d.), 18: 544–46.

17. E.g., ʿAbd al-Razzāq, *Muṣannaf*, ed. Ḥ. al-Raḥmān al-Aʿẓamī, 11 vols. (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1970–), 10: 170; Abū Yūsuf, *Kitāb al-Kharāj* (Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrifa, 1979), 181–82; al-Ṭaḥāwī, *Sharḥ Maʿānī l-āthār*, ed. M. Z. al-Najjār et al., 5 vols. (Beirut: ʿĀlam al-Kutub, 1994), 3: 266; Abū Bakr al-Khallāl, *Aḥkām ahl al-milal*, ed. S. Kisrawī Ḥasan (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1994), 419–20; al-Ṭabarī, *Tahdhīb al-āthār*, ed. M. Shākir, 4 vols. (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-Madanī, 1982), 4: 78–79.

18. For the ninth-century rite, see E. Montet, "Un rituel d'abjuration des musulmans dans l'église grecque," *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 53 (1906): 145–63 (complete text in Migne, *Patrologia graeca*, 140, cols. 124–36); for discussion, see D. J. Sahas, "Ritual of Conversion from Islam to the Byzantine Church," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 36 (1991): 57–69; for a later eleventh-century rite, see A. Rigo, "Una formula inedita d'abiura per i musulmani (fine X–inizi XI secolo)," *Rivista di Studi Bizantini e Neoellenici* 29 (1992): 164–73 (Greek text); also M. Aubineau, "Un recueil ≪De haeresibus≫: Sion College, Codex Graecus 6," *Revue des Études Grecques* 80 (1967): 425–29, at 427; P. Eleuteri and A. Rigo, *Eretici, dissidenti, musulmani ed ebrei a Bisanzio: Una raccolta eresiologica del XII secolo* (Venice: Il Cardo, 1993), 24–25, 53–57.

19. L. S. B. MacCoull, "The Rite of the Jar: Apostasy and Reconciliation in the Medieval Coptic Orthodox Church," in *Peace and Negotiation: Strategies for Coexistence in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance,* ed. D. Wolfthal (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), 145–62.

20. E.g., ʿUbaydallāh b. Jaḥsh, who participated in the first *hijra* to Ethiopia in 7 B.H./614–15 and converted to Christianity (Ibn Hishām, *Sīrat al-nabī*, ed. M. M. ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd, 4 vols. [Cairo: Maktabat Muḥammad ʿAlī Ṣubayḥ, 1963], 3: 417); Ṣalt b. al-ʿĀṣ, a Qurashī who was apprehended by the Byzantines at Nisibis, jailed in Constantinople, and forcibly converted to Christianity (Ibn ʿAsākir, *Tārīkh madīnat Dimashq*, ed. ʿA. Shīrī, 80 vols. [Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1995–98], 8: 386–87; cited in Cook, "Apostasy from Islam," 260–61); Naṣr b. al-Azhar, an envoy of the caliph al-Mutawakkil in ca. 240/854–55, tasked with negotiating prisoner exchanges with the Byzantines, including of Muslims who had converted to Christianity in captivity (al-Ṭabarī, *Annales quos scripsit Abu Djafar Mohammed ibn Djarir at-Tabari*, ed. M. J. de Goeje, 15 vols. [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1879–1901], 3: 1349–52); and the mass conversion of Muslims in northern Syria following the Byzantine reconquest of the region (Ibn Ḥawqal, *Kitāb Ṣūrat al-arḍ* [Beirut: Dār Maktabat al-Hayā, 1964], 172; al-Muqaddasī, *Descriptio imperii moslemici*, ed. M. J. de Goeje [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1877], 152). I thank Luke Yarbrough for the al-Ṭabarī reference and Thomas Carlson for the last two references.

to come by. Christian sources occasionally mention the baptism of Muslims for military,[21] apotropaic, and medical purposes,[22] though as a Syriac ecclesiastical canon of the twelfth century makes clear, these were often meant to confer a kind of blessing, and not as a formal sacrament of conversion.[23] Finally, Muslim apocalyptic texts (*kutub al-fitan*) fret about mass conversions to Christianity at the end of days (described as a *ridda shadīda* in one source).[24] These generally reflect anxieties among Muslims at the time rather than records of real events, but even if true apostasy was not widespread, Muslim and Christian sources acknowledge that it took place and demanded the attention of religious elites. To gain a sense of the real texture of the phenomenon, we must turn to the lives of the martyrs.

III. ANTHONY-RAWḤ AL-QURASHĪ

The Life

One of the most fascinating and disputed cases of true apostasy is that of Anthony (né Rawḥ) al-Qurashī, an alleged member of the Prophet Muḥammad's tribe, who converted to Christianity and was executed in eastern Syria in 799. Sources in Arabic, Syriac, Georgian, Latin, and Ethiopic furnish a rich trail of evidence.[25] The narrative that follows draws on one of the oldest recensions of his biography from a tenth-century manuscript at Mt. Sinai.[26] I will note discrepancies with other accounts as they arise.

21. The *History* of Sebeos reports that troops in Egypt, loyal to ʿAlī, sought to strengthen their position against Muʿāwiya by allying themselves with the Byzantine emperor Constans II. As a condition of this allegiance, 15,000 soldiers were baptized (*The Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos*, tr. R. W. Thomson, with J. Howard-Johnston and T. Greenwood [Liverpool: Liverpool Univ. Press, 1999], 154, 287).

22. For example, a monk named Rabban Khudhāhwī reportedly baptized the daughter of the caliph Muʿāwiya to heal her twisted arm (A. Scher and R. Griveau, "Histoire nestorienne (Chronique de Séert), second partie, fasc. 2," *Patrologia Orientalis* 13 [1919]: 436–639, at 594; discussion in Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 189–90; Tannous, "Syria between Byzantium and Islam," 460). On the baptism of ʿUqba, the Muslim governor of northern Iraq, at the hands of Rabban Hormizd, see E. A. Wallis Budge, ed., *The Histories of Rabban Hôrmîzd the Persian and Rabban Bar ʿIdtâ,* 2 vols. (London: Luzac and Co., 1902), 1: 65–71 (Syr. text), 2: 97–103 (Eng. trans.); for discussion of the identity of the governor, see Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 190–92.

23. The twelfth-century canon of John of Marde prohibited Syrian Orthodox clergy from baptizing Muslim children. Instead, it encouraged them to baptize Muslims using normal water on a different day from the Christian baptisms. This was called "the baptism of John," referring to John the Baptist, who performed a baptism of repentance and not of conversion (A. Vööbus, *The Synodicon in the West Syrian Tradition*, 2 vols. [Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1975], 2: 246 (Syr. text), 4: 259 (Eng. trans.); for further comment, see Tannous, "Syria between Byzantium and Islam," 473–74; D. Friedenreich, "Muslims in Eastern Canon Law, 1000–1500," in *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographic History* [henceforth, *CMRBH*], vol. 4: *1200–1350*, ed. D. Thomas and A. Mallett [Leiden: Brill, 2012], 45–58, at 54); D. G. K. Taylor, "The Syriac Baptism of St John: A Christian Ritual of Protection for Muslim Children," in *The Late Antique World of Early Islam: Muslims among Christians and Jews in the East Mediterranean*, ed. R. Hoyland (Princeton: Darwin, 2015), 437–60.

24. For the Muslim East, see Nuʿaym b. Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, ed. S. Zakkār (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 2003), 262–63, cf. 260, 271; comment in D. Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic* (Princeton: Darwin, 2002), 10, 63; idem, "Apostasy from Islam," 274. For al-Andalus, see ʿAbd al-Malik b. Ḥabīb, *Kitāb al-Taʾrīkh (La Historia),* ed. J. Aguadé (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1991), 155; discussion in J. Safran, "Identity and Differentiation in Ninth-Century al-Andalus," *Speculum* 76,3 (2001): 573–98, at 577.

25. See the extensive bibliography in *CMRBH*, vol. 1: *600–900*, ed. D. Thomas and B. Roggema (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 498–501.

26. Sinai arab. 513, fols. 363r–372v; see G. Graf, *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur*, 5 vols. (Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1944–53), 1 : 524; J. Nasrallah, *Histoire du mouvement littéraire dans l'église melchite du Ve au XXe siècle*, vol. 2,2: *750-Xe S.* (Louvain: Peeters, 1979–), 165–66. My citations refer to the two places where the Sinai text has been edited: I. Dick, "La passion arabe de S. Antoine Ruwaḥ néomartyr de Damas († 25 déc. 799)," *Le Muséon* 74 (1961): 109–33, at 119–26, and E. Braida and C. Pelissetti, *Storia*

Rawḥ was a Muslim nobleman from Damascus.[27] He lived in an abandoned monastery dedicated to St. Theodore on the slopes of Mt. Qāsyūn, beside which stood a functioning church.[28] According to the text, Rawḥ "was fond of the church and used to steal the blessed host and eat it." Sometimes he would even "tear the crosses from their places, rip the altar cloths, and greatly harass the priest."[29] One day, Rawḥ found the church vacant, so he decided to amuse himself by reaching for his bow and taking aim at the church's icon of St. Theodore, which sat propped up on the altar.[30] He fired and saw the arrow come within a foot of the sacred image, but suddenly it turned in midair and flew back, piercing his left hand. Terrified and reeling with pain, Rawḥ was knocked unconscious. A few days later, he witnessed another miracle when he saw the consecrated host transformed into a lamb during a mass.[31] That night St. Theodore appeared to Rawḥ in a dream and chastised him for his wayward conduct, ordering him to embrace Christ and to repent. He was so moved by the vision that the next day he set off for Jerusalem to be baptized. The patriarch at the time, Elias II, expressed fear that by baptizing Rawḥ he would provoke the ire of the Muslim authorities.[32] He therefore dispatched him to the River Jordan, where a group of monks submerged him in the water, giving him a monastic cowl and a new Christian name: Anthony.[33]

Anthony then returned to Damascus,[34] where his family mocked his coarse dress. After failing to persuade him to return to Islam, they handed him over to the head judge (*qāḍī*) of the city. "Shame on you, Rawḥ," the judge proclaimed, "Why have you left your religion into

di Rawḥ al-Qurašī: Un discendente di Maometto che scelse di divenire Cristiano (Turin: Silvio Zamorani, 2001), 95–111, which corrects errors in Dick.

27. According to the Ethiopic translation of the "autobiography" of Anthony, he is said to have lived in Aleppo but to have maintained a "pied-à-terre" in the neighborhood of al-Nayrab in Damascus; see P. Peeters, "S. Antoine le néo-martyr," *Analecta Bollandiana* 31 (1912): 410–50, at 411, 422, 436. Aleppo does not appear in any other source, and its mention here may reflect an otherwise unsubstantiated claim on the cult by the city of Aleppo; cf. A. Binggeli, "Converting the Caliph: A Legendary Motif in Christian Hagiography and Historiography of the Early Islamic Period," in *Writing 'True Stories': Historians and Hagiographers in the Late Antique and Early Medieval Near East*, ed. A. Papaconstantinou (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 77–103, at 85.

28. For discussion of the location, see Binggeli, "Converting the Caliph," 99–103.

29. Dick, "La passion arabe," 119; Braida and Pelissetti, *Storia di Rawḥ al-Qurašī*, 95.

30. For an example of an icon of St. Theodore from the post-conquest Middle East, see K. Weitzmann, *The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai: The Icons* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1976), 71–73, plate B.43.

31. In 692, the eighty-second canon of the Quinisext Council banned representations of Christ as a lamb; cf. L. D. Davis, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils (325–787): Their History and Theology* (Wilmington, Del.: M. Glazier, 1987), 294.

32. For Elias II (r. 770–97), see V. Grumel, *Traité d'études byzantines*, vol. 1: *La chronologie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1958), 452; G. Fedalto, *Hierarchia ecclesiastica orientalis: Series episcoporum ecclesiarum Christianarum orientalium*, 2 vols. (Padova: Messaggero, 1988), 2: 1002. For a scene in which another clergyman expresses fear of punishment for converting a Muslim, see *Christi martyrum lecta trias*, ed. F. Combefis (Paris: Apud Fredericum Leonard, 1666), 81–84.

33. The monastery beside the river may have been the same one remembered in Arabic sources as Dayr Fākhūr, where John baptized Jesus and beside which were buried the companions Muʿādh b. Jabal and Kaʿb b. Murra al-Bahrī; cf. Yāqūt, *Muʿjam al-buldān*, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1977), 2: 525; E. Campbell, "A Heaven of Wine: Muslim-Christian Encounters in Monasteries," Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Washington, 2009, 181, 279.

34. According to one recension of the story, Anthony wandered in Egypt for a time; see B. Pirone, "Un altro manoscritto sulla vita e sul martirio del nobile qurayshita Rawḥ," in *Biblica et semitica: Studi in memoria di Francesco Vattioni*, ed. L. Cagni (Naples: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1999), 479–509, at 498–99. Binggeli ("Converting the Caliph," 85) is inclined to see this as a literary motif meant to connect Anthony-Rawḥ to Anthony the Great of Egypt, but I am not so convinced that this is mere fiction, given the unexplained two-year gap between Elias II's dying in 797 and Anthony's martydom in 799 under Hārūn al-Rashīd. Could an Egyptian sojourn have filled the time between Anthony's baptism at the Jordan and his return to Damascus?

which you were born, not to mention your esteem and nobility (*ḥasabaka wa-sharafaka*)?"[35] When this, too, failed to persuade him, the *qāḍī* dispatched Anthony to Raqqa, then the seat of the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 170–93/786–809).[36] The caliph also taunted the monk for his ragged appearance, and after failing to win him over, he ordered his execution.[37] Rawḥ welcomed the sentence, explaining that it would expiate his three greatest sins: having gone on *ḥajj* to Mecca, having sacrificed on ʿĪd al-Aḍḥā, and having killed Christians during raids against the Byzantines.[38] With that, on Christmas Day 799, Hārūn al-Rashīd had him decapitated.

The Authenticity of the Life

The story of Anthony-Rawḥ is gripping, but is it believable? The answer to this hinges on the proper dating and interpretation of a collection of references in Arabic, Syriac, and other languages. The earliest of these is a treatise on the veneration of icons composed by Theodore Abū Qurra—the first Christian theologian to write extensively in Arabic—sometime between 800 and 815, only a few years after Anthony's alleged death. Abū Qurra states:

> In our own day there was a well-known martyr, from a family of the highest nobility among the outsiders, whose story is widespread. May he remember us in his prayers, he is called St. Anthony. He used to tell everyone he met that he came to believe in Christianity only because of a miracle he saw in connection with an icon that belonged to St. Theodore, the martyr.[39]

The date of this account, coupled with its rather matter-of-fact tone, instills some confidence that Anthony had been a real person whom contemporary Christians knew and remembered, and about whom stylized hagiographic accounts soon spread and became more elaborate, as, for example, the martyrdom of a Muslim nobleman at Diospolis and the mar-

35. Dick, "La passion arabe," 124; Braida and Pelissetti, *Storia di Rawḥ al-Qurašī*, 107. The *qāḍī* could be one of two people: Yaḥya b. Ḥamza al-Ḥaḍramī al-Ḥimyarī, who was chief *qāḍī* of Damascus until his death in 183/799 (Ibn ʿAsākir, *Tārīkh madīnat Dimashq*, 64: 125–35), or ʿUmar b. Abī Bakr al-ʿAdawī al-Mawṣilī, himself a member of Quraysh, who was chief *qāḍī* from 183/799 until 194/810 (ibid., 43: 547–51). I thank Mathieu Tillier for his help in identifying these judges.

36. The text states that Anthony went via the *barīd*, the network of imperial postal roads. It speaks to Anthony's standing as well as the controversy his apostasy must have provoked, for the *barīd* was usually reserved for the most sensitive business. See A. Silverstein, *Postal Systems in the Pre-Modern Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007), 53–89. The route went from Damascus to Baalbak, thence to Ḥimṣ, Qinnasrīn, Aleppo, and Raqqa, which took about seventeen days and lasted over 410 miles. Calculation from *The Stanford Geospatial Network Model of the Roman World*, at http://orbis.stanford.edu; cf. Silverstein, *Postal Systems*, 96, map 2b. Other recensions state that Anthony detoured to "new Khurasan" (P. Peeters, "L'autobiographie de S. Antoine le néomartyr," *Analecta Bollandiana* 33 [1914]: 52–63, at 63) or "new Persia" (L. Kipshidze, "Zhitie i muchenichestvo sv. Antoniia-Ravakha," *Khristianskii vostok* 2 [1914]: 54–104, at 91). I thank Stephen Shoemaker for his help with the Georgian.

37. When he first arrived in Raqqa, Anthony was thrown into prison by the city's governor, "Harthama." This may have been the ʿAbbāsid general who also presided over the execution of the martyr Bacchus-Ḍaḥḥāk several years earlier; see G. Garitte, *Le calendrier palestino-géorgien du Sinaiticus 34 (Xe siècle)* (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1958), 197, 414–15 (note that the longer Greek life of Bacchus leaves the Arab governor unnamed). That said, the identification of this figure as Harthama b. Aʿyan (Pirone, "Un altro manoscritto," 500; Vila, "Christian Martyrs," 293) (cf. Ch. Pellat, *EI2,* 3: 231), a governor of Palestine and Ifrīqiya under Hārun al-Rashīd, is problematic because at the time of Anthony's martyrdom, Harthama had already been moved from Ifrīqiya to Baghdad to serve as deputy of the guard under Jaʿfar b. Yaḥyā al-Barmakī; see al-Ṭabarī, *The Early ʿAbbāsī Empire*, tr. J. A. Williams, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988), 1: 219.

38. For discussion, see Sahner, "Old Martyrs, New Martyrs," 102–3.

39. S. H. Griffith, tr., *Theodore Abu Qurrah: A Treatise on the Veneration of Holy Icons* (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 21, 75; for the Arabic original, *Maymar fī ikrām al-īqūnāt li-Thāwdhūrus Abī Qurra*, ed. I. Dick (Jounieh: al-Maktaba al-Būlusiyya, 1986), 173.

tyrdom of the ʿAbbāsid prince al-Hāshimī, both probably modeled on Anthony-Rawḥ to one degree or another.[40]

Of all the facets of his life, Anthony's illustrious ancestry left the deepest impression on his Christian biographers. If there were relatively few Muslims who became Christians in the first generations after the conquests, then even fewer of these apostates shared Anthony's lineage. The sources frequently describe him as a member of the Prophet's tribe of Quraysh, a Muslim, a Hagarene, an Arab, a *ḥanīf*, a member of the nobility, and one of the "outsiders,"[41] all of which emphasize either his high social standing or his unique Muslim background, both of which distinguished him from most of the Christians who probably read his life and revered his memory.

Despite the abundance of references to the martyr in Christian sources, it is hard to identify him with any one person in Muslim texts.[42] Samir Khalil Samir came close when he observed that a large number of people with the name "Rawḥ" in the early period lived in Syria and held important positions in the Umayyad administration and army, and our aristocratic martyr seems to fit this onomastic profile.[43] We may surmise that Rawḥ was a member of an Umayyad clan in Damascus that had remained behind following the ʿAbbāsid revolution of 750. In fact, Syrian texts from the time often use the name "Qurashī" interchangeably with "Umayyad."[44] Furthermore, various Umayyad caliphs are known to have lived in the

40. For the former, see J. B. Aufhauser, *Miracula S. Georgii* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1913), 90–93; A.-J. Festugière, ed. and tr., *Sainte Thècle, saints Côme et Damien, saints Cyr et Jean (extraits), saint Georges* (Paris: Picard, 1971), 308–10. Similarly, the martyrdom of Pachomius/Joachim (né Malmeth), for which see Aufhauser, *Miracula*, 65–89; Migne, *Patrologia graeca*, 100: cols. 1201–12. For the second example, see A. S. Atiya et al., trs., *History of the Patriarchs of the Egyptian Church*, vol. 2, pt. 2: *Khaël III—Šenouti II (A.D. 880–1066)* (Cairo: Publications de la Société d'Archéologie Copte, 1948), 110–11. Similarly, the martyrdom of John-Muʿāwiya/al-Maʾmūn, for which, see I. Pomialovskij, *Zhitie izhe vo sviatykh ottsa nashego Feodora archiepiskopa Edesskago* (St. Petersburg, 1892), 72–79 (Theodore heals the caliph), 80–88 (caliph's baptism), 113–15 (caliph proclaims his apostasy and then dies).

41. Respectively, (1) *hādhā l-Qurāshī* (Dick, "La passion arabe," 119, 120, 122; Braida and Pelissetti, *Storia di Rawḥ al-Quraší*, 95, 96, 97, 101; Pirone, "Un altro manoscritto," 485, 486, 488); in later versions, *al-Qurayshī* (Peeters, "S. Antoine le néo-martyr," 440, 444; Braida and Pelissetti, *Storia di Rawḥ al-Quraší*, 115, 119) (for references to the use of the term "Qurayshī" in Syriac historiography, see Binggeli, "Converting the Caliph," 89 n. 46; for lucid discussion, see Vila, "Christian Martyrs," 127–28; idem, "Struggle over Arabisation," 43); (2) *muslim* (E. A. Wallis Budge, tr., *The Chronography of Gregory Abû'l-Faraj, 1225–1286* [London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1932], 121); (3, 4) *al-hājirī* and *rajul min ashrāf al-ʿarab* (Peeters, "S. Antoine le néo-martyr," 440; Braida and Pelissetti, *Storia di Rawḥ al-Quraší*, 115); (5) *akhrajanī min dīn al-ḥanīfiyya* (Dick, "La passion arabe," 126; Braida and Pelissetti, *Storia di Rawḥ al-Quraší*, 111; Vat. ar. 175, fol. 116v); (6) *li-mādhā tarakta dīnaka . . . wa-ḥasabaka wa-sharafaka* (e.g., Dick, "La passion arabe," 124); *shahīd min al-barrānīyīn* (Dick, *Maymar fī ikrām al-īqūnāt*, 173).

It is unclear whether *ḥanīf* was used in a pejorative or positive sense. Thomas Sizgorich ("For Christian Eyes Only," 131–32) argues that the author uses it to make Anthony appear as a pious Muslim before his conversion, per the Quranic usage (e.g., Q 3:67, 4:125). Arabic Christian writers also used *ḥanīf*, however, with neutral to negative connotations, as in the life of George-Muzāḥim, where the meaning is closer to the Syriac root *ḥanpā*, or "pagan." For more on the evolution of this term, see F. de Blois, "*Naṣrānī* (Ναζωραῖος) and *ḥanīf* (ἐθνικός): Studies on the Religious Vocabulary of Christianity and of Islam," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 65 (2002): 1–30.

42. The Ethiopic recension of the life gives Rawḥ's full *nasab* as *Rāwx walda* (ibn) *Ḥatm walda Bəḥērāwi walda ʿAmār walda Xaṭāb,* which perhaps means Rawḥ b. Ḥātim b. *Bəḥērāwi* (?) b. ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (Peeters, "S. Antoine le néo-martyr," 422). A contemporary of the martyr was also known as Rawḥ b. Ḥātim (d. 174 or 175/791), a high-ranking official under several ʿAbbāsid caliphs, including Hārūn al-Rashīd, for whom he served as governor of Ifrīqiya, where he died. Despite the similarity, they are clearly different people; for references, see S. K. Samir, "Saint Rawḥ al-Qurašī: Étude d'onomastique arabe et authenticité de sa passion," *Le Muséon* 105 (1992): 343–59, at 349. I am grateful to Luke Yarbrough for help with the Ethiopic.

43. Samir, "Saint Rawḥ al-Qurašī," 348–53.

44. W. Madelung, "The Sufyānī between Tradition and History," *Studia Islamica* 63 (1986): 5–48, at 30; idem, "Apocalyptic Prophecies in Ḥimṣ in the Umayyad Age," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 31 (1986): 141–85, at

monastery of St. Theodore where Rawḥ lived before his conversion. Arabic sources call this monastery "Dayr Murrān," and the geographer Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī (d. 626/1229) states that it possessed a "miraculous image," perhaps the same one mentioned in Anthony's life.[45] Interestingly, another Christian martyr of the period—Peter of Capitolias—visited Dayr Murrān in 96/715, when he was sentenced to death by the caliph al-Walīd I, then on his deathbed in the monastery-palace.[46] According to another source, Hārūn al-Rashīd, who ordered Rawḥ's execution, is said to have visited Dayr Murrān and conversed with the abbot of the monastery.[47] The encounter is undated and has a slightly fictional quality to it, but it is tempting to imagine Rawḥ's executioner visiting his home in the years before his death without knowing what was to come.

Even if we cannot identify Rawḥ with any known figure from Muslim sources, we can place him on a spectrum of recognizable behavior among Muslim aristocrats of his day. Medieval Arabic texts are filled with descriptions of encounters between Muslims, monks, and priests inside the confines of Christian monasteries. The most vivid accounts of these come from "books of monasteries" (*kutub al-diyārāt*), a genre that flourished in the third Muslim century. They describe amusing and occasionally racy gatherings in which wealthy Muslims enjoyed song, drink, and the company of Christian boys in monastic surroundings.[48] These encounters could occasionally be very intense. One poem discussed by Elizabeth Key Fowden, for example, speaks of a Muslim who was so overcome by the beauty of a Christian he spied in a monastery that he wished to be transformed into the bread and wine of the Eucharist in order to enter him and become one with his beloved.[49] Of course, this imagery is poetic—not to mention profane—but it does highlight the fluid boundaries between Muslims and Christians in this world. It is not out of the question that such encounters could have led to flirtation with, if not outright conversion to Christianity.

Above all, the life of Anthony casts precious light on the process of conversion from Islam. Although many conversions in the early Islamic period may have been motivated by social and material concerns, as I argued above, there must have been others, like Anthony's, that took place for spiritual convictions. Indeed, one is struck by the obvious parallels between the portrayal of his life and that of another persecutor-turned-saint, Paul of Tarsus, who became a Christian after his own miraculous encounter with the divine.

Here, one wonders whether the author of Anthony's life embellished and recast his conversion scene to match the expectation of his readers. Indeed, other hagiographical texts of the period—such as the life of the martyr ʿAbd al-Masīḥ (d. 760s), a young Christian from

148; David Cook ("Apostasy from Islam," 263) suggests that Rawḥ may have been a member of the tribe of Abū l-Muʿayṭ, though does not explain why.

45. For more, see "Dayr Murrān" (D. Sourdel), *EI2,* 2: 198; Zayyāt, "al-Diyārāt al-naṣrāniyya fī l-Islām," 307, 309, 314, 316, 321, 345, 347, 352, 395; Campbell, "A Heaven of Wine," 155–56, 159, 290; Binggeli, "Converting the Caliph," 99–103; see Yāqūt, *Muʿjam al-buldān*, 2: 533.

46. Peeters, "La passion de S. Pierre de Capitolias," 310–11; cf. al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, ed. De Goeje, 2: 1270.

47. R. Hamilton, *Walid and His Friends: An Umayyad Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988), 89.

48. The only surviving example is al-Shābushtī (d. 388/988), *Kitāb al-Diyārāt*, ed. K. ʿAwwād (Baghdad: Maktabat al-Muthannā, 1966); see also H. Kirkpatrick, "Monasteries through Muslim Eyes: The Diyarat Books," in *Christians at the Heart of Islamic Rule: Church Life and Scholarship in ʿAbbāsid Iraq*, ed. D. Thomas (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 19–37; Campbell, "A Heaven of Wine"; T. Sizgorich, "Monks and Their Daughters: Monasteries as Muslim–Christian Boundaries," in *Muslims and Others in Sacred Space*, ed. M. Cormack (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013), 193–216.

49. E. K. Fowden, "The Lamp and the Wine Flask: Early Muslim Interest in Christian Monks," in *Islamic Cross Pollinations: Interactions in the Medieval Middle East*, ed. A. Akasoy et al. (Exeter: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2007), 1–28, at 16–17.

Syria who converted to Islam and returned to Christianity and became a monk—accomplish something similar when they portray conversion to Islam as thoughtless and accidental, but reversion to Christianity as heartfelt, intense, and Pauline.[50] Whatever the case may be, we should not discount the possibility that some Muslims became Christians because of convictions about the perceived truth of Christianity (much as some Christians became Muslims for reasons other than political and social pressures). If Anthony's life is to be believed, not only did he convert because of an intense religious experience, but after having been baptized, he then opted for the most demanding kind of spiritual life—that of monasticism. When faced with torture and death, he refused to renounce his Christianity. If it indeed happened, Anthony's transformation, it would seem, was not the result of a religious "affiliation"—to use the terminology of Linford Fisher—but a genuine conversion.

IV. DAVID-ṢURḤĀN

The next case study brings us to the Caucasian frontier of the caliphate, to the Umayyad province of Armīniya, where David of Dwin was killed for apostasy in 703 or 705. Information about David comes chiefly from two Armenian manuscripts, both from the fifteenth century, but in all likelihood based on much earlier copies—there is strong internal evidence that the life was composed shortly after his death.[51] In addition, there are short passages about David in historical and liturgical sources of the medieval period.[52]

According to his life, Ṣurḥān was an Arab (Arm. *tajik*) soldier of noble ancestry who arrived in Armenia sometime between 656 and 660.[53] He was part of a company of Arab troops stationed in the province of Ayrarat, north of Dwin, which was then the seat of the Umayyad governor, or *ostikan*. While traveling through villages, Ṣurḥān was so struck by the faith of the locals that "he separated himself from all his own in order to gain Christ."[54] From outside sources we know that around the same time many Arab troops were forced to

50. S. H. Griffith, "The Arabic Account of ʿAbd al-Masīḥ al-Naǧrānī al-Ghassānī," *Le Muséon* 98,3–4 (1985): 331–74.

51. For information on the manuscripts, see *CMRBH*, 1: 720. For the Armenian text, see G. Alishan, *Hayapatum: Patmichʻkʻ ew patmutʻiwnkʻ hayotsʻ*, 3 vols. (Venice: S. Ghazar, 1901), 1: 546–52. I rely on the English translation of R. W. Thomson, in Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 672–76 (henceforth, Thomson, "The Passion of David of Dwin"). For discussion, see P. Peeters, ed., *Bibliotheca hagiographica orientalis* (Brussels: Apud editores, 1910), 57–58; *Bibliotheca sanctorum*, 16 vols. (Rome: Istituto Giovanni XXIII nella Pontificia Università lateranense, 1961–), 4: 518–19; *Bibliotheca sanctorum orientalium*, 1: 627; Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 370–73; S. W. Anthony, *Crucifixion and Death as Spectacle: Umayyad Crucifixion in Its Late Antique Context* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 2014), 59ff.

52. Y. Drasxanakertcʻi, *History of Armenia*, tr. K. H. Maksoudian (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 106–7; G. Bayan, "Le synaxaire arménien de Ter Israël (VII. Mois de Areg)," *Patrologia Orientalis* 21 (1930): 143–260, at 225–26; the summary in the synaxarium introduces no new information.

53. The Armenian *tajik*, a loan word from the Syriac *ṭayyāyā*, does not refer to a person from the region of Tajikistan, but to a person of Arab ancestry. For discussion, see H. Hübschmann, *Armenische Grammatik* (Leipzig: Breitkopf and Härtel, 1897), 86–87; Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 371 n. 106. That said, there are two other possibilities that may reflect usage during the late medieval period in which the manuscripts were copied (I thank Thomas Carlson for his insight here). In late medieval Armenian colophons, the term is used for various kinds of Muslims, including Tatars, Turkmens, Ottomans, and Mamluks; cf. A. K. Sanjian, *Colophons of Armenian Manuscripts, 1301–1480: A Source for Middle Eastern History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1969), 438. The term *tajik* was also used in this period in which the manuscript was copied to refer to the urban elite of eastern Anatolia and Iran who staffed the civilian administration of the states ruled by Turkic nomadic military elites; cf. J. E. Woods, *The Aqquyunlu: Clan, Confederation, Empire* (Salt Lake City: Univ. of Utah Press, 1999), 16.

54. Thomson, "The Life of David of Dwin," 672.

pull out of Armenia to fight in the first *fitna* (35–41/656–61) between ʿAlī and Muʿāwiya.[55] Given this, it seems possible that Ṣurḥān stayed behind while most of his companions headed for war.

Because Ṣurḥān was "much befriended and respected by many"[56]—possibly a reference to his noble ancestry or to a position of leadership in the Muslim army—the *ostikan*, Grigor Mamikonian (r. 661–85), presented him to the catholicus, Anastasius I (r. 662–68), for baptism. He was rechristened David and eventually settled in a village beyond Dwin, where he married a local Christian woman. Together they had several children. At the turn of the eighth century, when the story resumes, David had already reached old age. At this time, the caliph ʿAbd al-Malik (r. 65–86/685–705) decided to reimpose direct rule on Armenia after decades of semi-autonomy under local Christian princes.[57] He dispatched a new governor, ʿAbdallāh b. Ḥātim al-Bāhilī, to subdue the province.[58] Soon after arriving in Dwin, ʿAbdallāh heard about David's apostasy. It is not clear how the news reached him, though the text hints that David may have leaked the information himself, "for it was not right that the truth be hidden."[59] Therefore, ʿAbdallāh brought him to the capital for interrogation. David refused to repent—berating the governor in Arabic.[60] He was then was nailed to a cross in punishment, made to face south, presumably in the direction of Mecca (the *qibla*) in a gesture of submission to Islam.[61] Miraculously, his life states, the cross turned to the east, the direction of the rising sun and of Christian worship.

The apostasy of David-Ṣurḥān reflects the unique political circumstances in Armenia over the course of the seventh and early eighth centuries. Unlike Egypt, Syria, or Iraq, where Muslim control was relatively undisputed from the time of the conquests, the Umayyad caliphs struggled to project power in this far northern outpost. Ṣurḥān arrived in Armenia at a time when Arab military might was building up, but almost instantly it evaporated as more pressing events spiraled out of control in the south. This created a power vacuum, such that Muslim soldiers who remained behind—members of a rump force or perhaps even deserters— had little supervision and found it tempting to "go native." In Ṣurḥān, we see an example of what might have come to pass in the central lands of the caliphate had Arab

55. For an overview of Armīniya in the early Islamic period, see "Armīniya" (M. Canard), *EI*2, 1: 634–50, esp. 635–38; N. Garsoian, "The Arab Invasions and the Rise of the Bagratuni (640–884)," in *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times*, ed. R. G. Hovannisian, 2 vols. (New York: St Martin's Press, 1997), 1: 117–42; also, E. Schütz. "Armenia: A Christian Enclave in the Islamic Near East in the Middle Ages," in *Conversion and Continuity*, ed. Gervers and Bikhazi, 217–36.

56. Thomson, "The Life of David of Dwin," 673; another possible reference to his high standing in life or the army is found in the opening lines of the work where it is said that Ṣurḥān was "famous and [descended] from great ancestors on his father's side."

57. Garsoian, "The Arab Invasions," 125.

58. Called "Abdlay" in the text. For candidates for the likely governor, see Khalīfa b. Khayyāṭ, *Tārīkh*, ed. M. N. and Ḥ. K. Fawwāz (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1995), 189. The chronology at this point is confused, and Hoyland (*Seeing Islam*, 373) suggests several others (Nabīḥ b. ʿAbdallāh al-ʿAnazī, Abū Shaykh b. ʿAbdallāh); Anthony, *Crucifixion and Death*, 59. The short account of David's life in the Armenian synaxarium (Bayan, "Le synaxaire arménien," 225) identifies the Muslim governor as "Sirtchahan," which bears little resemblance to "ʿAbdallāh."

59. Thomson, "The Life of David of Dwin," 674.

60. Several of the Córdoba martyrs (see below) disparaged Islam before the Umayyad authorities in Arabic; see J. Gil, ed., *Corpus scriptorum Muzarabicorum* (henceforth, Gil, *CSM*), 2 vols. (Madrid: Instituto Antonio de Nebrija, 1973), 2: 367, 398, 431–32. By contrast, Bacchus-Ḍaḥḥāk refused to address the Muslim judge in Arabic, using Greek instead (Combefis, *Christi martyrum lecta trias*, 109–10).

61. Sean Anthony (*Crucifixion and Death*, 59) discovered an amazing parallel in Ibn ʿAsākir's *Tārīkh madīnat Dimashq* between this detail and an account of the crucifixion of the Shiʿi rebel Zayd b. ʿAlī in Kūfa in 121/738-9. According to one report, "When Zayd b. ʿAlī was crucified he faced in the direction of the Euphrates, but when the morning came, his cross (*khashabatuhu*) turned in the direction of the *qibla*."

leaders not insisted on sequestering their troops in garrison cities (*amṣār*) like Qayrawān, Fusṭāṭ, Kūfa, and Baṣra, which isolated them from the surrounding non-Muslim populations.[62] If the establishment of *amṣār* was a careful strategy aimed at countering assimilation, it is not surprising that provincial soldiers like Ṣurḥān converted after being abandoned by their Muslim companions in a predominantly Christian land.

V. ABO OF TIFLĪS

Another apostate-martyr from the Caucasus was Abo, who was executed in 786 in Tiflīs (modern-day Tbilisi), the capital of Georgia. His life survives in a number of relatively early Georgian manuscripts from the ninth to eleventh centuries, including two at Mt. Sinai and one at Iviron Monastery on Mt. Athos.[63] In addition, Georgian liturgical and historical texts contain passing references to him.[64] Based on information internal to the life, it was written within four years of the martyr's death by one John Sabanisdze, a high-ranking clergyman in Tiflīs who knew Abo personally.[65]

As with David of Dwin, to understand the life of Abo it is important to grasp the convoluted arc of Georgian history in the early Islamic period.[66] The Arabs first entered the region through a series of sporadic and unsuccessful raids in the 640s. A treaty with the Byzantines led to a three-year suspension of hostilities, after which a large Arab force invaded Transcaucasia in 645–46 under the general Ḥabīb b. Maslama. The army eventually reached Tiflīs, where it obtained the submission of Stephen II, prince of K'art'li. Thereafter, the Arabs governed Armenia, Georgia, and Caucasian Albania as territories of the larger province of Armīniya, with the principal capital at Dwin and a regional capital at Tiflīs. As we have seen, the Arabs ruled the region indirectly for much of the seventh century. The eighth century saw the restoration of Arab power, which was challenged again in the 770s when Armenian and Georgian aristocrats rebelled against the ʿAbbāsid caliph al-Manṣūr (r. 135–58/754–75). The leader of this rebellion in Georgia was the prince Nerse (r. 760–72, 775–79 or 780), who was captured and hauled off to prison in Baghdad when Abo's story begins.

Abo was an Arab Muslim from Baghdad, around seventeen or eighteen years old. "He was born of the line of Abraham, of the sons of Ishmael [. . .]," the text states. "He had no foreign blood in him, nor was he born of a slave woman, but of pure Arab stock on both his father's

62. Despite having been built to sequester Muslims from non-Muslim populations, the *amṣār* were soon infiltrated by Christian, Jews, and others; cf. ʿAbd al-Razzāq, *Muṣannaf*, 6: 58–60.

63. For information on the manuscripts, see *CMRBH*, 1: 336. For the Georgian text, see I. Abuladze, ed., *Dzveli k'art'uli agiograp'iuli literaturis dzeglebi*, 6 vols. (T'blisi: Mecniereba, 1963–1980), 1, pt. ii: 46–81; Eng. tr. D. M. Lang, *Lives and Legends of the Georgian Saints* (New York and London: Allen and Unwin/Macmillan, 1956), 115–33 (henceforth, Lang, "Martyrdom of Abo"). For discussion, see K. Kekelidze and M. Tarchnišvili, *Geschichte der kirchlichen georgischen Literatur* (Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1955), 94–95; *Bibliotheca sanctorum*, 1: 86–87; Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 346, 685; G. Shurgaia, *La spiritualità georgiana: Martirio di Abo, santo e beato martire di Cristo di Ioane Sabanisdze* (Rome: Studium, 2003), passim (Ital. tr., 185–268); D. Rayfield, *The Literature of Georgia: A History* (London: Garnett Press, ^{3}2010), 49–54.

64. See Shurgaia, *La spiritualità georgiana*, 96 (Annals of K'art'li), 115 (liturgical calendar); for translation of related liturgical notices, 258–68.

65. Shurgaia, *La spiritualità georgiana*, 77–85; for dating of the composition of the text, 85–95. Donald Rayfield (*Literature of Georgia*, 49) argues that it was completed by 787 because the text does not mention the martyrdom of the prince Arč'il (d. 787).

66. For background, see "Tiflis" (V. Minorsky), *EI*2, 10: 478–79; C. Toumanoff, "Armenia and Georgia," in *The Cambridge Medieval History*, vol. 4: *The Byzantine Empire*, ed. J. M. Hussey, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1966), 1: 593–638, esp. 605–11; Canard, "Armīniya"; D. Rayfield, *Edge of Empires: A History of Georgia* (London: Reaktion, 2012), 55–72.

and his mother's side of the family."[67] Abo was a perfumer, adept "at preparing fragrant scent and lotions." He may have been well educated, too, since he was "versed in the literature of the Saracens." In 158/775, with the death of al-Manṣūr and the accession of al-Mahdī (r. 158–69/775–85), the duke Nerse was released from prison and permitted to return to his native Georgia.[68] Compelled by a "divine summons," the young Abo accompanied Nerse north. He lived with the duke, quickly learning to speak, read, and write Georgian. In Georgia, Abo discovered the Bible, attended church, and discussed the Christian faith with "many expert theologians." Before long, "he became estranged from the faith of Muhammad and abandoned the rites and beliefs of his native land." Given that Georgia remained under Muslim control, Abo could not profess his new faith publicly, but he did fast and pray in secret, and searched for a hidden place where he could be baptized.

By 779, relations between Nerse and the ʿAbbāsid authorities had soured again. As a result his court moved north through the Darial Pass to the land of the Khazars, who provided them with sanctuary.[69] Finally free from the scrutiny of Muslim officials, Abo was baptized in one of the Christian villages of their realm. Soon the court moved yet again, this time to the small Christian kingdom of Abkhazia on the Black Sea.[70] Inspired by the piety of the locals, Abo began practicing asceticism, "pass[ing] three months plunged in fasting and silent meditation."[71] At this point in the story, the caliph al-Mahdī moved to replace Nerse with his more pliant nephew Stephen III (r. 779 or 780–86). As a result, Abo felt free to make his way back to Tiflīs, though he was warned by the Christians of Abkhazia that this would mean certain death.

Back in Tiflīs, Abo "walked around openly professing the Christian faith." The Muslims harassed him and tried to pressure him into returning to Islam, but he refused. He carried on in this way for a time, supported and protected by the large Christian population of the city. This ended with the arrival of a new hardline emir named Khuzayma b. Khāzim al-Tamīmī, who was notified about Abo by the local Muslims.[72] "He has abandoned this faith of ours," they said, "and walked fearlessly about the city teaching many of our people how to become Christians!"[73] With that, Khuzayma had Abo tried and thrown into prison. After he refused to repent, he was beheaded in January 786.

As with David-Ṣurḥān, Abo's apostasy was closely connected to the political conditions in the Caucusus during the early ʿAbbāsid period. The text does not specify why the teenaged

67. Lang, "Martyrdom of Abo," 117.

68. For more on the release of prisoners with the accession of al-Mahdī, see J. M. Fiey, *Chrétiens syriaques sous les Abbassides surtout à Baghdad, 749–1258* (Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1980), 30.

69. For the Khazars' conversion to Judaism, which the life of Abo appears to corroborate, see P. Peeters, "Les Khazars dans la passion de S. Abo de Tiflis," *Analecta Bollandiana* 52 (1934): 21–56; O. Pritsak, "The Khazar Kingdom's Conversion to Judaism," *Harvard Ukranian Studies* 2 (1978): 261–81. For general orientation, see idem, "Khazars," *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, 7: 240–42; idem, "Khazars," in *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, ed. A. P. Kazhdan, 3 vols. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991), 2: 1127.

70. For orientation, see "Abkhāz" (W. Barthold and V. Minorsky), *EI2,* 1: 100–102.

71. Lang, "Martyrdom of Abo," 120.

72. For Khuzayma, see Yaʿqūbī, *Tārīkh*, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1960), 2: 428; Khalīfa b. Khayyāṭ, *Tārīkh*, 304, 305–6, 307, 308; al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, ed. De Goeje, 3: 648; for discussion of his activities in the Caucasus, see C. Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History* (Washington, DC: Georgetown Univ. Press, 1963), 409–10. Khuzayma was responsible for the execution of a number of other martyrs in Georgia and Armenia at this time, including Arčʿil, prince of Kakhetia, as preserved in *The Royal Georgian Annals* (see R. W. Thomson, *Rewriting Caucasian History: The Medieval Armenian Adaptation of the Georgian Chronicles* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1996], 251–55), and Hamazasp and Sahak, as preserved in the Armenian *History* of Łewond (Z. Arzoumanian, tr., *History of Lewond: The Eminent Vardapet of the Armenians* [Wynnewood, PA: St. Sahag and St. Mesrob Armenian Church, 1982], 144–47).

73. Lang, "Martyrdom of Abo," 123.

Muslim left Baghdad with Nerse in 775—perhaps to serve as a purveyor of perfumes at the reconstituted court in Tiflīs—though the move would prove to be propitious. In Abo we see another young Muslim who was no longer in a Muslim cocoon and had to adjust in a world dominated by the commanding presence of Christianity. There is ample evidence of Christian courtiers in the medieval Middle East and Spain who converted to Islam in order to ingratiate themselves with their Muslim masters, and we can assume that there were also Muslim courtiers who converted to Christianity to serve Christian princes.[74]

Abo's conversion underscores the precarious place of Islam in this remote northern outpost. There were clearly enough Muslims in Tiflīs in the late 770s to make Abo fearful about announcing his conversion. He only felt free to be baptized once he ventured north to the lands of the Khazars. That said, it is striking that upon his return to Tiflīs in 785, Abo spent at least a year living openly as an apostate. Despite being harassed, it was not until the arrival of an ʿAbbāsid governor specifically tasked with cracking down on Christians that it became unsafe for him to live publicly as a Christian. Not only did Abo carry on unmolested as an apostate, but according to the crowds that handed him over to Khuzayma, he was known to have gone around the city proselytizing other Muslims.

It is significant that apostates like David-Ṣurḥān and Abo came from the Caucasian frontier of the caliphate and not from its central lands. One suspects that these dramatic and unusual acts of apostasy were less prevalent in areas where Muslim political and social control was stronger. Nevertheless, they point to a phenomenon that could—and no doubt did—happen in any setting in which there was a significant imbalance between Christians and Muslims and insufficient mechanisms for keeping them apart. Left to chance, there perhaps could have been many more like David and Abo.

VI. APOSTATES FROM IRAQ, SPAIN, AND EGYPT

Given this, what is the evidence for true apostasy in places where there was an uninterrupted tradition of Muslim rule? The passion of the Twenty Martyrs of Mar Saba, a late eighth- or early ninth-century Greek text, includes a curious note about one Christopher, "a victory-bearing soldier and martyr of Christ, who just a few years ago converted from unbelief to pious faith." According to the text, he was "grafted from a barren Persian olive [tree] onto a fruitful one," becoming a priest and monk.[75] Later, he was slandered by some "God-denying man" and brought before the caliph al-Mahdī, who executed him on April 14, 778—making him a contemporary of Abo of Tiflīs. Given the mention of al-Mahdī, it seems possible that he was killed near Baghdad.[76]

74. For a list of known Nestorian secretaries in ʿAbbāsid Baghdad, roughly a quarter of whom converted to Islam between the mid-eighth and the mid-thirteenth centuries, see C. Cabrol, *Les secrétaires nestoriens à Bagdad* (Beirut: CERPOC, 2012), 271–80. Samson, an abbot in Córdoba (d. 890), produced a screed against Christian aristocrats who collaborated with the Muslim state, some of whom converted to Islam; see Gil, *CSM*, 2: 506–658. For examples of elite conversion in late medieval Cairo, see T. El Leithy, "Coptic Culture and Conversion in Medieval Cairo, 1293–1524 A.D.," Ph.D. diss., Princeton Univ., 2005, 52–58.

75. A. Papadopoulos-Kerameus, *Syllogē palaistinēs kai syriakēs hagiologias*, 2 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1907–13), 1: 40–41. For discussion, see S. Vailhé, "Le monastère de Saint-Sabas (Suite)," *Échos d'Orient* 3 (1899): 18–28, at 24; Schick, *Christian Communities of Palestine*, 175; A. Kazhdan, *A History of Byzantine Literature, 650–850* (Athens: National Hellenic Research Foundation Institute for Byzantine Research, 1999), 170; Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 346.

76. The Greek text states that Christopher was martyred on April 19, the Tuesday of Holy Week. Alexander Kazhdan notes that the Tuesday of Holy Week fell on April 14 during the reign of Elias II—the reigning patriarch of Jerusalem mentioned in the life—which would mean 789. The entry for Christopher in the Palestinian-Georgian calendar (Garitte, *Le calendrier palestino-géorgien*, 60, 198–99), however, states that he was martyred under al-Mahdī,

The Córdoba martyr texts—Latin sources describing the execution of forty-eight Christians in the capital of Umayyad Spain between 850 and 859—contain surprisingly few references to true apostates. Most of the martyrs were killed for blasphemy, not for converting to Christianity. There were several martyrs born to Muslim parents who practiced Christianity in secret or were products of mixed marriages between Muslims and Christians, but almost none born to two believing Muslims.[77] The only true apostate within the group was Leocritia (d. 859) who, as her biographer Paulus Alvarus put it, "was begotten from the dregs of the gentiles and brought forth from the flesh of wolves."[78] She gained exposure to Christianity through a relative named Litiosa, who was a nun. After practicing in secret for a time, she sought the counsel of the priest Eulogius (the literary impresario of the martyrs, who penned most of the biographical and apologetic texts about them). Leocritia's Muslim parents were very troubled by her new interest; to allay their concerns she temporarily halted her ascetic practices and adorned herself with lavish clothing. One day, after her donning her finest outfit, she told her mother and father that she was headed to a friend's home for a wedding celebration, but instead fled to Eulogius for protection. After Leocritia's disappearance, her parents contacted the *qāḍī* of Córdoba, who initiated a manhunt for her. Eventually, someone tipped off the authorities as to her location, prompting her arrest and execution in March 859.

The final example—Paul (Būluṣ) b. Rajāʾ, a Muslim convert to Christianity and a prolific theologian who flourished during the late tenth and early eleventh centuries in Egypt—falls slightly outside the chronological scope of the earlier martyrs.[79] Furthermore, he was not executed for apostasy—though in some sources he is termed a *shahīd*, or martyr—yet his life features many of the themes under review here. His biography was written by Michael al-Damrāwī, the bishop of Tinnīs, who recorded it in the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*. Michael learned about him from Ibn Rajāʾ's original biographer, Theodore b. Mīnā.[80]

Yūsuf b. Rajāʾ was born around the middle of the tenth century. His father was a professional witness in the *qāḍī* court of Cairo, and this gave the young Ibn Rajāʾ exposure to law and religion. He was a *ḥāfiẓ* of the Quran and probably also an adherent of the Mālikī school of law.[81] As a youth Ibn Rajāʾ used to walk along the banks of the Nile, and one day he

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who reigned from 775–85. The only year during al-Mahdī's reign when the Tuesday of Holy Week coincided with April 14 was 778, making this the likely year of his death. For the Easter tables of the Byzantine church, see Grumel, *Traité d'études byzantines*, 1: 311.

77. E.g., Aurelius, Sabigotho, Felix, and Liliosa (d. 852), inter alios; see Gil, *CSM*, 2: 416–30; also, the mother of the martyrs Walabonsus and Maria (d. 851), a Muslim married to a Christian man who converted to Christianity, but such pairings were exceptionally rare at the time (Gil, *CSM*, 2: 412).

78. Paulus Alvarus, *Vita Eulogii*, in Gil, *CSM*, 1: 337–41. See the extensive bibliography in E. P. Colbert, *Martyrs of Córdoba (850–859): A Study of the Sources* (Washington, DC: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 1962), 94, 238, 344, 350–53, 357, 392, 405, 444.

79. For background on Ibn Rajāʾ, see Graf, *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur*, 2: 318–19; *Bibliotheca sanctorum orientalium*, 1: 120–24; V. Frederick, "Al-Wāḍīḥ Ibn Rajāʾ," in *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, ed. A. S. Atiya, 8 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1991), 7: 2311; M. Shenoda, "Lamenting Islam, Imagining Persecution: Copto-Arabic Opposition to Islamization and Arabization in Fatimid Egypt (969–1171 CE)," Ph.D. diss., Harvard Univ., 2010, 135–50 (for his being called a *shahīd*: 148 n. 252); *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History*, vol. 2: *900–1050*, ed. D. Thomas and A. Mallett (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 541–46; D. Bertaina, "*Ḥadīth* in the Christian Arabic *Kalām* of Būluṣ Ibn Rajāʾ (c. 1000)," *Intellectual History of the Islamicate World* 2 (2014): 267–86; idem, "A Medieval Coptic Convert's Analysis of Islam: The *Kitāb al-wāḍiḥ bi-l-ḥaqq* of Būlus ibn Raǧǧāʾ," *Parole de l'Orient* 39 (2014): 181–201. I am grateful to David Bertaina for sharing this article with me in advance of its publication.

80. For the life of Ibn Rajāʾ, see A. S. Atiya et al., trs., *History of the Patriarchs of the Egyptian Church*, vol. 2,2: *Khaël III—Šenouti II (A.D. 880–1066)* (Cairo: Publications de la Société d'Archeologie Copte, 1948), 101–13 (Ar. text), 151–70 (Eng. tr.) (henceforth, Atiya et al., "Life of Ibn Rajāʾ").

81. Atiya et al., "Life of Ibn Rajāʾ," 101: *nāmūs* (Gk, *nomos*) *al-muslimīn*.

came across a group of Fāṭimid soldiers preparing a pyre for a convicted apostate from Islam. While crowds massed around the pyre, Ibn Rajāʾ approached the apostate and exhorted him to abandon his unbelief. The man refused, telling Ibn Rajāʾ that one day he, too, would suffer for Christ. Furious, Ibn Rajāʾ beat the apostate with his shoe, and soon after, the man was beheaded and his body was burned.

Sometime later (ca. 980–85), Ibn Rajāʾ set out for Mecca on pilgrimage. During his trip he had several nighttime visions in which a monk urged him to follow him. A Muslim friend told Ibn Rajāʾ to ignore the dreams, which came from the devil, he claimed.[82] During his return to Egypt, Ibn Rajāʾ was separated from his caravan. Wandering alone in the desert, he encountered a mysterious man on horseback who placed him on his mount and flew with him through the air to the Church of St. Mercurius in Cairo. Awaking the next morning, Ibn Rajāʾ realized the rider had been none other than St. Mercurius (d. 250) himself, the early Christian martyr. The revelation compelled him to ask the clergy of the church for baptism. They refused at first, fearing repercussions from the authorities, but after much pleading, the main priest consented, and the former Yūsuf was rechristened Paul—inspired by the example of the apostle who had also embraced the Christian faith after once persecuting it.[83]

Meanwhile, Ibn Rajāʾ's family feared that he was dead. A friend spotted him emerging from a church and notified them that he was still alive.[84] The family apprehended him and brought him back home. His father chastised him, saying, "Oh my son! You have disgraced my standing (*shaykhūkhatī*, lit. old age) among the *qāḍī*s and the witnesses! Perhaps you've done this because I didn't marry you off?"[85] If he promised to recant, his father offered to marry him to a woman of high social standing, but Ibn Rajāʾ-Paul refused.

At first, the family contemplated killing him, "but their hearts were touched by pity for him." They therefore spirited him away to a remote area near Giza where he could carry on in anonymity and avoid bringing further dishonor on his father's house. Instead of staying there, however, Paul went to Wādī l-Naṭrūn—the famed center of Egyptian monasticism—and became a monk. Several monks there told him that his conversion would be valid only if he abjured his Muslim faith in public, so he returned to Cairo to confront his father one last time.[86] The plan backfired when his father imprisoned him in the cellar, intending to starve him into submission. When this did not work, his father ordered him to watch as his older brother raped his former concubine, with whom he had a young son. To make matters worse, the father plotted to have the boy drowned in the Nile by the boy's swimming instructor.

82. Ibn Rajāʾ's visit to Mecca is reminiscent of Anthony's confession that he had visited the Masjid al-Ḥarām; see Dick, "La passion arabe," 126; Braida and Pelissetti, *Storia di Rawḥ al-Qurašī*, 111.

83. The priest first wanted to dispatch him to be baptized in Wādī Ḥabīb (Wādī al-Naṭrūn), away from the scrutiny of Muslim officials; compare with the experience of Anthony, whom Elias II sent to the River Jordan (Dick, "La passion arabe," 123; Braida and Pelissetti, *Storia di Rawḥ al-Qurašī*, 103), or Bacchus, whom the Abbot of Mar Saba baptized in a secret room (Combefis, *Christi martyrum lecta trias*, 83–84).

84. The friend had no doubt that it was Ibn Rajāʾ "save for his garments of wool and the *zunnār*" (Atiya et al., "Life of Ibn Rajāʾ," 106). It is interesting that a Muslim convert would voluntarily don the *zunnār* (belt), as it instantly conveyed news of his conversion to Christianity to everyone around him, much as the removal of the *zunnār* instantly conveyed news of a Christian's conversion to Islam; cf. the *Chronicle of Zuqnīn* (J.-B. Chabot, *Incerti auctoris Chronicon Pseudo-Dionysianum vulgo dictum*, CSCO 104, Scriptores Syri 53 [Louvain: Peeters, 1952], 391).

85. Atiya et al., "Life of Ibn Rajāʾ," 107. Compare the shaming heaped on Anthony-Rawḥ (Dick, "La passion arabe," 124; Braida and Pelissetti, *Storia di Rawḥ al-Qurašī*, 106–7).

86. For more on the possible contents of this public abjuration, see the rites of abjuration mentioned in nn. 18 and 19, above.

Despite the relentless tortures and provocations, nothing could sway Paul to give up his faith. Therefore, his father wrote to the Fāṭimid caliph al-Ḥākim (r. 386–411/996–1021) petitioning for his son to be sentenced. The chief *qāḍī* of Cairo handled the case. No charges were brought against him, and Paul was set free.[87] For the rest of his life, he busied himself establishing a monastery and writing apologetic and theological works against Islam, some of which survive to the present.[88]

The life of Ibn Rajāʾ diverges from the three main examples of apostasy examined so far in that he escaped death. Scholars have suggested various reasons for this, including the leniency of an Ismāʿīlī judge toward a virulent anti-Sunni polemicist, as well as the shifting views of the erratic caliph al-Ḥākim, who behaved magnanimously toward non-Muslims at the end of his reign.[89] Whatever the reason, Ibn Rajāʾ's case is indicative of the unexpected tolerance converts could encounter in their new lives. He is evidence of what may have been a sizeable subculture of Muslim apostates, whose conversions went largely unpunished and who may have managed to avoid detection altogether.

If this is so, we must ask ourselves why "successful" apostates like Ibn Rajāʾ did not leave a deeper impression on the historical sources of the period. As David Cook notes, the absence of such individuals is especially striking in Christian texts, which were written with an "in-house" audience in mind, and which therefore had few compunctions about reporting the apostasy of Muslims.[90] We should consider the possibility floated by Cook that their absence meant that medieval authors, especially Christians, "did not see the issue as newsworthy." Perhaps it is modern eyes that are too captivated by a phenomenon that was, if not everyday, then certainly more common than the lacunae in the sources lead us to expect.

VII. CONCLUSION

This article has examined several hagiographical sources concerning Muslim conversion to Christianity in the Umayyad, ʿAbbāsid, and Fāṭimid periods. Recognizing that the evidence has been fragmentary and colored by the apologetic aims of its authors, what do these cases reveal about true apostasy in the early centuries after the Arab conquests?

First, Muslim conversion to Christianity was rare. True apostates faced stiff penalties and generally stood to gain little economically, socially, or politically from their decisions. Faith and personal conviction were powerful incentives for change, but they do not seem to have overpowered the staggering disincentives for most people. The small size of the early Muslim community may have compounded the rarity of apostasy, but the community's long-term trajectory was always in the direction of growth, not of contraction.

Second, true apostasy seems to have occurred in practically every part of the caliphate where Muslims lived alongside Christian majorities. It is significant that two of the most vivid examples—David-Ṣurḥān and Abo—came from the Caucasian frontiers where the combination of a demographic imbalance between the religions and the collapse of Muslim authority created conditions ripe for "going native." By the same measure, Muslims in areas

87. It is surprising that al-Ḥākim, one of the most notorious persecutors of non-Muslims in Islamic history, freed Ibn Rajāʾ. Among his most famous acts was to destroy the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in 400/1009-10. For more, see "al-Ḥākim bi-Amr Allāh" (M. Canard), *EI2,* 3: 77–78; Y. Lev, "Persecutions and Conversion to Islam in Eleventh-Century Egypt," *Asian and African Studies* 22 (1988): 73–91.

88. Ibn Rajāʾ wrote four known but as yet unedited books: the *Kitāb al-Wāḍiḥ*, a refutation of Islam; *Nawādir al-mufassirīn wa-taḥrīf al-mukhālifīn*, another polemical tract against Islam; the *Kitāb al-Ibāna fī tanāquḍ al-ḥadīth*, a critique of contradictions in the hadith literature; and an autobiography; see *CMRBH*, 2: 543–46.

89. Bertaina, "*Ḥadīth* in the Christian Arabic *Kalām*," 270–71.

90. Cook, "Apostasy from Islam," 265.

like Spain, Syria, and Egypt could also "go native" by converting to Christianity, but the coercive instruments of the state were much more powerful in those places and made apostasy that much harder. Aside from irregular cases like those of the martyrs, Muslims who converted with any regularity were probably peasants in majority Christian areas, especially in the countryside. There, the reach of the state was in all likelihood weaker, such that leaving Islam incurred less fear of punishment, and conversion might have granted access to Christian wives, markets, and inheritances that Muslims found otherwise difficult to obtain.

Third, miracles seem to have played a role in the conversion of Muslims. Reports of wonder-working icons and Eucharistic miracles can be dismissed as literary tropes, but they may have a basis in reality. The historian Ramsay MacMullen observed that Christianity's success in late antiquity was due in part to its perceived knack for exorcism and other supernatural feats.[91] Miracles furnished proof of the power and truth of the Christian God—whether in the third century or the eighth, it seems.

Fourth, clergy played a surprisingly peripheral role in the conversion of Muslims to Christianity. Because of the harsh penalties facing apostates, as well as anyone caught facilitating their conversions, priests and monks do not seem to have proselytized very aggressively.[92] We have hints that proselytizing did occur, and here, monks may have been more enthusiastic about it than priests, though the archetypal conversion depicted in the sources was still sparked by a miracle or vision. Priests could help interpret these events and fortify a convert's desire to be baptized. It seems, however, that the initial impetus came often through contact from without the institutional church, not from within it.

Fifth, conversion to Christianity was highly secretive. Baptisms were conducted in discreet locations far away from prying eyes. Some converts concealed their beliefs from Muslim friends and family, while others fled to the safety of Christian areas where they could practice freely, as in the life of the martyr Bacchus-Ḍaḥḥāk, who died in 786-7.[93] Most apostates probably tried to carry on in anonymity, avoiding the attention of anyone, Muslim or Christian, who might betray them. Perhaps this explains the striking presence of upper-class Muslim apostates in the sources—individuals whose conversions were too conspicuous to ignore. In contrast, apostates from the lower classes were more likely able to fade into the background and avoid detection.

Sixth, and last, a disproportionate number of martyrs became monks after converting to Christianity. In doing so, they seem to have understood themselves as tapping into a richer and more demanding spiritual tradition than they had known in Islam. This may well reflect the anti-Muslim bias of our sources, which were written largely by monks, but it is nonetheless striking to observe how many martyrs became ascetics after being baptized—including those who began life as Christians, converted to Islam, and then returned to Christianity, such as ʿAbd al-Masīḥ-Qays (d. 760s) and George-Muzāḥim (d. 979). Was every apostate a spiritual rigorist like Anthony-Rawḥ, who gave up his riches to don a hair shirt, or like Abo

91. R. MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, 27–28.

92. The Pact of ʿUmar and various surrender treaties contained clauses in which Christians pledged not to promote their own beliefs among Muslims. This can be read as a sign that such promotion was a problem, whether real or potential; see A. Fattal, *Le statut légal des non-musulmans en pays d'Islam* (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq, 1958), 61, 79; M. R. Cohen. "What Was the Pact of ʿUmar? A Literary-Historical Study," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 23 (1999): 100–57.

93. Presumably these were Christian-majority areas inside the caliphate, and for those living nearby, perhaps the Byzantine empire, too. See Combefis, *Christi martyrum lecta trias*, 96; cf. S. D. Goitein, *Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1967–93), 2: 304, which asserts that Muslim converts to Judaism had "to leave the country" to avoid detection and punishment.

of Tiflīs, who abandoned his perfumes for a life of fasting and penance? It is doubtful, yet by the same token, not a small number were.

Islam was developing its own ascetic traditions around the same time that many martyrs were apostatizing and embracing monasticism, embodied by early authorities such as al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728), the great proto-Sufi, and ʿAbdallāh b. al-Mubārak (d. 181/797), the volunteer soldier (*mutaṭawwiʿ*) who combined a life of combat, scholarship, and penance along the borders (*thughūr*).[94] The rise of Muslim asceticism is a complex phenomenon, but it is clear that it evolved as a result of, in conversation with, and in reaction to pre-existing Christian practices.[95] Thus do we find many stories of Muslims seeking advice at the feet of Christian holy men. These monks were ecumenical symbols—for Christians and Muslims alike—but also symbols of a spiritual path that was at the time more developed in Christianity. As much is suggested by legends about the great *zāhid* Ibrāhīm b. Adham (d. 161/778-9), who is said to have realized his vocation as a Muslim ascetic through conversations with a Christian monk named Abba Simeon.[96] Perhaps some apostates sensed this chasm and pursued baptism to draw closer to what they regarded as "Ur asceticism." By this same logic, perhaps conversions to Christianity trailed off with the emergence of more mature forms of Muslim asceticism, such as Sufism.

Conversion in the Umayyad and ʿAbbāsid periods was not a one-way street—it took place to and away from Islam. The late antique Middle East was a competitive religious world, in which confessional costume changes were relatively common. When we consider the demographic weight of Christianity, its relatively deeper roots in the societies of the Middle East where Muslims first settled, and the general culture of religious fluidity, it is a marvel that more did not follow the path of martyrs like Rawḥ al-Qurashī and undergo baptism. That they did not is a testament to the powerful disincentives created by the legal prohibition on apostasy, which came about in the early decades following the Prophet's death. That said, if this tour through the little-known saints of the period has accomplished anything, it is to show that Islamization was neither absolute nor inevitable during the early period. It could, in fact, be a rather fragile thing in the mixed-up world that emerged in the wake of the conquests.

94. For more on the *mutaṭawwiʿ* phenomenon, see D. G. Tor, *Violent Order: Religious Warfare, Chivalry, and the ʿAyyār Phenomenon in the Medieval Islamic World* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2007), 36–82.

95. On the relationship between asceticism in late antique Christianity and early Islam, see E. Beck, "Das Christliche Mönchtum im Koran," *Studia Orientalia* 13,3 (1946): 1–29; S. Sviri, "*Wa-rahbānīyatan ibtadaʿūhā*: An Analysis of Traditions Concerning the Origin and Evaluation of Christian Monasticism," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 13 (1990): 195–208; O. Livne-Kafri, "Early Muslim Ascetics and the World of Christian Monasticism," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 20 (1996): 105–29; C. C. Sahner, "Islamic Legends about the Birth of Monasticism: A Case Study on the Late Antique Milieu of the Qurʾān and Tafsīr," in *Late Antique World of Early Islam*, ed. Hoyland, 393–435.

96. Cited in T. Andrae, *In the Garden of Myrtles: Studies in Early Islamic Mysticism* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1987), 12–13; cf. "Ibrāhīm b. Adham" (R. Jones), *EI2,* 3: 985–86.