THE EARLY AND MEDIEVAL ISLAMIC WORLD

One of the most common religious practices among medieval Eastern Christian communities was their devotion to venerating crosses and crucifixes. Yet many of these communities existed in predominantly Islamic contexts, where the practice was subject to much criticism and often resulted in accusations of idolatry. How did Christians respond to these allegations? Why did they advocate the preservation of a practice that was often met with confusion or even contempt?

To shed light onto these questions, Charles Tieszen looks at every known apologetic or polemical text written between the eighth and fourteenth centuries to include a relevant discussion. With sources taken from across the Mediterranean Basin, Egypt, Syria and Palestine, the result is the first in-depth look at a key theological debate which lay at the heart of these communities' religious identities. By considering the perspectives of both Muslim and Christian authors, *Cross Veneration in the Medieval Islamic World* also raises important questions concerning cross-cultural debate and exchange, and the development of Christianity and Islam in the medieval period. This is an important book that will shine much-needed light onto Christian–Muslim relations, the nature of inter-faith debates and the wider issues facing the communities living across the Middle East during the medieval period.

'a subtle and admirable work' *Juan Pedro Monferrer-Sala, Professor and Chair of Arabic and Islamic Studies, University of Cordoba*

'Charles Tieszen's book on disputes about cross veneration between Christians and Muslims in the Middle East is the first of its kind, dealing with a subject that can teach us a lot about interreligious relations. The work covers all aspects that come up when Christians and Muslims dispute about cross veneration: idolatry of cross veneration, the identity-shaping power of it, and the cross as an easily identifiable marker for Christians and Christianity.' *Frank Griffel, Professor of Islamic Studies, Yale University*

'a valuable reference for anyone interested in the history of Christianity in the Islamic Middle East, interreligious dialogue and theology' *Christian C. Sahner, Research Fellow in History, St John's College, University of Cambridge*

CHARLES TIESZEN is Adjunct Assistant Professor at the Fuller Theological Seminary. He received his PhD from the University of Birmingham and is the author of *Christian Identity amid Islam in Medieval Spain* and *A Textual History of Christian–Muslim Relations*.

Cover image: The Crucifixion, by an unknown artist from the Byzantine-influenced Coptic school, wooden icon, Church of St Barbara, Cairo, Egypt, fourteenth century. (Photo by DeAgostini/Getty Images)

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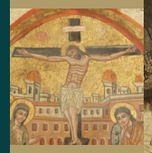

CROSS VENERATION IN THE MEDIEVAL ISLAMIC WORLD
CHRISTIAN IDENTITY AND PRACTICE UNDER MUSLIM RULE
CHARLES TIESZEN

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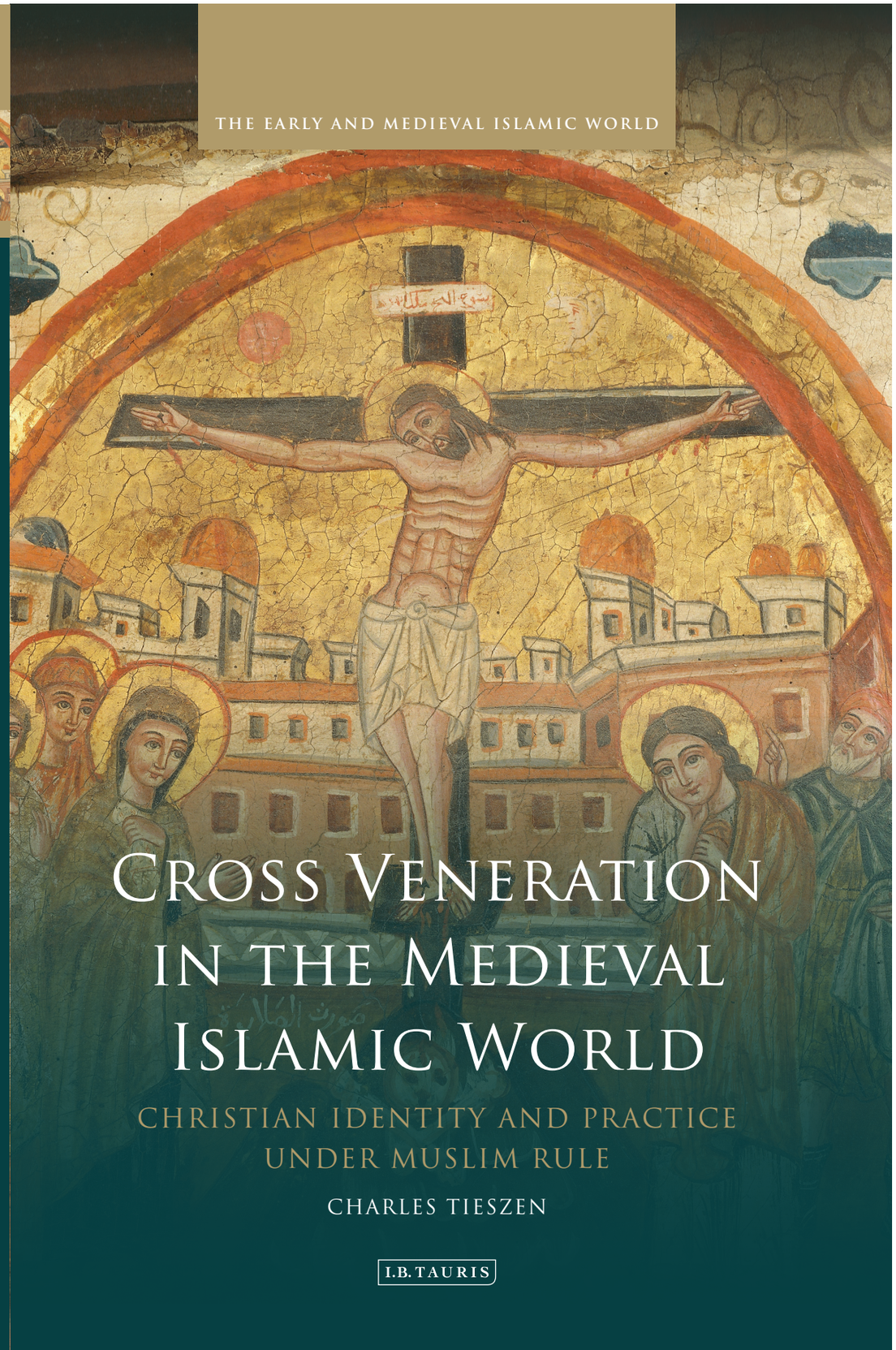

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'Charles Tieszen's book on disputes about cross veneration between Christians and Muslims in the Middle East is the first of its kind, dealing with a subject that can teach us a lot about interreligious relations. The work covers all aspects that come up when Christians and Muslims dispute about cross veneration: idolatry of cross veneration, the identity-shaping power of it, and the cross as an easily identifiable marker for Christians and Christianity. It also shows that disputes about the cross are often vehicles and outlets for conflicts about something else.'

Frank Griffel, Professor of Islamic Studies, Yale University

'Charles Tieszen takes us on a sweeping tour through a controversy that consumed Christians and Muslims through much of the Middle Ages: was it permissible to venerate the cross, and in so doing, to worship Jesus as the resurrected God? Tapping an array of sources in different languages, Tieszen shows how Christians and Muslims polemicised against each other over this central issue, and in the process, came to ever more refined understandings of their own beliefs and doctrines. This book will be a valuable reference for anyone interested in the history of Christianity in the Islamic Middle East, interreligious dialogue and theology.'

Christian C. Sahner, Research Fellow in History,
St John's College, University of Cambridge

'This study deals with an ever-present theme in Christian–Muslim confrontation in the Middle East: Christian veneration of the cross, which was regarded as idolatrous by Muslims. While most defences of Christianity vis-à-vis Islam discuss the theme, no monograph had as yet been devoted to this source of interreligious controversy. Charles Tieszen's book, which covers the first 700 years of Islam, is therefore very welcome. The author discusses the intricacies and diversity of approaches to the theme in an accessible way. The book will undoubtedly appeal to scholars of interreligious relations and Christian apologetics.'

Barbara Roggema, Research Fellow,
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CROSS VENERATION IN THE MEDIEVAL ISLAMIC WORLD

Christian Identity and Practice under Muslim Rule

CHARLES TIESZEN

I.B. TAURIS
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For Brahm, Jonathan, Rene and Vanessa

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This book is dedicated to Jonathan, my ever-present friend and first reader; to Rene and Vanessa, my heroic friends whose example

I try to follow; and to my son, Brahm, who asked a question over lunch ('What is God?') and discovered with me the shape of humanity. With each of these cherished ones acknowledged here, O God, I pray: 'Make us an icon for {You} in truth, that in ourselves here, as in a clear mirror, {Your} outline may be perceived' (Theodore Abū Qurrah, ninth century).

INTRODUCTION

TRACING THE LIFE OF A THEOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL IDEA

It was in Egypt sometime around the close of the seventh century that Isaac, Coptic Patriarch of Alexandria (d. 692/3), visited the Muslim emir ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz (r. 685–705).[1] Not long before, according to a biographer of Isaac's life, 'some Saracens who hated [the Christian] faith went to [ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz] and accused [Isaac], saying "Behold! you honor Isaac and receive him to yourself, but he abominates both us and our faith"'.[2] The accusation did not square with what ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz knew about Isaac. In fact, Isaac and ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz met regularly and the two got along reasonably well. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz was even fond of Isaac, considering him a faithful citizen and man of God.[3] 'The words you speak are lies', he responded.[4]

Isaac's accusers were not satisfied with ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz's rebuff and devised a plan. 'If you want to know that he hates both us and our faith and that the words we have spoken to you are truths, then have him eat with you from the [same] dish and the food that is on it, without making [the sign of] the cross. If he does not make it, then know that all the things we have said to you are lies'.[5] In other words, if Isaac made the sign of the cross over his food before he ate, as was his custom, then he would actually be the emir's enemy. If, however, he did not make the sign of the cross, then he would indeed be the emir's friend. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz agreed to the scheme.

And so it was that Isaac visited the emir. They assembled along with a host of Muslim officials including ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz's entourage. When all were seated, a basket of dates was served and ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz ordered Isaac to eat first. Isaac took the basket, looked toward ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz and cleverly

inquired, 'From which place would you like me to eat? This place or that place? Here or there?'[6] In two crafty strokes, the patriarch made the sign of the cross over the dates, disguising the motions as questions about whether he should select a date from the top or the bottom, the left or the right, of the basket. None the wiser, 'Abd al-'Azīz was sure he had made Isaac eat without making the sign of the cross. When his advisers told him otherwise, however, 'Abd al-'Azīz was amazed and exclaimed, 'Truly, I have never found a man as wise as [Isaac]!'[7]

This story from Isaac's life is framed with a bit of hagiography: the Christian finds himself in the midst of those who oppose him and he miraculously confounds them, earning the admiration of the emir. The story's hagiographical frame is even given a biblical edge when the biographer notes that Isaac's triumph was not unlike 'the prophet Daniel before the kings of the Chaldeans and the Persians'.[8] Despite this way of framing the event, the biography of Isaac's life reveals something of the nature of Christian–Muslim relations in seventh-century Egypt. And the story about the patriarch, the emir and the basket of dates in particular demonstrates that the symbol of the cross and the ways this symbol was used could be a point around which Muslims and Christians encountered one another.[9]

Muslims were often perplexed by the posture Christians took toward the cross and often showed great antipathy for the symbol of the cross in general. Of course, the Qur'ān speaks relatively ambiguously about the crucifixion, stating that the People of the Book (*ahl al-kitāb*) claim to have killed Jesus and flatly repudiating the idea that he died. Instead, the Qur'ān reveals, God raised Jesus (*rafa'ahu*) up to himself (4:156–9).[10] Alongside the denial that Christ died upon a cross came the Muslim repudiation that such an event was the necessity that Christian doctrine made it. To select one example from a large corpus of Muslim reflection, the Andalusī Mālikī jurist Abū l-Walīd al-Bājī discusses the matter when he responds to a French monk in the early eleventh century about some of Christianity's confusions, or what he concludes are the 'brayings of [Christians'] asses'.[11] For al-Bājī, the Christian claim that Christ's cross was the locus of humanity's salvation was among 'the strangest things' Christians put forward as a part of their faith.[12] The notion that Christ gave his blood and died presented numerous contradictions with respect to Christ's alleged two natures. Did this happen to his divine nature or his human nature? Either answer was a theological pitfall in

al-Bājī's mind. Further, it hardly seemed an appropriate act for someone who was supposed to be divine and all-powerful.[13] For al-Bājī, as for many Muslim intellectuals who engaged with Christian Christology, the cross was theologically unnecessary.[14] As such, it constituted blindness reaching a rather steep 'pitch of plain ignorance'.[15] In short, and despite the Qur'ān's rather terse treatment of the topic, the crucifixion, for Muslims, was not something that happened to Jesus. The cross was an extreme affront and Muslim traditions even depict Jesus as a judge who will return to earth in the last days and smash crosses.[16]

When it came to Christian veneration of the cross, the practice could be a public act that dramatised Christian doctrine. In venerating the cross, Christians animated their belief in Christ's divinity and in his redemptive work. It is little wonder, then, that despite the fact that the Qur'ān does not mention cross veneration, Muslims pounced upon the act as unbelief and an example of idolising an abhorrent symbol. For them, Christians were *mushrikūn*, or polytheists, because they ascribed partners to God (*shirk*) by divinising Jesus. This, along with Christians' belief that Christ was crucified, made the cross an affront to God and a rejection of the revelation he communicated via his messengers.[17] Hence, it also made Christians idolaters.[18] Sometimes the resulting discussions between Muslims and Christians about the cross were antagonistic or resulted in various kinds of persecution. At other times discussions about the cross merely indicate a context of inter-religious exchange. In any case, the Christian posture towards the cross was very often a literal one and Muslims write frequently of their concern over Christians bowing towards or kissing crosses.

In particular, Muslims often write to accuse Christians, declaring that the act was tantamount to idolatry and demanding an explanation. For example, the Muslim caliph 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz ('Umar II; r. 717–20) allegedly writes to Byzantine emperor Leo III (r. 717–41) and says, 'you worship the cross and the image [of Christ], kiss them, and bow before them, even though they are only the product of human work which can neither hear nor see, which can neither help nor harm, and the ones you esteem the most are the images made of gold and silver. In fact it is in this way that the people of Abraham behaved with their images and idols'.[19] For 'Umar, the cross was a powerless object made by human hands. As such, it was not worthy of the honour Christians offered to it. Adorning crosses with precious metals, as some Christian communities

did, only further implanted the suspicion in 'Umar's mind that Christians were fashioning idols for worship.

In an account, possibly written in the ninth century, of an exchange between Wāṣil, a captive Muslim from Damascus, and Bashīr, a Byzantine nobleman, Wāṣil says, 'I am going to ask you a question, my son. Do you worship the cross as a likeness for Jesus, Mary's son, because he was crucified?'[20] The question is really a trap, for it forces Bashīr to concede that the cross symbolised a humiliating event that was undeserving of honour. Towards the end of the account, Wāṣil corners the king, presumably Leo III, and says, 'Do you not worship what you have made with your hands? This is what is in your churches'. The king concedes that Christians have made their religion 'like the religion of the people of the idols' (*ahl al-awthān*).[21] The story helps to confirm in Muslim readers' minds that Christianity was a stumbling monotheism.

In the mid-ninth century, 'Alī al-Ṭabarī, a former East-Syrian Christian who converted to Islam late in his life, attacked his former faith in his *Al-Radd 'alā l-Naṣārā* (*Refutation of the Christians*). He wondered why Christians make crosses and wear them and why they make the sign of the cross. He even mocked his former co-religionists when he writes, 'You make a wooden [cross] with your hands and hang it around your necks!'[22]

In the eleventh century, Ibn Ḥazm, one of the greatest Muslim intellectuals to emerge from al-Andalus, the regions controlled by Muslims on the Iberian Peninsula, responded to an earlier Christian anti-Muslim text. Like the Christian text, Ibn Ḥazm wrote his refutation as a poem (*qaṣīdah*):

> How dare you brag of a Trinitarian faith?
> So removed from reason, so out of place?
> Worshiping a being who has a worshiping face!
> Woe to you! Where is your sanity and brain?
> Your gospels are tampered with in every place.
> And in them, words of truth are often slain.
> You bow still to a wooden cross.
> Woe to you! Where is your sanity and brain?[23]

For Ibn Ḥazm, Christianity departed from logic and reason. Its scriptural texts were thoroughly corrupt and Christians foolishly worshiped an object made with human hands.

Many more of these kinds of Muslim assessments and accusations are represented in Christian texts that functioned, in part, to defend and justify the practice of cross veneration. This book is about how medieval Christians responded to the Muslim charge of idolatrous cross worship and the tactics they deployed to explain their practice of cross veneration. A number of scholars consider Christian veneration of the cross in Islamic milieus. Most notably, Mark Swanson devotes a section to the topic in a dissertation that focuses on Arabic-speaking Christian discussion of the cross.[24] Sidney Griffith devotes a number of essays to Christians living under Muslim rule and their devotion to sacred images.[25] Gerrit Reinink and Herman Teule devote several articles to defences of cross veneration that appear in Syriac.[26] From these scholars, along with many others, we have a helpful body of secondary sources along with editions and translations of primary sources from which to learn. Even so, these studies either focus on more general discussions of the cross and Christology, the history of images and iconography in Islamic milieus, or the reflections of one particular author on the topic of cross veneration. This book attempts a modest corrective to what might otherwise be a slightly fragmentary treatment of texts that are, as a result, rhetorically decontextualised. Instead of exploring one particular exchange between a Christian and a Muslim over cross veneration or a few key authors' defences of the practice, this book investigates medieval apologetic, debate and disputational literature[27] written roughly between the eighth century and the fourteenth century.[28] Almost every known text from this period that is written in an Islamic milieu and in which an argument concerning cross veneration appears is examined. Most of these texts are written by Christians, but others that I examine, like the accusations that appear above, are from Muslims. In the end, 40 main texts appear in the book and readers may consult the appendices for bibliographical information about the main texts under examination. The result is a focused examination of how a variety of Christians living under various kinds of Muslim rule defended and explained their devotion to the cross.

Examining a large number of texts in this way is not an easy task. But doing so means that something more specific can be achieved than merely considering generalisations about a number of Christian–Muslim encounters that took place over a wide range of time and geographies. Similarly, with this approach much more can be said about one particular

and significant feature of Christian–Muslim relations than simply commenting in a very focused way on one particular text. By concentrating on the topic of cross veneration and considering how medieval Christian and Muslim authors approached it, it is possible to trace the life of cross veneration as an idea, as it is told from the perspective of medieval disputational literature written in Islamic milieus. When and under what conditions did Christians in these milieus first have to defend the practice? How did the topic emerge in contexts predominated by the religion of Islam and Muslim rulers? Did defences of cross veneration take new shape over time? Do they diminish over time?

Questions like these touch upon a variety of issues and readers will undoubtedly be drawn to wider discussions of the cross like Muslim analyses of the cross's function in Christian theology, examinations of the historicity of the cross or even considerations of fragments of the True Cross. This book necessarily focuses on the Christian practice of venerating the cross and how they defended this act of devotion to Muslims who questioned or ridiculed it. As a result, though some of the peripheral topics will be addressed in order to provide necessary context (this is particularly the case when it comes to the nuances of Muslim antipathy for the cross), many of these topics will remain beyond the reach of this book.

By this point readers may indeed wonder, why cross veneration? One should not be surprised by discussions of certain topics commonly found in apologetic literature written by Christians and Muslims: the Trinity, Christology or the nature of scripture for example. To some readers, however, cross veneration, especially relative to other theological topics like the aforementioned ones, may be unexpected. In fact, Christian defences of cross veneration and the Muslim accusations of idolatry that are related to them appear frequently in medieval apologies and debates, especially in the eighth, ninth, and even tenth centuries. Though less frequently, they continue to appear through the fourteenth century and so discussions of cross veneration, far from being marginal, are actually a topos of medieval Christian–Muslim disputational literature.

One of the reasons for the idea's frequent appearance in these texts is that the symbol of the cross is connected to substantial theological doctrines related to Christ's crucifixion, death and resurrection. In this way, the cross symbolised some of the major Christian doctrines to which Muslims objected and, in turn, the main lines dividing Christian and

Islamic theology. By venerating the cross, Christians not only dramatised these differences, but as I have noted above, the practice also appeared to Muslims to be underlining their suspicions that Christians were guilty of idolatry and attributing partners to God (*shirk*).[29] As a result, many Christian authors, besides responding directly to Muslim accusations, also chose to address cross veneration alongside their attempts to elucidate other theological topics.

Perhaps more significant, however, were the political dimensions of cross veneration. Of course, from the fourth century, when Constantine (d. 337) adopted the cross as his sign, the cross took on political value as an imperial symbol for Christians. In this sense, Muslim antipathy for the symbol of the cross could be connected to opposition towards the Byzantine Empire that attributed victory to the cross.[30] Many Christian authors included in this book, however, did not have the advantage of being associated with imperial power; almost all of them were subordinate citizens living under Muslim rulers. So when Christian authors in Islamic milieus addressed cross veneration in apologetic texts and disputational literature they were often engaged in smaller scale politics. They were writing their texts to help their readers make sense of and navigate new contexts of inter-religious contact. Of course, in some cases Muslims and Christians were engaged in the process of coming to understand one another's practices. In many other cases, however, these discussions were intended by authors to produce specific results among their primary audiences.

With this in mind, one of the predominant motivations for the authors of the Christian texts was a concern to assert the unique truth of Christianity over Islam. The concern was much the same for Muslim authors who used their texts to clarify and affirm the ways Islam had superseded Christianity. Hence, while it is true that the texts in this book cover a wide range of times, cultures and geographies and are connected to unique languages, religions and religious traditions, audiences and literary genres, there is a considerable continuity in what motivated the authors to write them. In situations where competing truth claims exerted influence over religious communities, authors would respond with efforts to help readers navigate their multi-religious contexts and adhere to what authors argued was superior truth. But making a claim for absolute truth was not just an exercise that could demonstrate the intellectual prowess of an author. Even more, there is a pastoral edge to many of these texts whereby

convincing readers of religious truth could in turn safeguard a community from the dangerous or allegedly false claims of another faith. In this way, many authors were concerned to protect their communities from conversion, to nourish beleaguered communities affected by the strain of persecution or mockery, or to ensure that acculturating to linguistic or cultural environments did not also dilute the distinctions of a community's religious faith. Taken together, the concern for a community's adherence to superior religious truth can be re-articulated as an author's effort to define a community's religious identity. What identified a religious community as distinct from the other communities that existed within a given milieu?

Generally speaking, the concern to define communal religious identity was addressed by authors in two essential ways, and texts often evince a mixture of these two elements. In the first, many authors wrote texts in order to defend their religious truth claims. They tried to make clear, for example, why it was that God was strictly one or a Trinity in Unity, how Christ became located in the Virgin Mary or why Muḥammad's office of prophethood was universal and not limited to Arabia. These efforts were carried out in contexts where the truth claims of one community were challenged by the claims of another. Hence, authors wrote texts in order to defend and reassert the boundary lines that defined distinct religious communities.

In a second means by which to define communal religious identity, many authors directly attacked the other's religion. For example, when a Christian author assaults the morality of Muḥammad, he surely hopes that his readers will be convinced by the Christian truth that remained standing as his attack upon the Prophet forced Muḥammad to crumble in defeat. Similarly, when Muslim authors attacked the history of Christianity's development, claiming that it was built on idolatrous and manipulated foundations, they likely hoped Christian claims would collapse before their readers' eyes and leave Islam as the only truly pure monotheistic religion. Readers who were convinced by these tactics would become more firmly planted in their religion and would not waver under the tempting influences of other religious claims. Their religious identity would be safeguarded and made firm.

Of course, authors employed other tactics – apocalyptic readings of historical events, for example – but defending one's own view or attacking that of another, such as the apologetic and disputational texts

in this book do, could be brought into service as tools to assert the superiority of one religion over the other. Thus, even when one writes in an ostensibly appreciative way of the other's religious tenets, an opponent's claims are made subservient to the correct interpretation that only a superior text or religious framework could provide. These tactics work quite well in apologetic or polemical treatises. But even those that are historical accounts often use material germane to Christian–Muslim disputational literature in order to say something to their readers about how they might understand their position in life vis-à-vis Muslim rulers and Islam. With this in mind, the features that draw these wide-ranging texts together are concerns that adherents of one religion will not blur the lines that made religious communities distinct, regardless of the ways different religious communities acculturated culture and language. In all of this, religious identity was at stake and authors were working hard in their own ways to define what they believed to be the correct religious identity of their communities.

In particular, veneration of the cross and the Christian devotion to its sign was one way of making public the political dimensions of one's faith and highlighting religious identity. Returning to Isaac, the Coptic patriarch of Alexandria, the shape of the cross could be subversive and authors could use stories about it, as did Isaac's biographer, to say something about how Christian communities might see themselves in light of the Islamic milieus in which they lived. In the case of those who read about Isaac's life, the sign of the cross was a reminder of the power it held to confound those who opposed it. Christian communities like the ones over which Patriarch Isaac shepherded may have lived under Muslim rule, but that need not weaken their grasp upon what was to them superior religious truth. In this way, discussions of symbols like the cross, not to mention other kinds of religious images, and the postures people took toward them were as much political as they were theological.[31]

Indeed, many authors seek to explain why Christians venerated the cross and the theological value Christians attributed to it. Sometimes these explanations are pointed at Muslims as a response to their suspicions that Christians worshiped the cross as an idol. At many other times, explanations of cross veneration work to underscore the significance of the practice to Christian communities and how it helped to delineate the differences between them and Muslim communities. For this reason,

tracing the life of cross veneration will mean looking at how authors explained the practice theologically and how they used the practice politically in order to form and police the religious identities of the communities to whom they wrote. In these ways, cross veneration becomes a central point at which Christians and Muslims encounter one another in both conversation and debate.

Since the cross carried with it important theological and political ramifications, its function as a symbol becomes important and it is often discussed alongside other symbols like Christian icons. For this reason, a few important clarifications must be addressed at the outset of this study. The first clarification can be tended to briefly. While there is a relationship between icons and crosses as Christian symbols, they are also distinct symbols and functioned differently in different Christian communities. The subject of icons – one need only think of Byzantine iconoclastic controversies here – is a vast one. Because of the enormity of the topic of icons, I will not focus on defences of iconophilia in this book and will only include discussions of religious images beyond crosses when doing so is directly related to venerating the cross. This is especially the case in Chapter 1 where a discussion of the historical context of cross veneration necessarily includes consideration for how religious images in general were viewed.

The second clarification concerns the religious traditions adhered to by the authors we examine. Since most of them are Christians, it will be helpful to many readers to understand here the variety of Christian confessions represented. Predominant among the medieval Christian traditions in regions under Muslim rule, especially among the authors represented in this book, were those who adhered to Chalcedonian orthodoxy – the Christological confession advocated by the Byzantine emperor and formulated by the Council of Chalcedon in 451. These Chalcedonians came to be known as Melkites (from the Syriac *malkāyā* and the Arabic *malakī*, meaning 'royal' and thereby implying that they were 'imperialists' who joined with the Byzantine emperor). Melkite communities took their shape after the emergence of Islam and were among the first Christian communities to adopt Arabic as a spoken and ecclesiastical language.[32] There were also other Christian communities that formed before the rise of Islam, though their identities grew more solidified during the first few centuries of Islam. These were the West-Syrian Miaphysite (also Monophysite or Jacobite) communities – those

believing in a single, undivided nature in Christ – and East-Syrian communities (Nestorians or Church of the East) – those believing in two, separately existing natures in Christ. These two communities comprised primarily Syriac speakers. There were also the Copts in Egypt who used Coptic and shared a miaphysite theology.[33]

The differences between these Christian traditions were not limited to Christological confessions. Each community celebrated different liturgies and languages and practised varying liturgical devotions. Most important for this study, this means that these communities devoted themselves in a variety of ways to icons and crosses in worship. Some traditions had churches with abundant icons while other communities did not favour them at all. Some showed a preference for aniconic crosses while there is evidence of others incorporating crosses with corpora. For example, some early medieval West-Syrian Christians favoured aniconic church decoration. During the same periods, however, evidence exists for embellished ornamentation in West-Syrian churches. To further complicate the matter, varying evidence exists among influential churches and more marginal village churches.[34] Similarly, the Melkite Theodore Abū Qurrah, in his ninth-century treatise *A Treatise on the Veneration of Holy Icons*, defends devotion to the icon of Christ crucified, having in mind the church in Edessa that bore the icon's name (as well as Christian images and crosses in general). In the same century, an anonymous Melkite author also writes to defend Christian devotion to the cross, but does so with an aniconic cross in mind and pays less attention to the role icons might play in Christian prayer.[35] Of course, this does not necessarily indicate that icons were absent in this author's context, but it does suggest that when it came to icons and crosses, Melkite authors felt differently about where to place an accent on their importance. Finally, East-Syrian Christians are normally thought to have rejected icons in their churches or to have favoured devotion to crosses in their place. However, a number of East-Syrian texts, as we shall see, provide evidence for the defence of Christian crosses and images and their use in worship well into the fourteenth century.[36] The worship and devotional practices of these communities was hardly uniform and great variety is attested.[37] As a result, I will only make special mention in relevant sections when particularities related to confessional worship are important to context or are discernible from textual evidence.

Another clarification concerns the terms 'symbol' (and the related word 'sign'), of which an icon (*eikōn*) and a cross are examples, and 'veneration'. The word 'symbol' has taken on a generic meaning for many today. In such cases a symbol merely represents something and may therefore have no special meaning or value. Even in some religious contexts, symbols are, for many, only simple indicators. An image of the Good Shepherd, for example, represents Christ – and therefore is a symbol of Christ – but may only serve as a reminder for some aspect or function of Christ's life. To many modern viewers, such an image is very nearly arbitrary, completely dialectical and might be easily replaced by another image. Further, there are many today who would find it difficult to look at a symbol and not locate a line that divides an image or a copy from that which it represents, a prototype or an original. This was not the case in the ancient and medieval worlds.

Surveying antique and medieval thought on religious symbols would require far too much space, so I will describe as briefly as I can the complexity of the concept of symbol as it was understood for Eastern Christians during the late antique and early medieval periods. The theological reflection offered in these periods formed the bases for many later theological treatments and understandings of religious symbols for Eastern Christian communities. One can begin with Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita in the early sixth century. His thought on sacred images was significant enough for it to have been a source for both iconoclasts and iconodules in the eighth and ninth centuries.[38] For Dionysius, though he acknowledged a difference between a symbol (*symbolon*) and what it symbolised, he emphasised what the symbol and what it depicted had in common. As Moshe Barasch summarises, for Dionysius a symbol 'is not only a sign, but is actually the thing itself'.[39] Therefore the line dividing symbol and symbolised is faint and porous in Dionysian thought.

It is much the same in the eighth and ninth centuries for John of Damascus (d. 749) and Theodore the Stoudite (d. 826). For them, there was a necessary relationship between an image and its prototype. This is less apparent in John's work where, though he recognises a relationship, writes that 'the image is certainly not like the archetype, that is, what is depicted, in every respect – for the image is one thing and what it depicts is another – and certainly a difference is seen between them, since they are not identical'.[40] Clearly there is a relationship for John

between an icon and what it represents, though he is hesitant to make them identical to one another.[41]

Theodore is more explicit. 'The prototype and the image belong to the category of related things', he writes and the image necessarily follows from the prototype.[42] 'The prototype and the image have their being, as it were, in each other'.[43] Theodore goes on to employ the admittedly limited metaphor of an object and its shadow. 'If the shadow cannot be separated from the body [. . .] in the same way Christ's own image cannot be separated from Him'.[44] As one implication of this connection between Christ and symbols depicting him, many writers ascribe miraculous power to religious icons and Theodore writes that the symbol of the cross had the power to burn demons.[45] For Theodore and others like him, the symbolised dwells in the symbol and is made manifest. They are not to be equated, but they are to be understood together.[46] In this way, Theodore makes the relationship between symbol and symbolised much more explicit than John of Damascus.

A nearly ubiquitous metaphor used to explain this relationship, a topos in literature discussing religious symbols and one that will appear throughout this book, is the image of the emperor. That an emperor's image could be recast in various materials and still retain its identity with the actual, living emperor was a provocative concept for those reflecting on the nature of religious icons.[47] This metaphor could be used to illustrate the relationship between an original (the emperor himself) and copies (representations of him as statues, imprints on coins, etc.) and applied to the nature of icons and crosses as symbols. The emperor metaphor could also help to elucidate the honour paid to an emperor's image. When one bowed before it or kissed it, the honour was not really being given to a representation. Because of the innate relationship between copy and original, honour passed from image to prototype, from a representation of the emperor to the emperor himself. With this in mind, references to 'symbol' or 'sign' in this book, when they are used to refer to religious icons and crosses and the figures and events they symbolised, carry with them this kind of complexity where there is an understood relationship between original and copy, prototype and image.

This brings us to a final clarification concerning the term 'veneration'. To venerate an object was to bow (*proskynēsis*) before or even kiss (*aspasmos*) it. Frequently in texts discussing veneration of the cross, the

shape of the cross is also given consideration. In turn, making the sign of the cross, the vertical and horizontal strokes made over one's forehead and chest or over an object, is important in the literature I analyse and becomes part of the way one can honour the cross and even enact its inherent power. Of course, it was this act of veneration, offered to objects in the shape of the cross, that perplexed and concerned Muslims. In this light, when Muslims accused Christians of idolatry with respect to veneration, it was because they observed them bowing before crosses, kissing them and making their sign.

But Muslims were not the first to be scandalised by the Christian practice of venerating crosses. In fact, there is a much wider history of condemning and defending cross veneration. This book begins in Chapter 1, therefore, by taking a closer look at the historical and literary context of apologetic discussions of cross veneration and the place the practice had in the wider context of Christian religious symbols. This historical examination begins with the pagan and Jewish contexts, for it was among members of these communities where Christian veneration of crosses first appeared suspect. In fact, it was in *Adversus Judaeos* literature – the body of texts written by Christians responding to Jewish literary attacks upon images and crosses – that something of a tradition developed that set in place the most common explanations for Christian veneration of the cross. Eventually, of course, these discussions made their way into Islamic contexts. Hence, Chapter 1 will also discuss Islamic views of religious symbols and how the symbol of the cross became such a focal point of religious and political controversy between Muslim and Christian communities. As will become clear, it is this broad historical context that frames the apologetic and disputational texts Muslims and Christians wrote in the medieval period that included the idea of cross veneration.

In Chapter 2, I begin to analyse the main texts devoted to cross veneration that emerge from medieval Islamic milieus. In this chapter, I consider texts where there is an emphasis upon acknowledging Muslim accusations of idolatry and deflecting them back towards Islam. In texts where this approach is an emphasis, Christian authors deploy polemical counterattacks meant to expose the polytheistic roots of Islam and suggest that Muslims unknowingly perpetuate idolatry, especially in their adoration of the Black Stone of the Ka'bah. For these authors, adoration of the cross was the mark of true monotheism. Of course,

Muslim authors could play this game as well, and so Muslim texts are also examined. Particularly significant are those that attempt to expose the manipulative foundations of Christianity and Christian history with reference to the practice of venerating crosses.

In Chapter 3 there is a noticeable shift from texts that focus on counterattacks to those that actually attempt to explain the meaning and function of cross veneration. With these texts, consideration is given to the symbolic nature of the cross and the strategies authors utilised in order to illuminate the reasons why Christians incorporated cross veneration in their worship. It is here where the main contours of the tradition of defending and explaining cross veneration, stretching back to *Adversus Judaeos* literature, are discernible.

Finally, I consider in Chapter 4 the most innovative defences of cross veneration. In these texts we see authors being the most explicit in their designation of the cross and its veneration as a marker of unique Christian identity. Here it becomes clear that in milieus increasingly shaped by Arabic and Islam, many of these authors, even as they demonstrate the absorption of Arabic language and culture and Islamic thought forms, would have their communities identifiable by the shape of the cross and a posture of adoration towards this symbol.

One of the challenges of a book like this is the matter of arranging a large number of texts. Since the book's aim is to trace the life of cross veneration as a theological and political idea in Islamic milieus, I arrange the texts thematically, not chronologically. This is especially helpful since arguments applied to defending cross veneration did not develop chronologically, but were applied by their authors in a piecemeal fashion. In this light, a thematic structure eases the work readers must do in navigating through a large corpus of literature. But this arrangement also means that it becomes difficult to fully contextualise each text when it appears under a given theme. For this reason, while I have taken care to articulate each text's necessary context, I have included two appendices: Appendix I is a summary of each text along with information regarding what is known about authors; an abbreviated form of this appendix appears as a table for easy reference in Appendix II.