

✠ INTRODUCTION ✠

Christian Martyrs under Islam

The early Islamic period is one of the greatest watersheds in human history. In a matter of a few generations, Muslim armies emerged from the Arabian Peninsula and established a caliphate stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Punjab. Today, we regard these areas as the heartlands of the “Muslim world.” But in the early centuries after the conquests, the situation was radically different. Muslims formed a demographic minority in many areas under their control. In places such as Egypt, Palestine, and Syria, the so-called Muslim world was in fact a majority-Christian world and would remain so for centuries to come.¹ This book seeks to explain the earliest stages of a long-term process whereby the predominantly Christian Middle East of late antiquity became the predominantly Islamic region of today. In particular, it explores the role of religious violence in the process of de-Christianization, as well as how Christians adopted the mentality of a minority through memories of violence.

To tell the story, this book investigates a neglected group of Christian martyrs who died at the hands of Muslim officials between the seventh and ninth centuries AD. They were known by their contemporaries as “new martyrs” or “neomartyrs.”² Despite the name, there was nothing new about martyrdom itself. Since the first century, Christians had been celebrating as saints members of their community who died witnessing to their faith.³ All but one of Christ’s apostles were martyred, and many luminaries of the early church died

¹Despite this, there is sometimes a tendency in the literature to refer to Christians in the medieval Middle East as “minorities”; e.g., Bennison, *Great Caliphs*, 122–33 (though cf. 94, which acknowledges the Christian majority). But as one prominent sociologist has noted, “A social minority need not be a mathematical one. A minority group is a subordinate group whose members have significantly less control or power over their own lives than do the members of a dominant or majority group.” This certainly fits the Christians of the postconquest Middle East; see Schaefer, *Racial and Ethnic Groups*, 5–6. On the long-term demography of Christianity in the region, see Fargues, “Demographic Islamization.”

²On the term *new martyr*, see Sahner, “Old Martyrs, New Martyrs,” 94–97; on the term *martyr* in various eastern Christian languages, see Peeters, “Traductions orientales du mot Martyr.”

³Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*; Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*; Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*; Boyarin, *Dying for God*; De Ste. Croix, *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom, and Orthodoxy*.

under violent circumstances, including figures such as Ignatius of Antioch (d. ca. 108), Polycarp of Smyrna (d. ca. 155), and Cyprian of Carthage (d. 258). Martyrdom waned with the conversion of the emperor Constantine to Christianity in the early fourth century. Suddenly, the very state that had once committed itself to persecuting Christians was now committed to defending them. While the pace of martyrdom may have slowed inside the Roman Empire, bloodshed carried on outside Rome's borders. In Sasanian Iraq and Iran, for example, Syriac-speaking Christians who ran afoul of the Zoroastrian authorities were killed and remembered as saints.⁴ What is more, although pagan-on-Christian violence declined inside Rome, the acid rivalry among competing Christian sects gave rise to new martyr cults within the "schismatic churches" of the empire. These included Donatist martyrs in North Africa and (West Syrian) Miaphysite martyrs in northern Mesopotamia and the Levant.⁵

With the rise of Islam, Christians once again found themselves living and dying under what many regarded as a hostile, pagan state. This was a jarring experience, especially for those in the former provinces of the Byzantine Empire, where Christianity had enjoyed imperial patronage for more than three hundred years. In a sense, the Arab conquest thrust these Christians back into a pre-Constantinian way of doing things. They embraced resources in their own tradition, in turn, to make sense of their new predicament, and the most powerful of these was martyrdom. In places as diverse as the Iberian Peninsula, Egypt, Syria, Armenia, and Georgia, local churches began to venerate Christians who had died at the hands of the Umayyad and 'Abbasid states. The term *new martyr* was intended to emphasize a sense of continuity between the sufferings of the present day and those of the golden age before the conversion of Constantine.⁶ But unlike the classical martyrs—many of whom were killed for shirking what hagiographers portrayed as a timeless paganism—the new martyrs were executed for reneging on a faith and culture that truly surrounded them and which some had even embraced. Thus, the "outsider"—the Muslim—is as visible and real in the martyrologies of the period as the Christians themselves. These martyrs were a varied group, including monks, soldiers, shopkeepers, village priests, craftsmen, princes, and bishops. They were women and men, young and old, peasants and nobles. Although capital punishment disproportionately affected certain groups, especially the clergy, martyrs hailed from across the social spectrum of the early medieval Middle East.

⁴Brock, *Guide to the Persian Martyr Acts*; Payne, *State of Mixture*; Smith, *Constantine and the Captive Christians of Persia*.

⁵Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories*; Chabot, *Chronicon anonymum Pseudo-Dionysianum*, ii, 21–23, 32–36, with the term *new martyrs* (Syr. *sāhdē hadtē*) at 33.

⁶Sahner, "Old Martyrs, New Martyrs."

Seen from this perspective, there were three main types of martyrs in the Umayyad and early 'Abbasid periods (for the purposes of this book, defined as ca. AD 660–860, between the first recorded martyrdom after the accession of the Umayyads, which occurred in Damascus, and the last substantial burst of martyrdoms, which occurred in Córdoba).⁷ The first and most numerous were Christian converts to Islam who then returned to Christianity. Because apostasy came to be considered a capital offense under Islamic law, they faced execution if found guilty. The second group was made up of Muslims who converted to Christianity without any prior affiliation with their new religion. The third consisted of Christians who slandered the Prophet Muḥammad, usually before a high-ranking Muslim official. Along with these, there were smaller numbers of Christians who were executed for refusing forced conversion, who were killed fighting the Arabs in times of war, or who died as a result of random, nonreligious violence.

There are roughly 270 new martyrs from the early Islamic period if we compile all the saints mentioned in hagiography, liturgical calendars, and chronicles. This figure, however, is slightly misleading because it includes many saints who died within larger groups and therefore are poorly differentiated from one another in the historical record. These include the Sixty Martyrs of Gaza, a group of Byzantine soldiers executed following the Arab conquest of Palestine in the late 630s;⁸ the Sixty Martyrs of Jerusalem, a cohort of Byzantine soldiers killed during a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 724/725; the Twenty Martyrs of Mar Saba, who were massacred during a Bedouin raid on their monastery in 788/797; the Forty-Two Martyrs of Amorion, a company of Byzantine soldiers who were captured in an Arab attack on Anatolia in 838 and executed in Iraq in 845;⁹ and the forty-eight voluntary martyrs of Córdoba, who were executed for blasphemy and apostasy in the capital of Umayyad

⁷For George the Black, one of the earliest neomartyrs, see chapter 1, sec. II; for the Córdoba martyrs, the last of the group martyrs, see esp. chapter 1, sec. IV, and chapter 3, sec. IV.

⁸Delehaye, "Passio sanctorum sexaginta martyrum"; with discussion in *CMR*, i, 190–92; Paroisse, "LX soldats martyrs"; Guillou, "Prise de Gaza"

⁹The Forty-Two Martyrs of Amorion will not be dealt with extensively in this book. Despite the existence of rich hagiographic traditions (see *CMR*, i, 630–32, 636–41, 676–78, 845–47), all of these texts were composed in Byzantium, not the caliphate. Furthermore, although the martyrs were eventually killed in Baghdad, they were captured in Byzantium. The cult of the Forty-Two Martyrs spread among Christians in the caliphate (see Peeters, "Rabban Sliba," 177; Nau, "Martyrologe et douze ménologes," 73), but it was largely a Byzantine affair. Occasional reference will be made to "Recension G" of the *Passion of the Forty-Two Martyrs*, composed between 845 and 846, immediately after the martyrs' death. Its author is Michael Synkellos, a monk of Mar Saba and a priest of the Jerusalem patriarchate who spent his later years in Constantinople. Of all the recensions of the text, it comes closest to offering a "non-Byzantine" view of the incident. For text, see Vasil'evskii and Nikitin, *Skazaniia o 42 Amoriiskikh muchenikakh i tserkovnaia sluzhba im*, 22–36; for discussion, see *CMR*, i, 630–32.

al-Andalus between 850 and 859. If we remove these saints from the overall tally, the total number of individual martyrs shrinks to around forty.

Some may question whether we can draw broad conclusions about a topic as vast as “the making of the Muslim world” from such a slender base of evidence. Indeed, we should not underestimate the difficulty of reconstructing an entire period on the basis of the somewhat limited body of sources that survive to the present. The challenge is doubly formidable considering the accumulated debris of legend that surrounds many martyrs and which can make it hard to obtain a clear picture of their life and times. In the pages to come, I will explain why so many saints’ *lives* are historically plausible and therefore why we should treat them as useful sources of information for the whole of early Islamic society. Yet the difficulties must be soberly acknowledged at the outset. Here, it is important to note that history furnishes other examples of how Christians behaved when confronted by the dominion of an alien faith, and these offer helpful comparisons for assessing the early medieval evidence.

We have already met the so-called Persian Martyrs, who were executed by the Sasanians between the fourth and seventh centuries. They present an especially useful comparison with the neomartyrs not only because of their chronological and geographic proximity to each other but also because Christians in both periods reacted to the threat of state violence in similar ways. Indeed, stories of Zoroastrian converts to Christianity and Christian blasphemers against Zoroastrianism could often be retold with Muslim and Christian characters instead without losing their narrative logic. This is not only the result of their common literary heritage. It is also the result of the somewhat consistent manner in which Christian communities in the premodern Middle East reacted when confronted by a similar array of religious, cultural, and social pressures at the hands of non-Christian sovereigns. In other words, there was often a predetermined script that both martyrs and biographers followed when confronted by state violence.

The parallels are even more striking with the Christian martyrs of the early Ottoman period—also commonly known as “neomartyrs”—who were revered across the Balkans and much of Anatolia.¹⁰ Despite the historical chasm separating the two groups, their biographies are shockingly similar: tales of Christians executed after refusing to convert to Islam or, having already converted, apostatized from Islam and returned to Christianity. The parallels between the two cohorts of saints—which have not been noticed by scholars but which merit thorough study in their own right—are not merely the result of a com-

¹⁰Vaporis, *Witnesses for Christ*; Krstić, *Contested Conversions to Islam*; Greene, *History of the Greeks*, 74, 146–51.

mon literary heritage. They are also the result of shared demographic realities between the early Islamic caliphate and the early Ottoman Empire, both post-conquest societies in which culturally Byzantine Christians found themselves living under Muslim ruling minorities. In these worlds, Christians and Muslims could rub shoulders in remarkably similar ways, living in a state of official competition that was offset by many deep cultural, religious, and linguistic similarities. Perhaps inevitably, these worlds produced similar kinds of violence, which Christians commemorated in similar ways, namely, by writing martyrologies. So, when someone reads the *lives* of the Umayyad and ‘Abbasid neomartyrs and asks of these harrowing, sometimes theatrical tales whether they represent pure fiction or contain elements of psychological reality, the parallels to earlier and later generations of apostates and blasphemers should instill some confidence in the plausibility of the evidence. Put simply, the sources report the kinds of information we might expect to find when Christians existed under non-Christian powers in the premodern Middle East.

The use of capital punishment against Christians was an important feature of early Islamic history, but it was limited in its scope and aimed at two specific goals. The first was to establish the primacy of Islam and the Islamic character of the state at a moment when Muslims were dramatically outnumbered by their non-Muslim subjects. In this world, public executions had a performative function and were designed to instill obedience in the massive and potentially recalcitrant non-Muslim population. The second was to forge boundaries between groups at a time of unprecedented social and religious mixing. Indeed, Muslims and Christians interacted with each other in the most intimate of settings, from workshops and markets to city blocks and even marital beds. Not surprisingly, these interactions gave rise to overlapping practices, including behaviors that blurred the line between Christianity and Islam. To ensure that conversion and assimilation went exclusively in the direction of Islam, Muslim officials executed the most flagrant boundary-crossers, and Christians, in turn, revered some of these as saints.

Thus, contrary to the common impression in popular culture today that Islam won converts principally by the sword, the historical record suggests a more complex picture. Capital punishment—while real and occasionally ferocious—was also a remarkably bureaucratic phenomenon that followed established rules and relied on state institutions. Private, nonstate violence against non-Muslims was not a major feature of the postconquest period, nor was forced conversion. On balance, the Umayyads and ‘Abbasids were not much interested in persecuting Christians, at least systematically. In fact, the state took a rather *laissez-faire* attitude toward the governance of *dhimmīs* (the protected non-Muslim subjects of the Islamic state, also including Jews and

Zoroastrians). It allowed them to live as they wished provided they paid the *jizya* (the poll tax imposed on non-Muslims in commutation for military service) and accepted their subordination as laid down by the law.

By and large, relations between Muslims and Christians in the early period were characterized by a peaceful but begrudging form of coexistence. The two groups—themselves internally diverse—shared the same cities, spoke the same languages, and as time went on, increasingly shared many of the same relatives and friends. Indeed, the firm distinction between the Arab Muslim ruling class and the non-Muslim subject population began to dissolve over time as the ranks of the Muslim community swelled with non-Arab converts. This is not to discount the fact that the Islamic empire was forged in the cauldron of conquest, which, like all wars, imposed suffering and deprivation on native populations, including Christians. It is also not to discount the fact that Muslims and Christians made antagonistic and mutually exclusive claims about the nature of God or that Muslims enjoyed privileged access to political, social, and economic power, which they used to marginalize their competitors. Rather, it is to point out that violent episodes such as martyrdom occurred against a backdrop of what Arabs today call *‘aysh mushtarak*, or a “common way of life,” not against a backdrop of constant hostility.

One of the great advantages of the sources is the ability to track the ebb and flow of religious and cultural change in the postconquest Middle East. Through these texts, we can gain a clearer picture of when conversion may have accelerated, where violence against Christians was most intense, and how the Middle East first took on the guise of the Islamic society that we know today. Here, the first fifty years of ‘Abbasid rule emerge as the single most important period in what this book calls “the making of the Muslim world.” It was at this time that Muslims and Christians began interacting with each other as members of a shared, increasingly integrated society, rather than as rulers and subjects in a divided, socially stratified world, as they had done in the immediate wake of the conquests. The traditional distinctions between Muslims and Christians—as Arabs and non-Arabs, soldiers and peasants, city-dwellers and villagers—were disappearing in the early ‘Abbasid period. This was due to the large numbers of non-Muslims converting to Islam, increasing Muslim settlement of the countryside, and practices such as slavery and intermarriage, which brought conquerors and conquered into ever greater proximity. This muddled world generated new anxieties about social and religious differentiation, which led to higher rates of state violence. These may be seen in the larger number of martyrdom incidents in the ‘Abbasid period, as well as the impulse of Christian writers to commemorate these incidents in literary form. The martyrologies testify to the creation of a Christian identity in the

early medieval Middle East grounded in memories of bloodshed, antagonism toward Islam, and hostility to Christians who switched sides. Thus, this book aspires to provide not just a history of a specific historical and literary phenomenon—martyrdom—but also a history of the wider society that generated violence and texts alike, one that was in the process of becoming “Muslim.”

Finally, Christians were not the only victims of state violence in the early Islamic period. Jews, Zoroastrians, and others felt the anger of the Muslim authorities for a similar range of offenses, including apostasy and blasphemy. Yet it is significant that these groups did not respond to the violence by creating martyrs. Indeed, it would be impossible to write a comparable book about the phenomenon of Jewish or Zoroastrian “martyrdom” under Islam. The disparity points to the fact that in this period, at least, “martyrdom” was a uniquely Christian idea and practice. As we have seen, the inclination toward martyrdom had deep roots in Christian antiquity. It drew its most profound inspiration from the figure of Jesus himself, who preached a message of finding strength through weakness and achieving victory through defeat. Such ideals were not nearly as pronounced in late ancient Judaism or Zoroastrianism. For this reason, the book is focused on relations between Muslims and Christians specifically, as opposed to Muslims and non-Muslims more broadly. It makes occasional comparisons with the experiences of Jews and Zoroastrians, but a thorough study of these similarities and differences will have to wait for another time.

I. HAGIOGRAPHY AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL HISTORY

This book is not simply a study of violence against Christians. It is also a study of how Christians remembered this violence in literary forms and used texts to construct social identities.¹¹ The *lives* of the martyrs were written in practically every corner of the nascent caliphate where Muslims and Christians lived side by side. Given the demographic realities of the seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries, this meant practically every region under Muslim control west of Iran. The evidence survives in a polyphony of ancient and medieval languages, including Greek, Arabic, Latin, Armenian, Georgian, Syriac, and Ethiopic. Many of these texts have been studied individually over the years,¹² but they are little known outside a small circle of academic

¹¹For this approach in an earlier period, see Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*.

¹²The brilliant Belgian Bollandist Fr. Paul Peeters (d. 1950) did the most to advance the field in the early twentieth century through a series of editions, translations, and studies of sources in Arabic, Georgian, and Ge'ez. Despite his erudition, Peeters never synthesized his findings in a

specialists.¹³ Indeed, as Sidney Griffith has recently put it, the Christian martyrs represent a “little-studied chapter of early Islamic history.”¹⁴ What is more, the texts have never been knitted together to tell a general history of Christian martyrdom under Islam or to gain insights into the development of Islamic civilization more broadly. This book attempts to accomplish both of these things.

When it comes to writing social and religious history, medieval hagiography is a rich but perilous source. Over the years, many scholars have dismissed it as a collection of tall tales and scurrilous lies, in some instances refusing to even entertain the idea that it may contain useful historical information. The early twentieth-century German medievalist Bruno Krusch summed up this view when he referred to a famous work of Merovingian hagiography as “kirchliche Schwindelliteratur.”¹⁵ Thankfully, Krusch’s opinion is rarely stated so bluntly today, but there are still plenty of scholars who approach hagiography with comparable reserve. The most prominent of these in recent years has been Candida Moss, who regards most of the early Christian martyr texts as essentially fabricated (and on the basis of this, seeks to counter contemporary Christians who, she believes, abuse the mantle of martyrdom for political gain—a political interpretation in its own right that often colors her reading of the evidence).¹⁶

Despite the prevailing skepticism in some corners, the study of late antique and medieval saints’ *lives* has undergone a renaissance over the past forty years.¹⁷ Indeed, scholars have used hagiography as a tool for social history and, in particular, for understanding issues such as identity formation, conceptions of the holy, the relationship between church and state, and Christianization.¹⁸ What is more, scholars have discovered that hagiographic texts are not simply collections of pious myths. Rather, hagiography is often filled with historical

single article or book on the neomartyrs; for more on his life and work, see Devos, “R. P. Paul Peeters.”

¹³For the key synthetic studies, see Zayyāt, “Shuhadā’ al-naṣrāniya”; Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 336–86; Griffith, “Christians, Muslims, and Neo-martyrs”; Vila, “Christian Martyrs.” See also *CMR*, i; *CMR*, ii; Shoemaker, *Three Christian Martyrdoms*, xi–xliii.

¹⁴Griffith, “Maṣūf Family,” 44.

¹⁵Krusch, “Zur Florians- und Lupus-Legende,” 559, cited in Kreiner, *Social Life of Hagiography*, 3.

¹⁶Moss, *Myth of Persecution*. For similar statements of the problem, see Mango, “Saints,” 265–66; Kazhdan and Talbot, “Hagiography,” 897; more broadly, Harvey, “Martyr Passions and Hagiography.”

¹⁷E.g., Brown, “Rise and Function of the Holy Man”; Brown, *Cult of the Saints*; Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*

¹⁸Patlagean, “Ancienne hagiographie byzantine et histoire sociale”; Lifshitz, “Beyond Positivism and Genre”; Geary, “Saints, Scholars, and Society”; Kaplan and Kountoura-Galaki, “Economy and Society in Byzantine Hagiography.”

details that can be corroborated using outside sources. These, in turn, can instill confidence that a given text may describe real events and people, though dramatizing these elements to suit the conventions of the genre. Of course, there are many saints' *lives* in which thick layers of fantasy obscure any underlying reality. But whether it is from Merovingian Gaul, Sasanian Iran, or 'Abbasid Syria, hagiography often offers a tantalizing, three-dimensional glimpse of real and imaginary worlds that historians would not be able to gaze at otherwise.

Even when we do not possess corroborating evidence to verify the claims made in hagiography, it is important to remember that saints' *lives* were successful as a form of literature precisely because they portrayed a world that was in some sense familiar and comprehensible to their readers. Thus, it may be beyond the power of most scholars to ascertain whether a saint lived and died exactly as a biography claims. But taking them judiciously and on a case-by-case basis, we can often trust hagiographic sources to provide a snapshot of a saint's world not completely divorced from his or her reality or that of the biographer. This is especially true if we can manage to establish when a text's author lived.

Herein lies the great challenge for social historians who wish to exploit hagiographic sources: How can we determine the gap between the life of a Christian killed by Muslim officials and his or her afterlife as a saint—or to put it more succinctly, the chasm between record and representation? The earliest academics who studied hagiography were focused on these very questions. The Bollandists—the famous Jesuit order founded in the wake of the Reformation with the mission of studying hagiography—were interested in using the sources to establish the veracity of saints' cults in the life of the contemporary church. The most prolific of the twentieth-century Bollandists was the Belgian scholar Hippolyte Delehaye (d. 1941), who produced many learned studies of ancient and medieval hagiography. His main interest was in recovering positive data about saints—the “what, where, and when” of their *lives*—rather than in understanding the texts as a genre of literature.¹⁹ Over the past fifty years, a new cohort of scholars has emerged that has been less interested in establishing biographical facts than in understanding the milieu in which saints' *lives* were written. Indeed, historians have recently shown how hagiography is often more useful for grasping the priorities of its authors than those of the saints themselves.²⁰

¹⁹Delehaye, *Légendes hagiographiques*; Delehaye, *L'œuvre des Bollandistes*; cf. Sullivan, “Jean Bolland (1596–1665) and the Early Bollandists.”

²⁰Debié, “Writing History as ‘Histories’”; Kreiner, *Social Life of Hagiography*; Payne, *State of Mixture*.

It is important to remember just how ubiquitous saints' *lives* were across the late antique and medieval worlds. Practically every Christian society in premodern times (and many thereafter) produced hagiography.²¹ The genre was so widespread, in fact, that pagans, Jews, Manichaeans, Zoroastrians, and Muslims also produced biographies of holy men and women.²² The cult of the saints was very popular more generally, and Christians from Ireland to Iran undertook local and long-distance pilgrimage to revere their martyred heroes. As a result, they were often intimately familiar with the details of their *lives*, whether they encountered these in manuscripts—like the monks and priests who had ready access to texts in monastic libraries—or heard them recounted aloud—like the peasants who visited saints' shrines on their feast days.²³

Given how universal the veneration of saints was in late antiquity and the Middle Ages, we can approach hagiography with a common set of questions regardless of where we find it: What were the goals of hagiographers, and how did their audiences react to their works? To borrow the apt phrase of Richard Payne, hagiographers were nothing short of the “anonymous architects of Christian communities” across the late antique and medieval worlds.²⁴ The texts they composed played a central role in configuring the identity of their readers. After all, to write a saint's *life* was to make an argument for a particular social, spiritual, and cultural ideal—to provide a vivid portrait of the “angelic life” (Gk. *bios angelikos*) to readers hungry for instruction and eager for saintly perfection.

Hagiography offered sound advice on a range of expected themes: prayer, charity, obedience, chastity, and sin. But it also provided advice on a range of social and political concerns: How should Christians interact with members of other religions? What were the duties of a Christian to his or her family, clergy, and king? What were the obligations of the rich to the poor? How should Christians spend their money? What were the virtuous ways of engaging in war? There are countless other questions about everyday life that late antique and medieval hagiography sought to address. For the scholar, the texts that strove to answer these questions are a boon because they amplify the kinds of low-volume but important conversations that are usually muted to

²¹For the eastern Mediterranean, see Efthymiadis, *Research Companion to Byzantine Hagiography. Volume I* and *Research Companion to Byzantine Hagiography. Volume II*; for the European Reformation, see Gregory, *Salvation at Stake*; for the Christians of the Ottoman Empire, see Vaporis, *Witnesses for Christ*.

²²Pagans and Christians: Miller, *Biography in Late Antiquity*. Jews: Dan, “Hagiography.” Manichaeans: Sundermann, “Mani,” *Elr*. Zoroastrians: Choksy, “Hagiography and Monotheism”; Cereti, “Myths, Legends, Eschatologies,” 264–69. Muslims: Renard, *Friends of God*.

²³Efthymiadis and Kalogeras, “Audience, Language and Patronage.”

²⁴Payne, *State of Mixture*, 19.

modern ears. Thus, Bruno Krusch's characterization of a saint's *life* as *kirchliche Schwindelliteratur* misses the point of the genre completely: even in its most fanciful forms, late antique and medieval hagiography makes powerful statements about the social priorities of long-lost worlds.

This book approaches the Christian martyrologies of the early Islamic period with a posture of critical positivism. It is "positivistic" because it does not *prima facie* discount the historical claims of the sources simply because they appear in hagiographic narratives. Rather, it takes these claims seriously by constantly testing them against outside evidence, mainly in the form of contemporary Muslim texts. It can be extremely difficult to verify the existence of a given martyr by name (virtually no martyrs are mentioned individually by Muslim authors), but more often than not, hagiography does contain the kinds of corroborating details that instill confidence in elements of a story, including places, dates, and minor characters of historical importance. When such details do not exist, it is still possible to compare the sources with more general legal and historical accounts of Muslim-Christian interactions. These, in turn, reveal that the martyrs' *lives* often adhered to recognizable patterns of behavior spread across postconquest society, which were shaped, in turn, by common legal, economic, and social norms. Thus, while we may not be able to say whether a given martyrology is "factual," we can usually establish whether individual elements of a text are "plausible" (readers wishing to understand how Christian hagiography can be read alongside Muslim texts for the purposes of verification should turn to appendix 1, which contains several methodological case studies).

At the same time, the posture of the book is "critical" in the sense that it is not purely interested in what saints' *lives* say about events and people. It is also interested in what the sources reveal about their authors and readers. Thus, it tempers methodological openness to the existence of historical data with sensitivity to the roles rhetoric, symbol, and motif play in presenting this information. Miracles, polemic, and fantasy—all stock features of hagiography in late antiquity and the Middle Ages—fill the texts, as one would expect. But they are not enemies of the historian; in fact, they can be assets to help us grasp how biographers represented the past to their readers and repackaged it in literary forms to suit the concerns and expectations of the present (these themes are dealt with throughout the book, though most especially in chapter 5).

Thus, to be clear, this book does not reject more text-centered approaches to hagiography, such as those that insist on the cultural function and meaning of the stories. Rather, this book charts a clear course between two competing impulses: literalism and skepticism. A hermeneutic of literalism falls short

because it takes the claims of hagiography too seriously and, in the process, fails to appreciate the literary dimensions of the genre. A hermeneutic of skepticism, meanwhile, is usually deficient because it treats the claims of hagiography too lightly and, in the process, fails to notice their grounding in real social, political, and cultural contexts. Both approaches have something to teach us when it comes to reading late antique and medieval saints' *lives*, but only when they are combined together can we realize the potential of what the sources have to say.

II. THE LIVES OF THE MARTYRS: AN OVERVIEW

If this combination of approaches does succeed, the *lives* of the martyrs emerge as some of the richest, most revealing bodies of evidence about relations between Christians and Muslims in the early Islamic period. They throw light on an array of important but poorly understood questions of deep concern to any scholar of the premodern Middle East: What motivated Christians to convert to Islam? Why did recent converts sometimes return to Christianity? Did Muslims ever apostatize from Islam? What was it like to grow up in a religiously mixed family? When and why did blasphemy first become a capital offense under Islamic law? Did the early caliphs faithfully implement Qur'anic punishments in everyday life? How did the Umayyads and the 'Abbasids discipline religious dissidents? How did the spread of Islam destabilize and reconfigure internal relations within the churches of the greater Middle East? Did some Christian denominations experience higher levels of violence than others? Did certain periods witness increased tensions within and between communities?

These are central questions to any scholar of the early Islamic period. Yet the traditional body of evidence that historians have used to answer these questions—much of it written in Arabic by medieval Muslim authors—provides unsatisfying answers. The problem is not only that many Arabic Muslim sources were written down centuries after the events they purport to describe, presenting a latter-day *Heilsgeschichte*, as Patricia Crone and Michael Cook noted in their pathbreaking 1977 book *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World*.²⁵ It is also that these sources take little interest in the affairs of non-Muslims. Indeed, if the great Muslim annalist al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) were all we relied upon to understand the shape of Middle Eastern society in the post-conquest period, we would come to the erroneous conclusion that nearly ev-

²⁵Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*; building on Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies*; Wansbrough, *Sectarian Milieu*.

everyone in this world had already converted. Yet this was not the case. As Peter Brown put it:

Jews and Christians, Persians and East Romans were allotted “walk-on” parts [in early Muslim historiography] but little more. The immensely rich but inward-looking Arabic historical tradition virtually ignored the intimacy and complexity of the relations between the Arabs and the other cultures of the Near East.²⁶

Islamic historian R. Stephen Humphreys came to a similar conclusion about one significant corner of the early Muslim empire, noting: “In general, the Arabic Muslim chronicles and biographical compendia maintain a frustrating silence about the Christians of Syria and the Jazīra.”²⁷ Of course, medieval Muslim historians had a vested interest in downplaying the diversity of the world in which they lived, which consisted of not only Christians from many denominations but also Zoroastrians, Jews, Manichaeans, Buddhists, polytheists, and others.²⁸ Not only were Muslim authors relatively unconcerned about the affairs of the subject population (whom they viewed as religiously and socially backward, by and large), but they were also committed to telling a story of Muslim triumph that discounted the importance of these communities in their shared cosmos. To admit that the major portion of the population in the Islamic heartlands of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria was in fact non-Muslim—and would remain so even until the time of the Crusades, as some scholars believe²⁹—ran counter to the favored story line. Put succinctly, the mainstream sources provide a portrait of a homogeneous Muslim society that later writers wished to imagine. They do not provide a faithful snapshot of the diverse society as it actually was.

²⁶Brown, *Rise of Western Christendom*, 301; see also Papaconstantinou, “Between *Umma* and *Dhimma*,” 129.

²⁷Humphreys, “Christian Communities,” 48.

²⁸Zoroastrians were the second-largest non-Muslim community in the early caliphate, yet their experiences under Islamic rule are poorly researched, especially in comparison with those of Christians and Jews; see Choksy, *Conflict and Cooperation*; Morony, “Madjūs,” *EF*, v, 1110–18; Daryaei, “Zoroastrianism under Islamic Rule”; also Crone, *Nativist Prophets*; Savant, *New Muslims of Post-conquest Iran*.

²⁹The most influential work on conversion remains Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam*, which argues that most regions crossed the threshold of a Muslim numerical majority in the ninth or tenth century. Other studies have pushed this estimate later, including for Palestine: Cahen, “First Crusade,” 7; Hitti, “Impact of the Crusades,” 212; Gil, *History of Palestine*, 170–72; Ellenblum, *Frankish Rural Settlement*, 20–22; Avni, *Byzantine-Islamic Transition*, 331–37. For Egypt: Friedmann, “Conversion of Egypt to Islam”; El-Leithy, “Coptic Culture”; Sijpesteijn, *Shaping a Muslim State*, 107. On general population estimates for Muslims in the very early period, see Tannous, “Syria,” 480; Carlson, “Contours of Conversion.”

Christian sources from the early Islamic period, not least of them hagiography, pose their own methodological risks. Not only are these texts filled with literary motifs, but they are also overtly hostile to the new religion and ruling class. What is more, they often misunderstand the events and peoples they discuss, much as early Muslims sometimes misunderstood non-Muslims. Furthermore, the dating of these sources can be just as contested as that of their counterparts on the Islamic side. Therefore, this book attempts to balance the evidence from martyrologies with information culled from Muslim sources. These include chronicles (Ar. *tārīkh*, pl. *tawārīkh*), as well as early traditions (Ar. *ḥadīth*, pl. *aḥādīth*) and law (Ar. *fiqh*). By combining Christian and Muslim sources in this way, this book aspires to convey a robust and balanced picture of issues scholars usually examine from only one angle or another, including conversion, apostasy, blasphemy, and the judicial system.

Genres

We have already discussed the promise and peril of using hagiographic sources to tell social history. In light of this, how do we know what we know about the martyrs? Information about the saints of the seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries comes in a variety of forms.³⁰ The single largest and most important texts are *lives*, or *vitae* to use the common Latin term: stand-alone biographies written independently of larger historical or literary works.³¹ Some of these biographies run for as much as forty pages in modern printed editions; others, for as little as four pages.³² Only in the case of the martyrs of Córdoba (Lat., d. 850–59) does a voluminous dossier about one group of saints survive from the pens of multiple contemporary authors.

The second most important genre is liturgical calendars, known by their Greek name as *synaxaria*.³³ Such calendars detail the feasts celebrated in the

³⁰For an overview of the different forms of hagiographic writing, see Hinterberger, “Byzantine Hagiography and Its Literary Genres.”

³¹Detoraki, “Passions of the Martyrs,” esp. 81–84.

³²E.g., the *Passion of the Twenty Martyrs of Mar Saba*, *SPSH*, i, 1–41; versus the *Passion of the Twenty Martyrs of Gaza*: Delehayé, “Passio sanctorum sexaginta martyrum,” 300–303.

³³The most significant were the *Synaxarium of Constantinople*, compiled in Greek in the tenth–eleventh centuries—Delehayé, *Synaxarium*, esp. 72–74, 98 (Michael of the Zobē Monastery, d. ca. 780–90, abbot killed by Muslims inside Byzantium, not discussed in this book), 105–6, 310–12, 434 (Theophilus the New, d. ca. 780–90, Byzantine naval commander captured by the Arabs, not discussed); Kazhdan, “Constantinopolitan Synaxarium as a Source for Social History”; Luzzi, “Synaxaria”—and the *Synaxarium of Alexandria*, compiled in Arabic in the fourteenth century—Basset, “Synaxaire arabe jacobite” (1909), 175, 360, 376; (1915), 797–98; (1922), 845–47; (1923), 1120–23, 1296–97 (henceforth, all references to Basset, “Synaxaire arabe jacobite,” will follow the continu-

course of the church year. In some instances, they identify a saint with a single line of information.³⁴ In other instances, they provide a longer biography, running up to three pages in certain cases. Some of these saints are known exclusively through *synaxaria*, while others were the subject of independent biographies and therefore can be cross-checked using sources outside the liturgy.

The third most important source is chronicles. Unlike hagiography, chronicles do not always make clear whether a given Christian was venerated as a martyr. Indeed, most victims of religious violence in this period were not considered saints.³⁵ Despite this, chronicles sometimes do mention martyrs and their cults. Some of these “pseudo-hagiographies” appear in the course of longer historical works, as with Cyrus of Ḥarrān, whose biography fills the final fragmentary pages of the *Chronicle of Zuqnīn*.³⁶ Others appear as incidental references in the chronicles of famous writers such as Theophanes Confessor (Gk., d. 818), Lewond (Arm., fl. eighth–ninth centuries), Thomas Artsruni (Arm., d. ca. 904–8), and Michael the Syrian (Syr., d. 1199).³⁷

Finally, information about the martyrs comes from a range of miscellaneous texts. One of the very earliest references to a new martyr appears in the *Narrationes* of Anastasius of Sinai (Gk., d. ca. 700), a collection of edifying anecdotes that the author gathered during his travels around the eastern Mediterranean.³⁸ Miracle collections—especially those associated with the shrine of Saint George at Diospolis in Palestine—also provide information about

ous pagination given in brackets in the print edition); Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 367–69; Coquin, “Editions of the Synaxarion,” *CE*, vii, 2172–73; Atiya, “List of Saints,” *CE*, vii, 2173–90.

³⁴For liturgical texts with brief references to new martyrs, see Nau, “Martyrologe et douze ménologes,” 73; Peeters, “Rabban Sliba,” 169 (George, patriarch of Baghdad, d. unknown, not discussed in this book), 174 (Elias of Beth Qūsaynā, d. unknown, not discussed), 177, 180; Sauget, *Synaxaires melkites*, 310–11, 332–34, 344–45 (Rizqallāh of Tripoli, d. ca. 1360s, not discussed), 366–67, 377–78 (Ephrem, neomartyr of Damascus, d. unknown, not discussed), 380–83, 411–14, 427–29 (Isaac of Ḥamā, d. unknown, not discussed); Garitte, *Calendrier palestinogéorgien*, 44/126–27, 44/131–32, 45/136, 47/144, 48/151, 54/172, 55/179–80, 59/196, 59/197, 60/198–99, 64/213–14, 92/340, 98/363–64, 105/393, 110/410.

³⁵E.g., Chabot, *Chronicon ad annum Christi 1234*, i, 245 (for an account of Muslims killing Christians but without reference to martyrdom); cf. Tritton, *Non-Muslim Subjects*, 127.

³⁶Harrak, “Martyrdom of Cyrus”; see also the martyrdom of Arĉ’il (d. 786) in the *Royal Georgian Annals*: Thomson, *Rewriting Caucasian History*, 251–55.

³⁷Theophanes on the women martyrs of Ḥimṣ (d. 779/780): de Boor, *Chronographia*, i, 452–53. Lewond on Hamazasp and Sahak (d. 786): Arzoumanian, *History of Lewond*, 144–47. Thomas Artsruni on various Armenian martyrs killed under Bughā al-Kabīr (d. ca. 851–52): Thomson, *House of Artsrunik*, 206–7, 249–55. Michael the Syrian on ‘Abdūn of Takrīt (d. 820): Chabot, *Chronique*, iii, 48–49 (Fr.); iv, 506–7 (Syr.). Cf. Abbeloos and Lamy, *Chronicon*, iii, 183–84.

³⁸Binggeli, “Anastase le Sinaïte,” 251–52 (Gk.), 566–67 (Fr.), with other stories involving Muslims: 219–20, 225–28, 230–31 (Gk.); 531–32, 538–42, 545–46 (Fr.). For Anastasius on Islam, see Griffith, “Anastasios of Sinai, the *Hodegos*, and the Muslims.”

martyrs,³⁹ as do sermons, apologetic works, and polemical treatises.⁴⁰ Our understanding of individual martyrs varies widely from one saint to the next: Some individuals are known thanks to a single reference in one text; others star in multiple biographies written across a variety of genres and languages. With notable exceptions (see appendix 1), Muslim sources are silent about individual martyrs, though they can help us reconstruct the general historical and legal setting in which the martyrdoms took place.

Languages

One of the most striking features of the *lives* of the new martyrs is their linguistic diversity.⁴¹ Greek continued to be used as a language of hagiography in greater Syria until the eleventh century.⁴² This was especially true in the Chalcedonian monasteries of Palestine, such as Mar Saba, whose monks produced an outsized share of the texts discussed in this book (the topic of chapter 5).⁴³ So vital was their Hellenic culture that Cyril Mango famously described Muslim-controlled Palestine as the single most active center of Greek literary production in the eighth century.⁴⁴ As Greek waned, it was replaced by Arabic in many Christian communities of the Middle East.⁴⁵ In general, the very earliest Christian Arabic texts can be dated to the mid-eighth century, though recent research has suggested that an Arabic translation of the Bible may have existed before Islam, though this is a matter of major debate.⁴⁶ If this is true, it

³⁹ Aufhauser, *Miracula*, 65–89, 90–93; see also the later Latin translations: Braida and Pelissetti, *Rawḥ al-Quraṣī*, 81–91 (It. trans.), 129–38 (Lat. text).

⁴⁰ The account of the martyrdom of Pachomius (alias Joachim, Malmeth) in Vat. Gk. 1130 (16–17th c.) describes itself as a *logos historikos* of Gregory of Decapolis (d. 842). On the disputed authorship of this text, see now Binggeli, “Converting the Caliph,” 92–93 n. 58. Two famous apologetic treatises that mention the martyrs are the *Indiculus luminosus* of Paulus Alvarus (*CSM*, i, 270–315) and the *Apologeticus martyrum* of Eulogius (*CSM*, ii, 475–95).

⁴¹ On language change more generally, see Wasserstein, “Why Did Arabic Succeed Where Greek Failed?”; Hoyland, “Why Did Aramaic Succeed Where Greek Failed?”; Papaconstantinou, “Hellenism and *Romanitas*.”

⁴² See the reworking of the *Passion of the Sixty Martyrs of Jerusalem* (d. 725) in the eleventh century by Simeon of the monastery of Quarantine near Jericho: *SPSH*, i, 136–63; Flusin, “Palestinian Hagiography,” 216, 218.

⁴³ Griffith, “Aramaic to Arabic.”

⁴⁴ Mango, “Greek Culture in Palestine”; cf. Blake, “Littérature grecque en Palestine”; Cavallo, “Cultura greca in oriente”; Johnson, “Social Presence of Greek”; Mavroudi, “Greek Language and Education under Early Islam.”

⁴⁵ Griffith, “Greek into Arabic”; Griffith, “Monks of Palestine and the Growth of Christian Literature in Arabic”; Griffith, “Stephen of Ramlah”; Griffith, “Church of Jerusalem and the ‘Melkites’”; Levy-Rubin, “Arabization versus Islamization.”

⁴⁶ Kashouh, *Arabic Versions of the Gospels*, 143–71 (on Vat. Ar. 13, copied in the ninth century,

would mean that the Christian scriptures constitute the oldest book written in Arabic, not the Qur'an as is usually thought. Hagiography was among the very earliest Christian Arabic writings.⁴⁷ Again, the Melkite monasteries of the Holy Land played a leading role in their production, as did monastic communities farther north near Antioch.⁴⁸

The main example of Latin hagiography from the period is the *lives* of the Córdoba martyrs. In al-Andalus, Latin remained an important language for educated Christians until at least the late ninth century, and there is evidence of high-level knowledge of Latin surviving into the tenth century and beyond.⁴⁹ Indeed, the Córdoba martyr acts are among the finest (and most complex) examples of Latin prose composition in al-Andalus before it was finally eclipsed by Arabic and Romance.⁵⁰

Armenian and Georgian authors also produced *lives* of neomartyrs.⁵¹ Due to the peculiar circumstances of Arab rule in the Caucasus, these sources tend to convey similar kinds of information, focusing on the violence that arose there amid the political disputes between the Muslim conquerors and the indigenous Christian nobility. In addition to composing new texts, Georgian monks also played an important role in translating old texts.⁵² For example, many saints' *lives* that were first written in Greek and Arabic in the Levant were later translated into Georgian, and in certain instances, the only versions that survive today are the Georgian copies.⁵³ Even when it is not clear what

probably at Mar Saba but, according to Kashouh, possibly based on a pre-Islamic *Vorlage* or a *Vorlage* written at the very beginning of Islam at a site such as Hira, Najrān, or Baṣra; for an opposing view, see Griffith, *Bible in Arabic*, esp. 41–53.

⁴⁷Swanson, "Arabic Hagiography"; see also *GCAL*, i, 487–555.

⁴⁸For Sinai, see Binggeli, "Hagiographie du Sinai"; for Antioch, see Zayyāt, "Vie du patriarche melkite."

⁴⁹Sahner, "From Augustine to Islam."

⁵⁰Banniard, *Viva voce*, 423–84; Wright, *Late Latin and Early Romance*, 145–207; Wright, "End of Written Ladino"; Aillet, *Mozarabes*, 133–246.

⁵¹Vacca, "Creation of an Islamic Frontier in Armīniya," 195–203. A revised version of this work has just appeared as Vacca, *Non-Muslim Provinces under Early Islam*.

⁵²Peeters, *Tréfonds oriental*, 155–64; Samir, "Plus anciens homéliaires géorgiens"; Mgaloblishvili, "Georgian Sabaite (Sabatsminduri) Literary School"; Griffith, "Aramaic to Arabic," 30–31; Nanobashvili, "Literary Contacts"; Johnson, "Social Presence of Greek," 81–84.

⁵³The *Life of Peter of Capitolias* (d. 715), written first in Greek (Peeters, "Passion de S. Pierre") and the *Life of Romanus* (d. 780), written first in either Greek or Arabic (Peeters, "S. Romain le néomartyr"). English translations of both are now available in Shoemaker, *Three Christian Martyrdoms*. See also the Georgian translations of the *Passion of the Twenty Martyrs of Mar Saba* and the *Life of Anthony*, written in Greek and Arabic, respectively, and surviving in their original languages as well as later Georgian translations: Blake, "Deux lacunes comblées"; Kipshidze, "Zhitie i muchenichestvo sv. Antoniiia Ravakha"; Peeters, "Autobiographie de S. Antoine." The manuscript containing the Georgian translation of the *Life of Anthony* (Ivion, *Passionary* 57) also contains the *Life of Abo of Tiflis* and the *Life of Michael of Mar Saba*, both new martyrs: Wardrop,

the original language of a text may have been,⁵⁴ the existence of Georgian translations from the ninth and tenth centuries underlines the close connections among different Christian communities in the early medieval Middle East and central Asia.⁵⁵ Martyrologies and their authors traveled from place to place, as evidenced by the many Georgian sources that survive in institutions such as St. Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai,⁵⁶ as well as the accounts of individual martyrs who traveled between Palestine and the Iberian Peninsula.⁵⁷ Although Ethiopic preserves far fewer translations than Georgian, it played a similar role in disseminating hagiography originally written in Coptic and Arabic in Egypt.

The final language of martyrology-writing was Syriac. A prestige dialect of Aramaic associated with the city of Edessa, Syriac was one of the most important Christian languages of late antiquity and continued to be used long after the Arab conquest.⁵⁸ Despite this, Syriac speakers produced no stand-alone biographies of martyrs that survive to the present. There are a few quasi-exceptions—including the *Life of Cyrus of Ḥarrān*, which appears as an epilogue in the *Chronicle of Zuqnīn*, and the *Passion of the Sixty Martyrs of Jerusalem*, which may have been written in Aramaic before being translated into Greek⁵⁹—but the overall absence of martyrs' *lives* in Syriac is noteworthy. It is especially striking given that Syriac speakers of all denominations (West Syrian, East Syrian, etc.) continued to pen saints' *lives* after the conquests, including of pre-Islamic saints and nonmartyr saints who lived under Islam. The

"Georgian Manuscripts," 603; Blake, *Catalogue des manuscrits géorgiens*, 318. On hagiography-writing in Armenian and Georgian more generally, see Cowe, "Armenian Hagiography"; Martin-Hisard, "Georgian Hagiography."

⁵⁴This is especially true of the *Life of Michael of Mar Saba*: Peeters, "Passion de S. Michel"; Blanchard, "Martyrdom of Saint Michael"; Griffith, "Michael, the Martyr"; and chapter 3, sec. II.

⁵⁵On the presence of Georgians in the Holy Land more generally, see Janin, "Géorgiens à Jérusalem"; Mgaloblishvili, "Unknown Georgian Monastery in the Holy Land"; Avni, *Byzantine-Islamic Transition*, 126. The *life* of the martyr Constantine-Kakhay describes the journey of one pilgrim from Georgia to Palestine: Abashidze and Rapp, "Kostanti-Kaxay," 150–51.

⁵⁶Sinai Geo. N. 3 and Sinai Geo. O. 11, with the *Life of Abo of Tiflis*: Garitte, *Catalogue des manuscrits géorgiens littéraires du Mont Sinai*, 42–43; *CMR*, i, 336.

⁵⁷See chapter 5, sec. III.

⁵⁸On the history of Syriac in late antiquity and the early Islamic period, see Hoyland, "Why Did Aramaic Succeed Where Greek Failed?"; on hagiography-writing in Syriac, see Brock, "Syriac Hagiography."

⁵⁹Papadopoulos-Kerameus, "Muchenichestvo shestidesiati novykh sviatykh muchenikov post-radavshikh," 7; the author of the text states that he first "read about the Sixty Martyrs in the Syrian language [Gk. *syristi*];" cf. Peeters, *Tréfonds oriental*, 21. Such references to the "Syrian language" usually mean the local dialect known as Christian Palestinian Aramaic; see Griffith, "Aramaic to Arabic," 16–24. For more on the history and languages of this text, see Auzépy, *Hagiographie et l'iconoclasme*, 196.

absence of Syriac is a complicated issue connected to Christian sectarian identity and will be addressed more thoroughly in chapter 5.

Authors and Dates

Nearly all martyrologies were composed by monks and priests, who wrote for the spiritual edification of their brethren and the lay faithful they served.⁶⁰ As we shall see in the coming chapters, their general goal was to discourage conversion to the Muslim faith and assimilation into Arabic culture by showcasing models of resistance to both forces. Thus, we must be careful not to automatically conflate the views of the clerical authors with those of the laity they served, even if it is exceptionally difficult to disentangle them. We are fortunate to know several of the biographers by name. Eulogius of Córdoba and Stephen Manṣūr of Mar Saba are the only authors known to have produced multiple martyrologies in this period.⁶¹ We know about others because they mention themselves in their own compositions, such as the Georgian churchman John Sabanisdze and the Armenian monk Abraham, who composed biographies of Abo of Tiflis and Vahan of Goht'n, respectively.⁶² Still others left only their names,⁶³ while the vast majority of works are anonymous.

The matter of authorship raises the thornier question of when martyrologies were written. Here it is difficult to make generalizations about the corpus as a whole, since dating varies widely from one text to another. Some martyrologies—including the *passions* of Cyrus, Abo, Vahan, and the Córdoba martyrs—claim to have been written only a few years after the events they describe. In many instances, however, there is no concrete information to help

⁶⁰For an overview, see Hinterberger, “Byzantine Hagiographer and His Text.”

⁶¹For the *Life of Eulogius* by Paulus Alvarus, written ca. 859, see *CSM*, i, 330–43; Eng. trans. in Sage, *Paul Albar*, 190–214. The first complete English translation of his works by Kenneth Wolf will soon appear with Liverpool University Press. On Stephen and the confusion surrounding his biography, see Auzépy, “Étienne le Sabaïte et Jean Damascène”; Johnson, “Social Presence of Greek,” 73–74. Stephen was responsible for the *Passion of the Twenty Martyrs of Mar Saba* and the *Life of Romanus* and also possibly the *Life of Bacchus*; *CMR*, i, 597, regards the author of this text as “Stephen the Deacon,” who also wrote the *Life of Stephen the Younger* (d. 764/765), the first martyr of Byzantine iconoclasm. This would place the *Life of Bacchus* in Constantinople, not Palestine.

⁶²Shurgaia, *Martirio di Abo*, 77–85; Gatteyrias, “Martyre de saint Vahan,” 212–13.

⁶³E.g., Cyrus of Ḥarrān by Joshua the Stylite: Harrak, *Chronicle of Zuqnān*, 4–8. The Greek version of the *Life of Michael of Mar Saba* by Basil of Emesa: Blanchard, “Martyrdom of Saint Michael,” 149; Peeters, “Passion de S. Michel,” 80 n. 2. On a Sabaïte monk named Basil who was present for the sack of the monastery in the late eighth century: *SPSH*, i, 2; Swanson, “Christian al-Ma'mūn Tradition,” 81. George-Muzāḥim by Mena: *CMR*, ii, 460–63. Christopher of Antioch by Ibrāhīm b. Yuhannā ʿl-Anṭāki: Zayyāt, “Vie du patriarche melkite.”

assess when they were composed. That being said, it is not impossible to derive a general sense of the temporal distance between a martyr and his or her biographer by examining extraneous information in the text, including references to places, dates, secondary characters, and outside events. A writer who knows a martyr's world very intimately—such as the author of the *Life of Peter of Capitolias* (d. 715)—probably penned the work shortly after the martyr's death, in this instance, in a monastery not far from Capitolias, possibly Mar Saba.⁶⁴ By contrast, an author who knows a martyr's world poorly or who plainly fills the text with fictional elements—such as Basil of Emesa, to whom the Greek *Life of Michael of Mar Saba* (as contained in the *Life of Theodore of Edessa*) is ascribed—probably did not compose his work in close proximity to the incident it describes.

In addition to clues in the texts, there is information about dating to be gleaned from the manuscripts. Here again, it is difficult to make generalizations on the basis of material evidence, since dating varies so significantly from one martyrology to another. With the possible exception of the *Life of Cyrus*, there are no autographs of martyrs' *lives* from the early period. The oldest manuscripts were written in Arabic and Greek and come from the ninth and tenth centuries.⁶⁵

One such manuscript—Paris Coislin 303—is especially interesting since it contains the only known copies of several Greek martyrologies, including the *passions* of the Sixty Martyrs of Jerusalem (d. 724/725), Elias of Helioupolis (d. 779; see Figure I.1), and the Twenty Martyrs of Mar Saba (d. 788/797).⁶⁶ According to André Binggeli, the manuscript was copied in Constantinople in the tenth century on the basis of an older manuscript from Jerusalem.⁶⁷ Interestingly, some of the texts in the manuscript seem to draw on older Aramaic *Vorlage* (such as the *Passion of the Sixty Martyrs*) or were possibly written by bilingual Greek/Aramaic speakers (the *Life of Elias*). These texts, however, never became popular in the imperial capital, and the cults they were meant to promote never became widespread in Byzantium at large. There are also a number of very early manuscripts in Georgian that contain original Georgian compositions as well as translations from Greek and Arabic, many of which date to the tenth century.⁶⁸

⁶⁴See chapter 3, sec. III.

⁶⁵E.g., Sinai Ar. 542 (9th c.), with the *Life of 'Abd al-Masih*: Binggeli, "Hagiographie du Sinai," 175–77; Sinai Ar. 513 (10th c.), with the *Life of Anthony*: CMR, i, 500.

⁶⁶Devreese, *Fonds Coislin*, 286–88.

⁶⁷Binggeli, "Réception de l'hagiographie palestinienne à Byzance." I am grateful to André Binggeli for sharing a draft of this article with me in advance of its publication.

⁶⁸E.g., Iviron Geo. 8 (10th c.), with the *Life of Romanus*: CMR, i, 392; Iviron Geo. 57 (10th c.), with the *lives* of Anthony, Abo, and Michael: see n. 53 above; and Sinai Geo. 11 (10th c.), with the

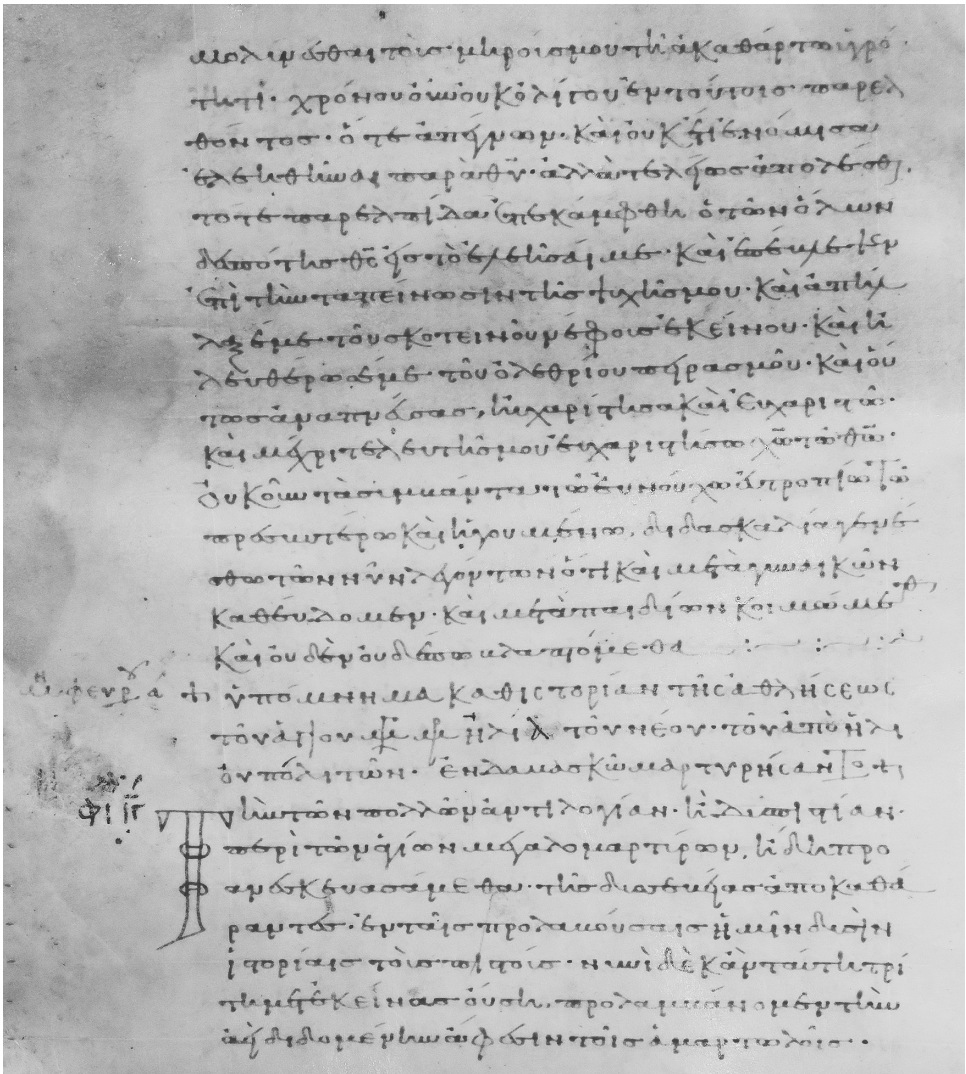


Figure I.1. First page of the *Life of Elias of Helioupolis*, BNF Coislin 303 (10th c.), fol. 236v. Photo: Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Thus, even with our earliest sources, we face a chasm of at least a century between the date of a martyrdom and the copying of the surviving manuscript. The most problematic manuscript tradition of all is that of the Córdoba martyr

Life of Abo: see n. 56 above. Along with these, there are many late Georgian and Armenian manuscripts, e.g., *CMR*, i, 282, 421, 720.

acts, which seem to have been lost between 884 and the mid-sixteenth century, when they were “rediscovered” by the bishop and inquisitor Pedro Ponce de León. After being studied by Ambrosio de Morales, they disappeared again and have never resurfaced. Thus, Morales’s 1574 edition—which shows signs of linguistic tampering—has served as the basis for all research on the Córdoba martyrs until today.⁶⁹

How we interpret the *lives* of the new martyrs depends on when we date such texts. Were most written shortly after the martyrdoms they recount, or were they products of much later periods? Here again, it would be imprudent to make sweeping generalizations about the corpus as a whole. It is simply too diverse linguistically, geographically, and confessionally to make a definitive statement one way or another. In the course of the following pages, each text will be assessed on its own to determine when it may have been written. Suffice it to say, it is my reasoned opinion that many martyrologies were products of the world they describe—and to a much greater extent than other genres of hagiographic literature, such as the early Christian *lives* that Candida Moss and other skeptical scholars regard as fabricated. Though they may have been written at a remove of several years or decades from the incidents they recount, I believe that they can tell us something useful about the world in which the martyrs lived and the one in which their biographers wrote. This is especially true when they are controlled with outside sources and read in accordance with the methodological principles outlined above.

III. TOLERANCE AND INTOLERANCE IN MEDIEVAL ISLAM

This is the first book-length study of Christian martyrdom in the early Islamic period. As such, it seeks to explore a relatively unknown aspect of the broader transition from late antiquity to the Islamic Middle Ages.⁷⁰ Historians once argued that the rise of Islam violently disrupted the rhythms of life in the late ancient Near East. Over the past decades, however, a new symphony of literary and archaeological evidence has emerged that has changed the way we see the

⁶⁹Morales, *Eulogii Cordubensis*; Colbert, *Martyrs of Córdoba*, 435–53; Wolf, *Christian Martyrs*, 36–47. However, early manuscripts of Paulus Alvarus’s *Indiculus luminosus* do survive to the present: *CMR*, i, 648.

⁷⁰See esp. Brown, *World of Late Antiquity*, 189–203; Cameron et al., *Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East*; Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*; Fowden, *Before and after Muhammad*; Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief*; Al-Azmeh, *Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity*; Bowersock, *Crucible of Islam*; etc. On the “long late antiquity,” which makes room for Islam, see Bowersock, Brown, and Grabar, *Late Antiquity*; Rousseau, *Companion to Late Antiquity*; Johnson, *Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*; Cameron, “Long Late Antiquity”; Marcone, “Long Late Antiquity?”

period.⁷¹ Far from marking a rupture with the past, the first two centuries of Islamic history have come to be seen as an extension of late antiquity—if not its triumphant denouement. This is especially true if we regard Muḥammad and the early caliphs as heirs to the Constantinian revolution—especially that distinctive marriage of empire and monotheism that Constantine brought about through his conversion in the fourth century. A by-product of this revolution was the use of state power to promote right belief and purge wrong belief. It is this violent by-product, especially in its Islamic context, that constitutes the subject of the present book.

This book also focuses on the history of Muslim-Christian relations. Despite the many exemplary works on this topic over the years, it is a subject that has traditionally lacked a vigorous engagement with social history. This is particularly true in comparison with the study of medieval Judaism, in which the documents of the Cairo Geniza have helped scholars reconstruct the daily life of Jews in the Middle East with unparalleled richness and humanity.⁷² When it comes to Christians, we have a clear picture of what was at stake in intellectual encounters at the top of society—especially in the realm of theological dialogue and debate with Muslims.⁷³ We also have a clear picture of how Muslims used legal categories to regulate their contact with non-Muslims, especially in the form of the so-called Pact of ‘Umar (Ar. *‘ahd ‘umar, al-shurūṭ al-‘umarīya*).⁷⁴ But we do not have the same grasp of what was happening on the ground.⁷⁵ This book attempts to begin filling this gap.

Amid this, it is surprising to observe that until now, there has been no book-length study of Christian martyrdom in the early Islamic period.⁷⁶ There is also no general account of anti-Christian violence under Islam comparable to the voluminous literature on Christian persecution in the Roman Empire.⁷⁷

⁷¹ See especially Pentz, *Invisible Conquest*; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan*; Schick, *Christian Communities*; Walmsley, *Early Islamic Syria*; Sijpesteijn, “Landholding Patterns”; Evans and Ratliff, *Byzantium and Islam*; Khalek, *Damascus*; King, “Why Were the Syrians Interested in Greek Philosophy?”; Tannous, “Qenneshe and the Miaphysite Church”; Avni, *Byzantine-Islamic Transition*, 311–19.

⁷² Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*.

⁷³ See the collected essays in Griffith, *Beginnings of Christian Theology in Arabic*; Griffith, *Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*; and Samir, *Foi et culture en Irak*, among many others.

⁷⁴ Tritton, *Non-Muslim Subjects*; Fattal, *Statut légal*; Levy-Rubin, *From Surrender to Coexistence*.

⁷⁵ This is beginning to change; see esp. Robinson, *Empire and Elites*; Tannous, “Syria”; Hoyland, *In God’s Path*.

⁷⁶ There are several popular accounts of the plight of Christians in the contemporary Middle East, including Dalrymple, *From the Holy Mountain*; Sennott, *Body and the Blood*; Russell, *Heirs to Forgotten Kingdoms*, esp. 215–60.

⁷⁷ For more, see n. 3 above. And on the legal dimensions of Roman persecution of Christians, see Sherwin-White, “Early Persecutions and Roman Law”; De Ste. Croix, “Aspects of the ‘Great’

Despite the novelty of the topic, this book enters a long-running debate about the question of “tolerance” and “intolerance” in premodern Islam. It is a debate that has gripped academic specialists and the general public alike, and here, it is possible to discern two broad views. At one end of the spectrum lies what I will call the “apologetic thesis,” which stresses the essential tolerance of medieval Muslim rulers toward the non-Muslim subject population. It tends to highlight verses in the Qur’an that describe the People of the Book positively (e.g., Q. *al-Baqara* 2:62 etc.), regarding these as normative for how Muslims and non-Muslims interacted throughout history; it suggests that medieval caliphs granted “freedom of religion” to Christians and Jews; it downplays the legal strictures associated with the *dhimmī* regime; it celebrates moments of *convivencia* between Muslims and others, especially in mixed areas such as al-Andalus; and it contrasts the allegedly secure status of non-Muslims in the medieval Middle East with the precarious state of Jews and other minorities in Europe at the same time.⁷⁸ At the other end of the spectrum is the “lachrymose thesis,” famously championed by the Egyptian Jewish writer Bat Ye’or (née Gisèle Littman). For Bat Ye’or (and her even more strident followers, such as Robert Spencer), non-Muslims were the despised second-class citizens of states committed to their gradual eradication, a view she believed was spelled out in the Qur’an itself (e.g., Q. *al-Mā’ida* 5:51, *al-Tawba* 9:29, etc.) and developed with zeal and vigor across the ages. Indeed, her books—which have been influential in popular as well as academic settings—consider the *longue durée* of Christian and Jewish decline in the Near East from the time of the conquests to the present as a consequence of what she calls “dhimmitude,” or the state of living as a subjugated minority.⁷⁹

Needless to say, both of these views have serious flaws. The “apologetic thesis” reads into the Qur’an anachronistic ideas of religious freedom that are borrowed from modern culture.⁸⁰ It also whitewashes the sometimes troubled history of interreligious relations in the premodern period in the interest of

Persecution”; De Ste. Croix, “Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?”; Barnes, “Legislation against the Christians.”

⁷⁸For example, Menocal, *Ornament of the World*; Morrow, *Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad*; and Alkhateeb, *Lost Islamic History*, among others. For discussion of the historiography of “tolerance” in medieval al-Andalus, see Akasoy, “*Convivencia* and Its Discontents”; Soifer, “Beyond *Convivencia*”; Fernández-Morera, *Myth of the Andalusian Paradise*.

⁷⁹Bat Ye’or, *Dhimmi*; Bat Ye’or, *Decline of Eastern Christianity*; Bat Ye’or, *Islam and Dhimmitude*. See also Spencer, *Truth about Muhammad*; Spencer, *Religion of Peace?* I borrow the term *lachrymose* from Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross*, 3–14, which focuses on the treatment of Jews; cf. Lewis, *Semites and Anti-Semites*, 117–39.

⁸⁰With special attention to the famous verse Q. *al-Baqara* 2:256, “There is no compulsion in religion [*lā ikrāha fi ’l-dīn*]”; cf. Crone, “No Compulsion in Religion.” On the late antique context, see now Leppin, “Christianity and the Discovery of Religious Freedom.”

making medieval Islam seem much more open-minded and liberal than it really was. In the process, it overlooks the manner in which premodern Muslim states did often marginalize non-Muslims, whether by imposing heavy taxes on them, criminalizing apostasy, barring them from public service, prohibiting the construction of new churches and synagogues, mandating the wearing of humiliating clothing, or enslaving native populations (parallels to which are easy to find in other medieval societies outside the Middle East). The “lachrymose thesis” goes in the opposite direction by downplaying the abundant evidence of peaceful coexistence in the medieval Middle East. At its most extreme manifestations, it does so in order to discredit Islam in the present by tethering it to a history of supposed intolerance in the past. Perhaps inadvertently, the “lachrymose thesis” commits a second error by stripping non-Muslims of historical agency. Indeed, “dhimmitude” and concepts like it treat non-Muslims as hapless victims of persecution rather than as agents with the capacity for independent action, whether resistance or accommodation.

This book attempts to tread a careful path between these two views. As martyrologies and other medieval sources make clear, Muslim-Christian relations were not always irenic. In fact, they could be extremely tense, occasionally spilling over into violence. When this did take place inside the caliphate, the violence almost always went in one direction: from Muslims to Christians and not the other way around.⁸¹ On the other hand, social and religious conflict usually took place against a backdrop of peaceful relations between communities. It is for this reason that hagiographers, chroniclers, and other medieval writers recorded bloodshed in the first place: not because it was ordinary but precisely because it was extraordinary.

IV. ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

This book is divided into five main sections. Chapter 1, “Converting to Islam and Returning to Christianity,” profiles the largest group of new martyrs, those who began life as Christians, became Muslims, and then reverted to Christianity. Among these, there were several subgroups, including Christians who converted to Islam as slaves or prisoners, Christians who converted under disputed or contingent circumstances, and martyrs who were brought up in religiously mixed families. Because of the contingent nature of this process, conversions could also be undone, leading to sizable numbers of apostates over the course of the seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries.

⁸¹ A notable exception to this involves the non-Muslim revolts discussed in chapter 4.

Chapter 2, “Converting from Islam to Christianity,” follows the preceding chapter by exploring a small and neglected group of martyrs who converted from Islam to Christianity. The chapter shows that religious change in the postconquest Middle East did not go in one direction—from the church to the mosque—by highlighting a group of martyrs who moved from the mosque to the church. After surveying the evidence of true apostasy in legal, liturgical, and historical literature, it discusses a convert who is said to have been a member of the Prophet’s tribe of Quraysh. It then profiles two Muslim martyrs from the Caucasus and a collection of apostates from Iraq, Iberia, and Egypt. The last section investigates a curious cluster of legends about the conversion of caliphs and other high-ranking Muslims to Christianity. It argues that these expressed contemporary hopes for a second “Constantinian moment,” when a new pagan ruler would convert to Christianity and restore the church’s standing in the Middle East. These and other texts show how Islamization could be a fragile process, even in a world in which Muslims enjoyed privileged access to political and social power.

Chapter 3, “Blaspheming against Islam,” investigates the third major group of martyrs, those who were executed after disparaging the Prophet. It begins with a brief overview of the evolution of antiblasphemy laws in Islam, arguing that prohibitions against blasphemy were very slow to coalesce throughout the classical period. It then examines a number of Christians who were killed for blasphemy in Egypt and the Levant, including Peter of Capitolias, whose exceptionally detailed biography has been largely unstudied until now. The final section examines the abundant evidence for blasphemy in Córdoba, the capital of al-Andalus, where forty-eight Christians were martyred between 850 and 859. It suggests that the Christians most likely to blaspheme were those who were closest to Muslims, including members of religiously mixed families, servants of the Muslim court, and individuals in religiously mixed workplaces. On the basis of this evidence, it proposes that blasphemy emerged as a specific form of Christian protest against Islamization and Arabization at a time when the number of Muslim religious scholars in al-Andalus was on the rise and debate between members of the two religions was intensifying. This, in turn, sensitized Christians at all levels of society to the differences between the two faiths, thereby encouraging them to disparage Islam ever more effectively.

Chapter 4, “Trying and Killing Christian Martyrs,” investigates how the *lives* of the martyrs represent judicial procedure and criminal punishments. It argues that the state was dependent on private networks of informants—including relatives and friends—to root out apostates and blasphemers. It then

shows how state officials could be exceptionally cautious in prosecuting religious criminals but, once they established their guilt, how they could be exceptionally brutal in punishing them. It suggests that the state used specific punishments derived from the Qur'an (esp. Q. *al-Mā'ida* 5:33, the "Hirāba Verse") at an early date, along with other controversial punishments that were hotly debated by Muslim jurists. The most important of these was the burning of corpses. The chapter suggests that the state developed a coherent approach for punishing a wide array of religious dissidents, as evidenced by the striking parallels between the executions of Christian martyrs and Muslim heretics, especially the leaders of Shī'ī and Khārijī revolts. It concludes by arguing that violence was limited in its scope and aimed at two specific goals: securing Muslims' place at the top of the religiously mixed society they ruled and countering a widespread culture of boundary-crossing. Indeed, the need to contain potential unrest and clamp down on perceived lawlessness seems to have underlain much of the state's brutality.

Chapter 5, "Creating Saints and Communities," considers what hagiography meant as a genre of literature in the postconquest period. It investigates the rhetorical goals of these texts, arguing that many were written by monks and priests to discourage conversion to Islam and to condemn Christians who were drawn too closely to Arab culture. It then suggests that the martyrologies enshrined the views of one side of an intra-Christian debate about the threats of Islamization and Arabization. Developing a thesis first introduced by historians of the Córdoba martyrs, it proposes that hagiographers across the Middle East were advocates of a "rejectionist" tendency that looked warily upon the religion and culture of the conquerors. These "rejectionists," in turn, encouraged Christians to preserve their identity by quarantining themselves from Muslims and, when necessary, by taking public stands against Islam through acts of blasphemy. The views of their ideological opponents, the "accommodationists," do not survive explicitly, though judging from the complaints of the "rejectionists," it seems that they held more permissive attitudes toward Islamization and Arabization and more readily went with the tides of change. Furthermore, it seems that they saw greater benefit in making peace with Muslims than in protesting against them through behaviors like martyrdom. The chapter concludes by imagining how these two orientations—if they ever existed as such—may have mapped onto certain social and confessional categories. These include distinctions between urban and rural communities, secular clergy and monks, and Melkite, West Syrian (Miaphysite), and East Syrian churches. The chapter explains how and why Melkites—the Chalcedonian Christians of the Middle East who remained in communion with

Constantinople after the conquests—took to martyrology-writing more enthusiastically than their rivals in other denominations, arguing that this had to do with their fall from grace after hundreds of years of imperial patronage.

The conclusion considers the chronology of the martyrdoms as a way of measuring the pace of Islamization and Arabization in the postconquest period. It suggests that the apparent surge in violence between 750 and 800 may have come about as Muslims and Christians began interacting with each other for the very first time as members of a shared society, rather than as rulers and subjects in a divided world, as they had done for much of the immediate post-conquest period. This, in turn, destabilized relations between the two communities, giving rise to new anxieties about social and religious differentiation. The final pages consider the legacy of the martyrs from the Middle Ages to the present, as well as the role martyrs played in the process of community formation for various emergent sects in the early medieval period, Christian and Muslim alike. Appendix 1 presents information about the neomartyrs contained in Muslim texts, while appendix 2 offers a glossary of key names and concepts.