

Arabic as a Christian Language?

The title of this essay, “Arabic as a Christian Language?”, requires some explanation. Why the question mark? We know that there were Arabic-speaking Christians in the Arabian Peninsula before the rise of Islam, including poets such as ‘Adīy b. Zayd, in whose stanzas we find allusions to stories from the Christian scriptures. In our own day there are millions of Christians in the Middle East who celebrate their liturgies and say their daily prayers in the Arabic language. That Arabic has long been, and continues to be, a language of Christian worship, story-telling, catechesis and reflection is simply a matter of fact.

It is a matter of fact, however, that strikes many as a surprising, or even an *improper* fact -- hence the question mark. Arabic as a *Christian* language?? Surely Arabic, the language of the holy Qur’ān, is supremely the language of *Islam*! I have met Muslims from outside the Middle East who are surprised to learn that there are Christians who address their Arabic prayers to *Allāh*, and who praise Him in their hymns with many of the ninety-nine most beautiful names. Furthermore, we sometimes meet Arabic-speaking Christians within the Middle East who speak as if their use of Arabic in worship were merely a concession to unfortunate realities. For example, for several years I have been a member of a group called “The Friends of the Arabic Christian Heritage,” which hosts an annual public conference in Cairo. In general these conferences are well received, but at every conference we can expect at least one Egyptian Christian participant to criticize the *name* of our society: the juxtaposition of the words “Arabic” and “Christian,” we are told, is improper. Strictly speaking, we are told, Arabic is an Islamic language; the proper Egyptian Christian language is Coptic. So we are told. The

sad irony in this is that many of the people who speak like this know only a few liturgical phrases and hymns in the Coptic language: they have no real competence in Coptic, and yet are alienated from their Arabic mother tongue.

In this essay I will briefly describe and discuss the adoption of the Arabic language by the Christian communities of the Middle East, communities that at the time of the Arab conquests spoke languages such as Syriac, Aramaic and Greek, and Coptic. In my second essay I will mention some ways in which conversation between Christian and Muslim thinkers was enabled by their common Arabic tongue, and by their joint participation in the intellectual projects of developing Arabic civilization.

The early Islamic conquests - continuity of church life

Within ten years of the death of Muḥammad (A.D. 632), most of Palestine, Syria, Mesopotamia and Egypt had fallen to the Arab Muslim armies. The Christians of the region, who were the majority of the population, suddenly found themselves as subject peoples within a rapidly-expanding Islamic empire. Naturally, the rapid political and social changes brought about by the Islamic conquests were experienced by many Christians as disorienting and traumatic. However, some results of the Islamic conquests were liberating for some Christians. In particular, the Islamic conquests resulted in the "disestablishment" of the Chalcedonian Christianity supported and, when possible, imposed by a succession of Byzantine emperors. This resulted in a new freedom of operation for anti-Chalcedonian Christian communities, including the Copts of Egypt, which had experienced coercive pressure and even persecution from the Byzantine authorities. It was the Islamic conquest of Egypt under ‘Amr ibn al-‘Āṣ that enabled the

Coptic patriarch Benjamin to resume his public role after ten years of hiding from the agents of the Byzantine emperor Heraclius. The story of the friendly meeting between the Muslim general ‘Amr and the Coptic patriarch Benjamin is familiar to every Egyptian schoolchild, and is regularly invoked in discussions of *al-waḥdah al-waṭaniyyah* (“national unity”), the quasi-official Egyptian doctrine of interreligious harmony within a single Egyptian national identity.

It is important to stress the fact that there was a high degree of continuity of church life in the Middle East between the periods before and after the Islamic conquests. There was no rush by Christians to convert to Islam. With only a few rare exceptions noted by Christian chroniclers, the Muslims did not compel anyone to convert to their faith. With the passage of time there did develop pressures on Christians to assimilate themselves to their Arab Muslim rulers, but these were mostly subtle rather than overt, and, at least at the beginning, more linguistic and cultural than specifically confessional in character.

Arabic as the language of Christians

The Muslim Arabs who conquered much of the Christian East in the 630s and 640s -- and who less than a century later extended their conquests to Christian Spain -- spoke Arabic, a language which for them had been sanctified by the revelation of the Qur’ān, understood to be the very words of God “in clear Arabic speech.” Fairly quickly, the use of Arabic became established throughout the *Dār al-Islām*, and not only as a language of piety and worship. By the year A.D. 697, the Umayyad caliph ‘Abd al-Malik’s coinage reform had resulted in the minting of gold dinars bearing Arabic

inscriptions. About a decade later, ‘Abd al-Malik’s son Walīd decreed Arabic to be the official language of public administration. Arabic rapidly assumed an important role in trade within the vast expanses of Islamic territory that stretched from the Atlantic to Central Asia. And finally, by the second Islamic century Arabic was becoming the medium of a new and appealing literary culture.

For all these reasons -- the use of Arabic in the civil service, in trade, and in cultural life -- a knowledge of the Arabic language became a key to upward social mobility within the *Dār al-Islām*. Therefore, it was inevitable that, with the passage of time, Christians within the Islamic world would learn Arabic -- whether the Syriac-speakers of Syria and Mesopotamia, or the Aramaic-speakers of Palestine (who prayed in Greek), or the Coptic-speakers of Egypt, or the Latin-speakers of Andalusia. Not only would they themselves learn Arabic, but they would teach it to their children, the better to prosper within the New Islamic World Order.

It is a striking fact that with the passage of the generations many Christians would not only *gain* competence in Arabic, but also *lose* competence in the traditional Christian language of their region. This loss of linguistic competence is not a *necessary* consequence of Arabization. Indeed, the Syriac-speaking churches provide good examples of communities in which *both* Syriac *and* Arabic were cultivated. But in other communities, Arabic simply displaced the traditional tongues. In Palestine, Aramaic appears to have given way to Arabic already in the eighth century; certainly, by the end

of that century many of the most creative Christian minds in the monasteries of Palestine were devoting themselves to the production of a Christian literature in Arabic.⁽¹⁾

It is Egypt that provides us with the best evidence for the language shift to Arabic, largely because Egypt's desert sand preserves papyrus documents so very well.⁽²⁾ The study of these documents indicates that Egyptian Christians at first clung to their Coptic language more tenaciously than Palestinian Christians had held on to their Aramaic. Around the year A.D. 1050, the evidence of the papyri indicates that most Egyptian Christians knew Coptic, and used Arabic reluctantly. But by the year A.D. 1200, a mere century and a half later, the Coptic language was practically dead! From this time on, the documents of everyday life⁽³⁾ are overwhelmingly in Arabic. The clergy still *studied* Coptic, but most of them could write it only with the help of grammars and dictionaries, many of which were produced during the Egyptian Christian literary renaissance -- an *Arabic* renaissance, let it be added -- of the 13th century A.D. As in Palestine, although some centuries later, Christians had gained competence in Arabic but had lost competence in the traditional language of the Christian community.

Objections

More evidence of the language shift comes in literary sources, where we hear some sharp reactions to the phenomenon. Consider, for example, the following passage

⁽¹⁾ Professor Sidney Griffith of the Catholic University in America has written many articles on this subject. See, for example, his "The Monks of Palestine and the Growth of Christian Literature in Arabic," *The Muslim World* 78 (1988): 2-28.

⁽²⁾ On the evidence of the papyri for the linguistic shift, see the work of Leslie S. B. MacCoull, especially her "Three Cultures under Arab Rule: The Fate of Coptic," *Bulletin de la Société d'Archéologie Copte* 27 (1985): 61-70, and "The Strange Death of Coptic Culture," *Coptic Church Review* 10 (1989): 35-43.

⁽³⁾ A.D. 1246 is the date of the latest known marriage contract in the Coptic language.

of Paul Alvarus, a Christian of Andalusia who wrote in the mid-ninth century A.D. He bewails the fact that young Christians were cultivating Arabic, and neglecting Latin:⁽⁴⁾

The Christians love to read the poems and romances of the Arabs; they study the Arab theologians and philosophers, not to refute them but to form a correct and elegant Arabic. Where is the layman who now reads the Latin commentaries on the Holy Scriptures, or who studies the Gospels, prophets or apostles? Alas! all talented young Christians read and study with enthusiasm the Arab books; they gather immense libraries at great expense; they despise the Christian literature as unworthy of attention. *They have forgotten their language.* For every one who can write a letter in Latin to a friend, there are a thousand who can express themselves in Arabic with elegance, and write better poems in this language than the Arabs themselves.

A yet more vehement objection to Christian adoption of Arabic comes from Egypt, in an apocalyptic text -- perhaps of the 11th century A.D.? -- whose anonymous author puts his words into the mouth of a seventh century Coptic saint, Samuel of the Monastery of Qalamoun. According to the story, Samuel complains about the future of the Coptic church as follows:⁽⁵⁾

[The Christians] do something else, that if I were to tell you of it your hearts would be greatly pained: they are abandoning their beautiful Coptic language, in which the Holy Spirit has spoken many times through the mouths of the holy spiritual fathers, and they are teaching their children from infancy to speak the language of the Arabs, and to take pride in it! Even the priests and monks -- they as well! -- dare to speak in Arabic and to take pride in it, and that within the sanctuary! Woe upon woe!!

⁽⁴⁾ Cited in R.W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962), p. 21. Emphasis added.

⁽⁵⁾ Translated from the Arabic text in: J. Ziadeh, "L'apocalypse de Samuel, supérieur de Deir-el-Qalamoun," *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien* 20 (1915-1917): 379-80, 384.

O my beloved children, what shall I say in these times, when readers in the Church do not understand what they are reading, or what they are saying, because they have forgotten their language? These truly are miserable people, deserving of being wept over, because they have forgotten their language and speak the language of the *hijra*.

But woe to every Christian who teaches his son the language of the *hijra* from his infancy, and causes him to forget the language of his fathers! ...

Many books of the Church shall fall into disuse, because there shall not remain among [the Christians] anyone who is concerned with [these] books, because their hearts shall incline to the Arabic books. ...

[An elderly monk said to Samuel:] “Understand what I tell you, my son. At the time when the Christians shall have the audacity to speak the language of the *hijra* inside the sanctuary woe to the Christians at that time! Woe multiplied seven-fold!”⁽⁶⁾

The great irony of this text, which was written in Coptic, is that it is preserved only in Arabic translation!

As the tone of the works just cited makes clear, there was strong opposition in some quarters -- perhaps especially among Christian monks -- to the adoption of Arabic by Christians. *The Apocalypse of Samuel* reveals an attitude that (as I have already pointed out) may be found in Egypt to the present day: Arabic is the language of the Muslims; *Coptic* is the proper language of Egyptian Christians.

⁽⁶⁾ For the use of Arabic *in church* we have evidence already from the beginning of the eighth century: a parchment leaf from a book once used in the Church of St. John the Baptist in Damascus before its conversion to a mosque under the Umayyad caliph Walid b ‘Abd al-Malik (A.D. 705-715). The manuscript leaf preserves a text written in Greek characters, but which makes no sense as Greek. Reading the text aloud, however, it turns out to be *Arabic* -- an ancient Arabic translation of Psalm 78. Presumably it was written with Greek letters so that a priest ignorant of Arabic script could read the psalm to Arabic-speakers in the congregation. See Rachid Haddad, “La phonétique de l’arabe chrétien vers 700” in: Pierre Canivet and Jean-Paul Rey-Coquais (eds.), *La Syrie de Byzance à l’Islam, VII^e-VIII^e siècles* (Damascus: Institut Français de Damas, 1992), pp. 159-64.

Language and faith

As we already know, such opposition to Christian use of Arabic was to no avail. In Palestine, in Egypt, as far away as Andalusia, Christians living within the *Dār al-Islām* did adopt Arabic -- the language that had become the key to upward socio-economic mobility and to a promising future for one's children.

The text from *The Apocalypse of Samuel* that we have just read, however, points to a serious consequence of the language shift for the Christian community: in the words of the apocalypse, “readers in the Church do not understand what they are reading.” “Many books of the Church shall fall into disuse.” Rapid language shift would have serious consequences for Christian education and formation in a church accustomed to prayer and instruction in a particular language, once that language was dying! In 11th century Egypt, for example, the Bible, the liturgy, and most Christian books were in Coptic -- but people were *forgetting* Coptic. And from the standpoint of Christian teachers and pastors, the problem was exacerbated by the fact that the newly adopted Arabic language was *not* religiously neutral, but already the language of Islamic devotion and reflection. As Christians lost competence in the old languages and adopted Arabic, they came to absorb specifically Islamic teachings almost as if by osmosis. Here is how one Christian teacher, a Copt in (I believe) the 11th century, described the situation to a correspondent:⁽⁷⁾

You mentioned in the letter that you sent me that you are in great confusion about the Trinity and Unity of God's hypostases, how they are three, and how they are one. And

⁽⁷⁾ From the introduction to the first chapter of the *Kitāb al-Īdāh* (“The Book of the Elucidation”) attributed -- I believe falsely -- to Sāwīrus ibn al-Muqaffa‘ (mid-10th century); my translation of the Arabic text in Paris ar. 170, f. 5^r.

you asked that I explain the truth of this to you, and also the truth of the Incarnation of the Son of God. and his crucifixion, and the reason for that . . .

I tell you that the reason for the concealment of this mystery from the believers at this time is their mingling with the *ḥunafā'* [i.e., the Muslims], and the disappearance of their [Coptic] language, through which they know the truth of their religion. It has come to be the case that they do not hear any mention of “the Trinity” among themselves except rarely; nor do they hear any mention of “the Son of God” except in a metaphorical sense. Instead, most of what they hear is that God is *fard, ṣamad*, and the rest of the language that the *ḥunafā'* use. The believers have become accustomed to this, and have been raised with it, so that the mention of “the Son of God” has come to be difficult for them; they do not know any interpretation or meaning for it.

To put the matter simply, during the period of language shift many Christians could no longer understand what was being said in church, but could understand perfectly well what was being said at the mosque. There can be no surprise that eventually many Christians within the *Dār al-Islām* converted to Islam -- a process that began in earnest in some parts of the 'Abbasid Empire in the late eighth century, and in Egypt a little later, according to the historical demographic studies of Prof. Richard Bulliet.⁽⁸⁾

Arabic as a Christian language!

However, it was also in the late eighth century that Christian teachers and pastors began to respond to the arabization of Christian communities seriously by creating a Christian literature *in Arabic*.⁽⁹⁾ Many of these early Arabic Christian texts were translations from Greek or from Syriac, especially of the Scriptures, the lives of the saints

⁽⁸⁾ Richard W. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979).

⁽⁹⁾ The oldest *dated* Arabic Christian text is a Greek martyrdom account translated into Arabic in A.H. 155 (A.D. 772). See Sidney H. Griffith, “Greek into Arabic: Life and Letters in the Monasteries of Palestine in the Ninth Century,” *Byzantion* 56 (1986): 117-38 (among other important essays).

and martyrs, and the homilies of the church fathers. In this way, many of the chief texts used in the formation of Christian imagination and character came to be available in Arabic.⁽¹⁰⁾

However, the earliest Arabic Christian literature was not just a literature of translation -- as important as these translations were for the future of Christianity in the Middle East. Toward the end of the eighth century A.D. Christian thinkers also began to *compose* works of theology and of Christian edification in Arabic. We shall look at the character of some of these works in my second essay. For now, let us look at the introduction to an Arabic Christian theological treatise sometimes called "On the Triune Nature of God." This work is preserved in a manuscript written around the year A.D. 800 and preserved at the Monastery of St. Catherine at Mount Sinai as *Sinai Arabic 154*. Keep in mind that the author is a *Christian* theologian, who writes *in order to explain Christian doctrine*, as you listen to the language of the introduction to his book:⁽¹¹⁾

Praise be to God

before whom there was nothing,
and He was before all things;
after whom there is nothing,
and He is the Heir of all things,
and to Him is the destiny of all things;
who has preserved in His knowledge the knowledge of all things
(and nothing but His knowledge is vast enough for this);
in whose knowledge all things come to their end;
and who has numbered all things in His knowledge.

⁽¹⁰⁾ The primary resource for studying this material is: Georg Graf, *Geschichte des christlichen arabischen Literatur*, Vol. I (Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1944). Fr. Samir Khalil Samir, sj, has taken upon himself the ambitious project of updating this volume.

⁽¹¹⁾ My translation from *Sinai Arabic 154*, f. 99^r, previously published in Mark N. Swanson, "Beyond Proof-texting: Approaches to the Qur'an in Some Early Arabic Christian Apologies," *The Muslim World* 88 (1998): 305-8. An edition of the Arabic text of the manuscript, with an English translation, was published a century ago by Margaret Dunlop Gibson, *An Arabic Version of the Acts of the Apostles and the Seven Catholic Epistles, from an Eighth or Ninth Century MS in the Convent of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai, with a Treatise 'On the Triune Nature of God'*, *Studia Sinaitica* 7 (London: C.J. Clay and Sons, 1899). It is Mrs. Gibson who gave the apologetic treatise the title "On the Triune Nature of God."

We ask you, O God, by your mercy and power,
that you make us to be among those who know your Truth,
who follow your good pleasure,
and who avoid your wrath;
who give praise using your most beautiful names,
and who speak using your most sublime similitudes.

You are the merciful one, the merciful Lord of mercy.

You sat on the throne,
were exalted above all creatures,
and filled all things.

You give preference to what you will,
but are not subject to others' preferring;
you establish your judgements,
but are not subject to others' judging;
you have no need of us,
but we are in need of you.

You are near to the one who draws near to you,
and responsive to the one who calls upon you and prays to you.

For you, O God, are Lord of all things,
and God of all things,
and Creator of all things.

Open our mouths,
loose our tongues,
soften our hearts,
and lay open our breasts,
that we might praise your noble Name,
which is exalted and great,
blessed and holy!

There is no God before you,
and no God after you.

To you is the destiny [of all things],
and all things are in the disposal of your power.

From the opening "Praise be to God" (*al-ḥamdu li-llāh*), through the praise of God as "the merciful Lord of mercy" who "sat on the Throne" (*ar-raḥmānu r-raḥīm / 'alā l-'arshi stawayta*), to the closing "To you is the destiny of all things, and all things are in the disposal of your power" (*ilayka l-maṣīr / wa-anta 'alā kulli shay'in qadīr*), the

passage is full of Qur'ānic citations, near-citations, and echoes.⁽¹²⁾ Throughout the treatise, the anonymous Christian author demonstrates that he has savored and absorbed the language of the Qur'ān, and he uses it in a way that (I believe) is not at all artificial or stilted, but comes from the heart.

In this and many other texts, we see that Arabic had not merely become a language used by Christians solely when the circumstances of their daily life demanded it. Arabic had become a Christian language. As early as the eighth century A.D., Christian thinkers and teachers in Palestine and Sinai had discovered that the language of the Qur'ān could be used -- by Christians! -- for the praise of God, for petition, and for reflection upon and defense of their faith.

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⁽¹²⁾ In fact, in my article mentioned in the previous footnote I pointed out twenty-two words or phrases with clear Qur'anic parallels.