

1-1-2008

Review: Sidney Griffith, *the Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton, 2008)

Kenneth Baxter Wolf
Pomona College

Recommended Citation

Wolf, K. (2009). Sidney H. griffith. the church in the shadow of the mosque: Christians and muslims in the world of islam. *The American Historical Review*, 114(1), 251-252. DOI: 10.1086/ahr.114.1.251

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Pomona Faculty Scholarship at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pomona Faculty Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu.

mentioned it in order to convince his audience that Stalin was not guilty of every evil of which he has been accused. The chapters on the direct military involvement of Red Army, Navy, and Air Force advisers, again backed by solid archival work, demonstrate that the contributions they made were important, even vital in some situations, but in no way gave the USSR the kind of leverage over the Spanish that some have maintained. In fact, the author shows the military effort of the USSR was beset by chronic problems inhibiting cooperation such as language difficulties—there was always a shortage of translators—and cultural and social problems. Domineering and patronizing attitudes on the part of Soviet advisers also contributed to a certain level of ineffectiveness.

The author only hints at direct answers to the issues of Stalin's position of weakness and the context of failure. The weaknesses are primarily the difficulties the Soviets faced in transporting armaments to Spain through the Nationalist blockade and closed French-Spanish border; the self-imposed secrecy of the involvement of Soviet servicemen in the fighting; and language, cultural, and social barriers. It is impossible for the reader to judge the context of failure, because we are not told what the measure of success would have been from Stalin's perspective, which is precisely the major obstacle to advancing the historiographical debate: no one knows what Stalin's intentions were in the first place. Nevertheless, Kowalsky's work leads one to agree that Stalin was working from a position of weakness—that the long arm of Stalinist manipulation and control was simply not long enough to dominate in Spain, if indeed that was his intention. The most important contribution of this book is made inadvertently: it shows that Stalin was at all times working from a position of indecision. Evidence of Stalin's indecisiveness and lack of definite purpose does more to undercut the abandonment thesis than any argument yet put forth. Kowalsky's efforts are to be commended and the book is overall a worthwhile read, but it leaves the reader with more questions than answers.

The electronic features of this book are quite good, consisting of photos, video clips, and audio clips. The footnoting features are first rate.

ROGER REESE
Texas A&M University

MIDDLE EAST AND NORTHERN AFRICA

SIDNEY H. GRIFFITH. *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam*. (Jews, Christians, and Muslims from the Ancient to the Modern World.) Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008. Pp. xiii, 220. \$35.00.

Sidney H. Griffith's timely book surveys the intellectual legacy of those Christians living under Muslim rule who wrote in Arabic, as opposed to Greek, Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, or Latin, during the Abbasid caliphate (750–1258). As the author sees it, the lingering tendency on

the part of modern scholars to write off the experience of the so-called "Oriental churches" as irrelevant to the dominant narrative of church history has not only done a disservice to our understanding of the past, but has deprived the modern world of the chance to benefit from the experiences of those medieval Christians who engaged Islam from the inside.

The book begins with a historical overview of the rise of Islam within its largely Christian Near Eastern context. The Eastern churches that had struggled to define themselves vis-à-vis the orthodoxy pronounced at the Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon found more latitude under Muslim rule. Indeed, the so-called Nestorian, Jacobite, and Melkite churches would achieve their fullest bloom on Muslim soil, articulating their differences from each other as well as from Islam in Arabic. In the process of rendering their sacred texts into Arabic and mounting apologetic responses to the ever-present threat of Islamization, theologians from these churches were obliged not only to understand Islam but to adopt its theological vocabulary and its theological discourse (*kalam*) for their own purposes.

The earliest Arabic Christian *apologia*, an anonymous treatise on the Trinity written around 755, exemplified many of the themes and techniques that would dominate Arabo-Christian apologetics for the next five centuries, including its reliance on the "vocabulary and thought patterns of the Qur'an" (p. 56). By the middle of the eighth century, each of the dominant Eastern churches under Islamic rule had produced a theologian of its own who wrote in Arabic: the Melkite Theodore Abu Qurrah (d. ca. 830), the Jacobite Habib ibn Khidmih Abu Ra'itah (d. ca. 851), and the Nestorian Ammar al Basri (d. ca. 850). A century later, the Coptic church would add the works of Severus ibn al-Muqaffa (d. 987) to the growing body of Arabic Christian apologetic, although the bulk of Egyptian writings of this type would not appear until the thirteenth century. Not as prolific, Spanish Christian theologians are known to have written in Arabic as early as the late ninth century, with actual texts surviving from the twelfth century.

The agenda of these apologists was for the most part consistent with those of their non-Arabic speaking counterparts: to defend the doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation, the two principal targets of Muslim polemic, and to undercut Islam by challenging the status of its prophet, decrying its lack of miracles, and disparaging its supposed reliance on force to win converts. As Griffith sees it, such texts were designed not only to "sustain the faith of Christians living in that world" but also to "commend the reasonable credibility of Christianity to their Muslim neighbors in their own religious idiom" (p. 105). With this dual purpose in mind, it is not surprising that the arabophone apologists distinguished themselves from their Greek and Latin counterparts by soft-peddalling their critiques of Islam, dispensing with the unbridled invective that characterized Christian views of Islam from a distance.

As Griffith observes, many of the arabophone Christian intellectuals who left behind apologetic treatises

were active participants in the philosophical revolution that Abbasid Baghdad was experiencing at the time. The Nestorian physician and philosopher Hunayn ibn Ishaq (d. 873), best known for overseeing a prolific team of translators in Baghdad, participated in an influential epistolary debate about Muhammad's status as a prophet. Yahya ibn Adi (d. 974), a Jacobite student of al-Farabi, was renowned in Baghdad as a logician but spent much of his time composing works in defense of Christian doctrine. Though none of these Christian philosophers ever gave an inch as far as his religious affiliations were concerned, Griffith is right to draw attention to the philosophical common ground that Muslim and Christian intellectuals shared and the possibilities this presented for interfaith dialogue.

Although a work of history, this book does not shy away from drawing lessons designed for a twenty-first-century audience. The experiences and writings of Arabo-Christian philosophers like Hunayn ibn Ishaq and Yahya ibn Adi embody for Griffith a kind of philosophically based *convivencia* that he believes points the way toward a modern reprise. He calls on Christians living under Muslim rule today to revive their proud heritage and "lead their coreligionists in the rest of the world into a renewed Muslim/Christian dialogue" (p. 4). The unique experience of this community, on the one hand cultivating good relations with Muslims and on the other making sense of their own traditions using the very idiom of Islam, has given its members a special kind of wisdom from which Christians living in other parts of the world could benefit. One does not have to share this level of optimism to appreciate the value of Griffith's book.

KENNETH BAXTER WOLF
Pomona College

CHRISTOPHER MACEVITT, *The Crusades and the Christian World of the East: Rough Tolerance*. (The Middle Ages Series.) Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. Pp. vi, 272. \$49.95.

This important book offers a major reappraisal of how crusaders interacted with the indigenous Christian communities with whom they came into contact in the East. Christopher MacEvitt is keen to set aside the commonly held view that the Franks treated the local Christians as heretics and second-class citizens, arguing that, at least in the twelfth century, there was a considerable measure of mutual respect and cooperation, and that the gulf between the Frankish Catholic Christians and the rest of society under Latin rule (in which Eastern Christians probably outnumbered Muslims) would not have been unbridgeable. That is not to say that everything was always cosy, but the perceived differences between the Franks and the Melkites, Armenians, and Jacobites, to mention only the more numerous of the various groups, were more a matter of language than religious belief. What was achieved was a working arrangement in which the different religious or ethnic groups coexisted in what MacEvitt calls

"rough tolerance." In this respect the Franks proved far more amenable to the adherents of the non-Chalcedonian Christian confessions than the Byzantines had been.

The chapters dealing with northern Syria are particularly impressive. The author's analysis of the relations between the counts of Edessa, the princes of Antioch, and the local Armenian warlords explains much of the political and military dynamics of their shared struggle against Turkish encroachments. It was by working with the local Christians and adopting a style of rule not so different from that of the various Armenian chieftains that the Franks succeeded in maintaining their authority, at least until the fall of Edessa in 1144, an event that weakened the position of all the Christian groups significantly. Less persuasive, although still of considerable interest, is the discussion of the situation further south in the Kingdom of Jerusalem. The lack of surviving sources generated by the Melkites or other indigenous Christian groups there, and the fact that Eastern Christians appear infrequently in the Latin sources, create problems of interpretation. MacEvitt attempts to get the most out of what little there is, but alternative conclusions to questions such as the status and role of Meletos, the bishop of Gaza, could be advanced, while the evidence he adduces for Frankish patronage of Melkite religious foundations in Palestine is tenuous. It is a pity no use was made of the recent edition of John of Ibelin's *Le Livre des Assises* (2003): the new reading (especially pp. 138–139) would have bolstered the arguments MacEvitt advances.

It is a measure of the importance of this book that the reader is left wanting more. In particular the growth of Latin intransigence toward the Eastern confessions might have been explored further, although admittedly such an enquiry would go beyond the author's self-imposed time span into the thirteenth century. In this connection it would have been interesting to know how MacEvitt, who has made such an excellent analysis of the works of Matthew of Edessa and Michael the Great (or Michael the Syrian), understands William of Tyre. William wrote with the purpose of justifying the achievements of the Latins in the East in the eyes of Western prelates: was that sufficient reason for making the Eastern Christians almost invisible in the pages of his magnum opus, and how did his ambivalent attitude to the Byzantine Empire relate to this question? Moving beyond the end of the Third Crusade, mention is made of Jacques de Vitry as representative of a harsher attitude toward Eastern Christians, but how did the Fourth Lateran Council and the rise of the mendicant orders contribute to creating a new climate of opinion? In Cyprus, occupied by the Franks from 1191, it looks as if the rulers allowed "rough tolerance" to govern relations between the separate Greek and Latin hierarchies for the next thirty years; it was only in the early 1220s that Pelagio Galvani, the papal legate fresh from leading the Fifth Crusade to humiliating defeat, insisted on the subordination of the Orthodox to the Latins, setting the two main religious groups on the island