

how the BJP should react to this dilemma is probably the issue at the root of its present conflicts.

5. For instance, Arun Shourie, *Harvesting Our Souls: Missionaries, Their Design, Their Claims* (New Delhi: ASA Publications, 2000).
6. This is not least so in the lively daily and periodical press—in newspapers like *The Hindu* (in spite of its name) and the *Deccan Herald* and in the fortnightly news magazine *Frontline*.
7. All Christians interested in the history of mission in India should have an eye open for literature that helps to explain the nature and appeal of popular Hinduism. A good example is a book by anthropologist and photographer Stephen P. Huyler, *Meeting God: Elements of Hindu Devotion* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1999).
8. Over the last twenty years mission alignments in this part of Europe

have become so complex that I should perhaps make clear that the heritage of the Basel Mission in the West has been divided, for all practical purposes, between Mission 21 in Basel and the Evangelisches Missionswerk in Südwestdeutschland (EMS, Association of Missions and Churches in South-Western Germany) in Stuttgart. These have inherited, respectively, the Swiss and German parts of the movement that grew up in support of the Basel Mission. Responsibility for contact with the former Basel Mission fields has been divided between these two organizations, and it is EMS in Stuttgart that carries on the work of the Basel Mission in India in ways appropriate to the situation since 1947 and in partnership with the Church of South India.

## Christians in the Age of Islamic Enlightenment: A Review Essay

Lamin Sanneh

Emerging bedraggled from imperial repression and reeling from the sudden inrush of Greek science and philosophy, Christianity achieved at the hands of Constantine a measure of guarded cohesion before splintering further under Justinian in the sixth century. The Christological controversy, which had taken its toll by the time of the rise of Islam in the seventh century, survived into the Islamic phase with renewed vigor. Rather than flinching, the fledgling Islamic movement set upon the Christian world from two different directions: from without, by the sequestration of territory, in the east against Byzantium and in the west against Spain; and from within, by Islamic criticism of Christian Scripture and of Christian doctrines. In the centuries following the collapse of the Roman Empire, Christianity was consolidating its hold on the Mediterranean before the rise of Islam in the seventh century challenged it seriously. In time, the caliphate proceeded to hold the papacy to ransom for a hundred years, and for much longer Europe danced to the tune of the caliph and, later, to that of the Sublime Porte in Istanbul. Meanwhile, Islam held tenaciously to the view that Christianity is a corrupted religion whose doctrines are invalid. Muslims may for expedience tolerate Christians, but they may not countenance the religion. Split in that fashion, Christians were granted protected status as a matter of social policy while the religion remained under legal restriction. Nowhere is the double fact of territorial disinheritance and religious disqualification more evident than in Bethlehem, Jesus' birthplace and for centuries belonging in the Muslim sphere. It continues to lie on the remote, exotic rim

of the Christian world, and therefore of Christian consciousness. No such fate overtook Mecca, Muhammad's birthplace, thanks to Islam's territorial ascendancy and to the institution of the annual pilgrimage rite.

Befuddled historians since Edward Gibbon have tried in vain to explain the surprising ease and rapidity with which Islam overwhelmed Christianity in its heartlands. By contrast, it is much easier to account for the changes that left only traces of Christianity in their wake and where the outcome is self-evident. Islam's territorial gains in Egypt, the Near East, North Africa, and Constantinople, for example, are permanent and as easily accounted for. Yet in its cumulative historical expansion and in its contention against the incarnation and the Trinity, Islam has pursued the church everywhere, mounting an attack on the doctrinal system that has sustained Christianity both long before the rise of Islam and subsequently.

Once the Muslims succeeded in breaking down Byzantine power, they exposed the Greek intellectual structure of Christian thought by demanding an answer to Islam's objections to the church's teaching. Since the church employed Greek ideas and concepts in propounding its doctrines, Muslim scholars could employ the same ideas in attack once they gained access to Greek philosophical sources from the ninth century, which is precisely what happened with the scholastics of Islam, among them the Mu'tazilites. The Mu'tazilites were prickly defenders of God's unity and oneness, which put them at loggerheads with Christian teachings, but also with mainstream Islamic orthodoxy in respect to the subordinate status the Mu'tazilites gave the Qur'an in preserving the divine unity. The Mu'tazilites floundered on the issue of the Qur'an. In any case, it helped the Islamic argument of falsehood that such Christians as Nestorians, Jacobites, and Melkites, for example, were in bitter contention among themselves, and it did not escape the attention of the theologians that the language of Christianity was the language of the pagan Greeks and Romans, not the language of Jesus. It is interesting that in Muslim arguments there is little interest in

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### Christian Doctrines in Islamic Theology.

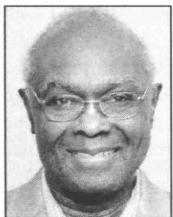
By David Thomas. Leiden: Brill, 2008. Pp. viii, 392. €135 / \$200.

### The Legend of Sergius Bahīrā: Eastern Christian Apologetics and Apocalyptic in Response to Islam.

By Barbara Roggema. Leiden: Brill, 2009. Pp. xii, 579. €169 / \$249.

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Christianity's historical claims as such, including the crucifixion and resurrection, a reflection, perhaps, of Christianity's acute intellectual Hellenization out of its Jewish Palestinian milieu. Territorial landmarks simply vanished in the rarefied atmosphere of Greek philosophical abstraction, allowing Islam to offer material peace in place of the bitter Christological disputes that brought suffering to the people.

In *Christian Doctrines in Islamic Theology*, David Thomas, a professor of Christianity and Islam at the University of Birmingham, England, collates some of the earliest representative Islamic texts on Christianity's doctrinal teachings, introduced here in a parallel Arabic-text-and-translation format, with introductions that place the texts and their authors in historical context. The four such texts assembled here attest to claims of Islam's intellectual self-confidence, as well as to its territorial ascendancy, showing Christianity to be only a marginal threat that is undeserving of serious intellectual attention. Islam's political advantage gave it impunity to reduce Christianity to an incoherent bundle of contradiction as a leftover religion Muhammad came to finish off. Under Muslim pressure, Christians were unable to make much of the historical priority of Jesus or to offer a satisfactory explanation for Islam. The Qur'an and the traditions laid explicit stake to the Christian ground; it would be anachronistic to expect any parallels in comparable Christian sources. This reduced Christianity to an enclave religion now subsisting on foreign ideas and concepts adopted outside and against the religion's birthright. Muslims sensed an inherent advantage in this situation.

Islamic arguments about Jesus are driven by the desire to rehabilitate him fully and finally as a figure of the Qur'an, an action that discountenances Christian claims; and with Christianity discounted, Muhammad can claim the final word on any number of subjects. In contrast to Islam's strict monotheism, for example, the Trinity is adjudged to be wrong and indefensible, making Christology the rock of stumbling. The false view of prophethood that Christology propagates is remedied by the status of Muhammad as prophet and magistrate and by Islam's defense of God's unity: God does not beget, nor is he begotten (Q 112). In the fourth and last text of Thomas's book, 'Abd al-Jabbar, the renowned Mu'tazilite scholar writing in the tenth century, mounts a spirited attack on the Trinity, saying that God cannot be at the same time internally differentiated as three persons and uniform as one substance, as Christians contend. Much of this theological disputation is directed to Muslims who share the confused and confusing picture of Christianity it portrays rather than to Christians in terms of engaging them with respect to their own theology.

The works Thomas has so ably collated and discussed with impeccable erudition bring into full view the nature and range of Islamic refutations of Christianity, and it is impressive to think that the basic thrust of these refutations, often presented as unassailable proofs, has withstood the test of time. Islamic theology has not budged from this position for over a millennium now, and it is for that reason sobering to reflect that, even with the post-9/11 burst of Western scholarship on Islam, the ground has scarcely shifted. The only difference is that Western apologetics have tended to veer toward panegyrics by endorsing anti-Christian Islamic strictures either explicitly or by default, which would lead anyone to wonder how pertinent all this is to Islam's territorial view of religious authenticity, not to say anything about its willingness to take seriously a Christianity that has long been dispossessed of the birthplace of its founder.

The common themes between the two religions fissure predictably into contested claim and counterclaim, in large

measure because the truth claims of Islam make reconciliation with Christianity's theological system impossible. The Muslim argument thrives from a double advantage—for one thing, with disagreements among Christians proving intrinsic contradiction, and for another, with the reinforcement that comes from Christians' acknowledging the truth of those parts of the Qur'an in which they recognize themselves. In this way Islam outflanks Christianity in its incompleteness and in its disagreements.

The story of Bahīrā, which lends support to the argument of the incompleteness of previous revelations, is the subject of Barbara Roggema's *The Legend of Sergius Bahīrā*. Roggema, at John Cabot University in Rome, is a lecturer in the history of the Islamic world. In this book she offers critically annotated texts in Syriac and Arabic, with accompanying translation and introductory commentary, on the legend of Bahīrā. In Muslim sources Bahīrā is the Christian monk of Syria who, endowed with foreknowledge of Muhammad's call to prophethood, singled him out for future greatness when he hosted the young Muhammad and his uncle, Abu Talib, to a meal on one of their caravan trading trips to Syria. As the one who saw in Muhammad exalted marks of prophethood, Bahīrā is proof of Christianity's foreshadowing the coming of Islam, indicating the conclusion also of the mission of Christianity. Muslim apologetics prefers to see Bahīrā as the quintessential true Christian in order to seize him as a stepping-stone to Islam. Appropriately, Bahīrā fulfills his function by testifying to the fullness of time for the culmination of Muhammad's prophetic witness.

In their effort to resist being delegitimized, the Eastern churches responded by disseminating stories of Bahīrā as an ample Christian mouthpiece well positioned to refute Islamic claims. In effect, the Christian Bahīrā exuded the confidence of the Muslim original. The historical setting is the eighth-to-ninth century, which is the period of the high Islamic Enlightenment, a time when for the first time Christian theologians bestirred themselves from their complacent view that Islam was a laughing matter to the realization that the religion was a formidable force that could not be dismissed or ignored. Christians realized that the most serious challenge was Islam's contention that it has a fuller, truer account of Abraham and Jesus, making it the fulfillment of their message and thus a transcending of both Christianity and Judaism. In his correspondence with Caliph 'Umar II, the Byzantine emperor Leo III, for instance, elects on historical grounds to ridicule Muslim claims that Abraham saw and visited the Ka'bah. For their part, Muslims promoted the Abrahamic tradition of the Ka'bah by appealing to the authority of the revealed, impeccable Qur'an. This put Leo III in the awkward position of having to contend with the Muslim view of the Qur'an as infallible against his own historical observations about Abraham.

The fruit of her dissertation, Roggema's book is a meticulous and skillful compilation of relevant materials in Syriac and Arabic. The *Legend of Bahīrā* is the church's way of providing in retrospect for Muhammad's Christian catechism, and thus indicating a reinstatement of Christianity against Islam. It draws on Islamic sources and models and refocuses them toward Eastern Christological apologetics. Accordingly, the role of Mary in the Qur'an as Virgin Mother (Q 3:38, 40; 4:168; 19:17; 66:13)<sup>1</sup> is fleshed out with the story in Luke's Gospel. Christian polemics here is defensive, with apologists using the Qur'an against Islam for that purpose.

These scholars used the prayer of guidance in the opening chapter of the Qur'an, for example, as proof that Christianity

is the guidance in question, as the Qur'an testifies (Q 5:50). The view that the Qur'an implicitly acknowledges the merit of Christianity was a critical element of Christian apologetics, even though Muslims view such evidence as proof of Islam's finality. Muhammad for that reason brings a revelation so that "the People of the Book may know that they have no power over anything of God's bounty, and that bounty is in the hand of God; He gives it unto whomsoever He will" (57:29-30). Christian critics must now contend with the argument that the legitimacy of Islam is nothing less than a function of God's unfettered bounty. The weak side of this argument, however, is how consistent God's bounty is with Islam's own claim of finality, with Muhammad as indispensable. Closing the door after Muhammad seems arbitrary, given the reasons for forcing the door in the first place.

Reflecting the reality of Islamic power, the *Legend* has Bahīrā appealing for protection of Christians under Islamic rule. For example, Bahīrā speaks of a future age in which Muslim rule will exempt monks from payment of taxes, a reference to the actual historical situation. An interesting discussion concerns worldly pleasures in paradise, with Muslim apologists drawing on Gospel accounts to support the qur'anic picture of physical gratification. Christian exegesis of the Qur'an in the eighth century played a crucial role in the evolution of Muslim exegesis, and it is plausible to believe that such exegetical work helped shape the earliest biography of Muhammad. Job of Edessa, a ninth-century Christian scholar of Greek science and philosophy, offered a dissenting opinion by propounding a spiritual view of heaven in which physical laws operate on matter in a fashion that our present finite state cannot allow us to comprehend, thus offering a picture of heaven uncluttered by contingent sense impression. In later centuries and drawing upon such ideas, Avicenna and Ibn al-'Arabi, for example, came to a similar conclusion.

The figure of Christ understandably dominates the intellectual exchange of Christians and Muslims, whether relating to Christ's prophetic role in history or to his status as the incarnate image (*surah*), sometimes the "veil" (*hijab*), of God. One Christian theologian uses "veil" in this sense for the incarnation: *wa-tattakhidha lahā hijāban*, "so he betook for himself a veil." It evokes the line "veiled in flesh the Godhead see" of Charles Wesley's Christmas hymn. Peter of Bayt Ra's of the ninth century answers his Muslim critics by contending that in the incarnation divine sovereignty is abated out of mercy, justice, and wisdom to subdue Satan and to redeem man. God does not have to hoard or flaunt his power to possess it, such being the prerogative of being all-powerful. This produces the interesting argument that the incarnation is *islam*, that is, ultimate divine "submission," with some apologists arguing that "faith" as *imān* (Q 49:14) flows from this source, of which Christ is the ultimate expression. Theodore, a Christian apologist, says that the qur'anic verse here shows that the submission (*islam*) Muhammad called for is intended to be a foreshadowing of faith (*imān*) in God that Christ taught. In that sense, as Patriarch Timothy said to Caliph al-Mahdi, the Qur'an was intended for those called the *ummiyyūn*, that is, people not acquainted with the Scriptures, which is why there exist veiled, abstract qur'anic references to scriptural themes suitable for those needing a rudimentary introduction to the full truth awaiting them.

The report that Bahīrā accurately foretold the prophetic vocation of Muhammad lends itself to the idea that Bahīrā also taught Muhammad the little he knew about the Religion of the Book, which contradicts Muslim claims of the Qur'an as an infallible, unmediated revelation (Q 4:84; 10:16-19, 38-44; 12:1;

15:86, 90-91, 103-6; 20:111; 25:33; 39:29; 41:44; 43:30; 56:76-77). As such, the idea is roundly and in timely fashion condemned in the ninth-century magisterial *hadīth* collection of Bukhari, for example. In either case it is obvious that both Qur'an and *hadīth* are occupied with refuting interested charges of invention and prevarication.

The controversy of Bahīrā is germane to the early Christian estimate of Islam's authenticity, so that apocryphal imputations to Bahīrā of views Christians preferred that he had professed served the purpose of an apologetic response to Islam's expanding mission. Christians could not let the claim stand that Muhammad obtained any valid religious teaching from Bahīrā, for that would buttress Islamic claims of finality, nor could Bahīrā simply be dismissed out of hand, lest that play into the argument that Christians could not face the truth, even if it came from one of them. Accordingly, Bahīrā is reclaimed as a repentant monk after his collusion with Muhammad, with the tone of his rehabilitation acquiring the exaggerated style of a penitent whose early death interrupted his fledgling mission to Islam. The well-known *Apology of al-Kindi* belongs to this apologetic genre and betrays a level of desperation that shows an alarming thinning of Christian ranks on the religious front. Islam had by then virtually closed off all the major corridors of circulation around the Mediterranean, forcing European states, including the Carolingians under Charlemagne, to sue for concessions from Baghdad. That was how Constantine-Cyril and Methodius reported to Baghdad for permission to embark on their mission to Moravia and beyond. The *Apology of al-Kindi* became a staple of European medieval polemic against Islam. When we remember that by that time Europe was slowly being awakened to the intellectual treasures that Muslim scholarship was making accessible in Arabic translations, from Gerard of Cremona and Hermann the German to Michael Scott and John of Palermo,<sup>2</sup> the accompanying polemic even of Dante was necessarily defensive and reactionary. The alleged unreasonableness of Islam was in spite of Islam's demonstrated intellectual excellence. Europe complained because Europe had fallen behind, with major disasters of war, plague, the witch craze, and fire lurking just beyond the horizon. When the Dominican William of Tripoli warned of the menace of Islam, he might have been referring with equal credibility to the lethargy and divisions of Christian Europe. As Sir Richard Southern pointed out, when the curia condemned the ideas of Dante and Meister Eckhart, among others,<sup>3</sup> and European princes turned on one another instead of uniting against Islam, for example, it showed Europe's cultural impulse flagging.<sup>4</sup> Despairing of a splintering Christianity and its worldly distractions, John Wycliffe added his own aggrieved twist by giving voice to this sense of Western uncertainty vis-à-vis the Islamic world, declaring, "We Western Mahomets, though we are only a few among the whole body of the Church, think that the whole world will be regulated by our judgment and tremble at our command."<sup>5</sup> It was that attitude that provoked Islam into existence, Wycliffe challenged. The remedy for Christianity, he felt, was a return to suffering and poverty as Jesus taught, values that were the opposites of worldly power, secular dominion, and self-will. The church had followed Islam in making laws for aggrandizing power and in requiring blind obedience from believers. Christendom had reduced orthodoxy to a tawdry matter of morals and practice and made a commodity of doctrine. It is little surprising, Wycliffe insists, that warfare should find ready soil in the church, for by embracing the world the church embraced the values from which sprang the impulses of war.

The habit of heresy hunting and sectarian animus among

Christians was hard to kick, and before long the encounter with Islam revived the old Christological conflicts, and Sergius Bahīrā was recruited to serve the part of factional catalyst. Cranked up in turn as Arian monk, Nestorian partisan, Jacobite insinuator, hostile witness, guileless victim, and interfaith mercenary, Bahīrā comes full circle, having meanwhile executed an adroit errand for the beleaguered Christian imagination. The Islamic epicenter was the pivot of the literary epicycles depicting his diverse roles, proving that Islam was no laughing matter after all, but also that the initiative for serious engagement had drained itself in a tide of fabrication of anti-Islamic polemic and mutual Christian recrimination.

Al-Ghazali wrote about the importance of a religious perspective on philosophical arguments over the fundamental claims of religion, saying that if faith were based on a carefully ordered argument about miracles as supernatural proofs of prophecy, it is likely that faith would be negated by an equally well-ordered argument showing how difficulty and doubt could undermine such proof. As an object lesson, that procedure can be applied

to the fascinating role of Sergius Bahīrā as the Islamic nettle that Christians were all too eager to grasp, only to be stuck with him after he ceased to be of any evident advantage.

It is unlikely, though no less regrettable, that current interest in Islam as a touchstone of Western tolerance and open-mindedness will rise much above press and media obsession, including President Obama's much-admired Muslim peace offensive, to the level of critical reflection and balanced engagement, the point at which the books reviewed here will prove their real value and merit. The Islamic Enlightenment was not simply a convenient cargo delivering Greek learning to the West; it was a profound intercultural event in which the Christian world saw itself reflected in surprisingly bracing and self-revealing ways. The books noted here are installments of the Brill series "History of Christian-Muslim Relations." In these times of retrenchment in academic publishing, it is a thankless entrepreneurial investment to commit to this scale. It is all the more reason to welcome the series as an invaluable service to scholarship and to interfaith understanding.

## Notes

1. The qur'anic verse numbering I am using is the Flügel version used in Blachère, Bell, and Arberry, among others. It is a slight variation of the Cairo edition.
2. Charles Burnett, "Arabic into Latin: The Reception of Arabic Philosophy into Western Europe," in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, ed. Peter Adamson and Richard C. Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005), pp. 370-404. See also W. Montgomery Watt, *The Influence of Islam on Medieval Europe* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1972).
3. The condemnations included the ideas of Marsilius of Padua, William of Ockham, and the Franciscans; see R. W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1962), p. 73.
4. Harvard historian Myron P. Gilmore describes how rivalry and conflict among European princes impeded papal attempts to mobilize a united front against Islam's strategic challenge to Europe (*The World of Humanism, 1453-1517* [New York: Harper & Row, 1962], pp. 15-20).
5. Southern, *Western Views of Islam*, pp. 79-80.

## Fuller's School of Intercultural Studies Takes a New Approach to Doctor of Missiology

In 2006 Fuller Theological Seminary's School of Intercultural Studies, Pasadena, California, introduced a new approach to study for the doctor of missiology degree. Incoming students form nonresidential cohorts built on a significant commonality, and they work together throughout their four years in the program. Often students come from a common region or share a common research interest. In some instances they may come from the same mission or denomination, enhancing solidarity among the students as they work through the program.

A strength of the nonresidential-cohort approach to doctoral study is that it enables students to remain within their ministry context while completing their studies. They can both continue in ministry and obtain a doctoral degree. Each cohort meets yearly for an intensive two-week seminar facilitated by School of Intercultural Studies faculty. Twice during the program the students travel to Fuller's campus in Pasadena; the seminars during the other two years may be held at predetermined sites germane to the purpose and goals of the cohort.

The program followed by the cohorts consists of four modules that focus in turn on (1) missiological foundations and program design, (2) relevant theoretical literature and research methods, (3) the nature of leadership in relation to the organizational, topical, or regional focus of the cohort and the dynamics of change, and (4) integration of the previous three years' work into a coherent whole that results in a completed dissertation.

The annual two-week seminar is preceded by reading

relevant to the topic and followed by writing of a paper that lays the groundwork for an aspect of the dissertation. Throughout the program students critique each other's work both in writing and in oral responses to student presentations made as part of the modules. Between the annual seminars students go online to communicate with professors and other members of the cohort. They use the Internet to participate in threaded discussions, to share their critiques of the readings, and to conduct research. The program builds on the master of arts program in global leadership, which also uses a cohort/modular format.

Members of the School of Intercultural Studies' first cohort have now completed their dissertations. The number of students enrolled has grown to the point that more students are now enrolled in the D.Miss. program than for the Ph.D., which is primarily an on-campus program. The cohort approach around which the D.Miss. program is built affirms the field orientation and focus that led Donald McGavran to found the school in 1966.

For detailed information about the doctor of missiology program, go to [www.fuller.edu/academics/school-of-intercultural-studies/dmiss/about-cohorts.aspx](http://www.fuller.edu/academics/school-of-intercultural-studies/dmiss/about-cohorts.aspx).

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