

***Christian Monastic Life in Early Islam.* By Bradley Bowman. Edinburgh Studies in Classical Islamic History and Culture. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021. viii + 256 pp. \$105.00 (cloth); \$29.95 (paper, forthcoming Feb. 2023); \$29.95 (eBook). ISBN: 9781474479684.**

Bradley Bowman's history of Christian monasticism (*rahbāniyya*) in Islam's formative period commences with 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-Azīz (r.98–101AH/717–720 CE). Buried at a monastery near Aleppo, this Umayyad caliph offered monks in death fuller recognition than the category of "tolerance" is able to capture. By this example, Bowman draws attention to the "continued Muslim fascination" with Christian monastic life, while arguing for the prevalence of a "fluid, piety-centered movement at the rise of Islam that did not rigidly distinguish sectarian religious groups" (2). In this way, he highlights regionally monastic sites throughout Syria, Egypt and Iraq, all of which served as "prominent centres for contact and communication" (23). But why, asks Bowman, were Christian monks accorded such a "privileged position within Islam during its formative period?" (9)

There are many ways one could begin narrating a history of Islamic "origins." For the field of Islamic studies, since the late 1970s, one common approach is to interpret the rise of Islam as a political and even nationalist movement, whose force forever altered the landscape through wars of conquest. Patricia Crone, whose revisionist approach has shaped the field, typifies this view and has further sought to demonstrate the basic unreliability of early Muslim sources as historic evidence because they tended to be written centuries later. By contrast, Fred Donner's *Muhammad and the Believers* (2010) developed an account of Islamic origins that preferred inclusive notions of religious belonging. Challenging questionable assumptions about sectarian identities, on the contrary, Donner acknowledged how Qur'anic revelations and the extant but sparse documentary evidence does not assume a new and distinct religious confession. On the other hand, unlike the traditional origins narrative such as Ibn Ishāq's eighth-century *Sīra*, Donner posits that the nascent movement's self-identity was understood as the *mu'minīn* ("believers"), and not *muslimīn*, and would have likely encompassed Jews, Christians, and probably also Zoroastrians. In this vein, following his mentor, Bowman also contributes to a changing perception of Islamic origins that is "decidedly non-sectarian" and yet distinctive as "a separate group of righteous, God-fearing monotheists, separate in their strict observance of righteousness from those around them" (2).

From narrating a history of conquest toward a certain religious ecumenism, Bowman's account of early Islam is drawn to the special admiration for Christian monks in this monotheistic revival. After his introduction, by contextualizing monasteries as privileged sites for interreligious contact, Bowman's first chapter develops a different appreciation for various roles that Christian monasteries may have played in Islam's development. In chapter 2, Bowman sketches how as a matter of policy monastic communities benefited from close connections and even "amnesty" that Muslim governing authorities provided, including amidst the "conquest period." Similarly, his third chapter argues that Muslim administrators typically eschewed "toleration" in favor of a more protective stance. As chronicled, governing policies partially developed in "continuance" with their prior legal standing with a Byzantine mystique for "holy men" but also the result of a uniquely Muslim "confessional synthesis." More specifically, Bowman points at the Pact of Najrān (c.631 CE), a treaty between the Prophet Muhammad and a predominantly Christian town, as the assumed paradigm for Muslim-Christian relations until

ninth-century Baghdad. By this account, both successors Abū Bakr and ‘Umar also assumed special responsibilities for monastic communities, as the former ordered non-interference with the activities of monks and the latter set the precedent of granting monks at Mar Gabriel a tax exemption.

In this regard, the early Islamic theologian Hasan al-Basri argued that the reason for this exemption is due to the fact that “monks were inherently bound to personal poverty” and “resigned from the secular world” (116). In subsequent chapters, Bowman continues to offer readers noteworthy examples that supply and illustrate reasons *why* religious commitments motivated such encounters. In the ninth-century *Kitāb al-ruhbān*, the moralist Ibn Abī al-Dunyā (d.281 AH/894 CE) offer a comprehensive account of the virtues of monastic life. In particular, as Bowman notes, this Muslim account extolled the rewards of “ascetic practices” that “certainly fit within his general pattern of illuminating the virtues of humility, fasting, fear of the divine, ritual weeping, silence in contemplation, and chiefly, the denunciation of the physical world” (188). In *Kitāb al-diyārāt* (“The Book of monasteries”), as its author al-Shābushū (d.1008) documented fifty-three monasteries, an account observes in detail a celebration of pilgrims, including Christians, who, “holding palms in their hands,” travel from their monastery to an ancient Christian church at Hīrah (present-day Iraq). Additionally, al-Shābushū mentions that “a large throng of cheerful Muslims follow them” to the shrine where communion was received and baptisms performed, after which together “they return in the same manner as they came” (153). As suggested, readers should appreciate how, in a confessional sense, Muslim visitation (*ziyāra*) indicates that popular Muslim interests in Christian monastic communities rose to the scale of due reverence and pious observances. Along similar lines, Bowman also enlists al-Shābushū who recalled a Palm Sunday celebration at Dayr al-A‘lā, where coincidentally resting as a guest was the caliph al-Ma’mūn (d. 833), who “took all of this in, and found it pleasing” (156).

As a key figure in this history, the caliph ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd Aziz provides Bowman with a potentially illuminating model for Muslim-Christian engagement. In chapter 4, Bowman returns to this figure, who, dying and prayerful, visited a community of Christian monks at Dayr Sim‘ān, where in failing health he ordered his ministers to secure a gravesite in the monastery’s cemetery. In the month of Rajab, he died and was buried. For his goal, the story serves Bowman with an illustrative example of “an overlapping of confessional affiliation at the dawning of Islam, revealing a relatively amorphous religious context” (147). In this regard, Bowman also adduces the fact that, upon his succession to the caliphate, ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd Azīz chose to lead his people in prayer—inside of a church. Alternatively, however, he seems to concede a potentially different lesson. For instance, an early Muslim ascetic once praised ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-Azīz as an exemplary figure of “renunciation” (*zuhd*) because “the whole world has been laid before him but he has rejected it” (148). Whereas prior caliphs visited Christian monasteries for purposes of health, revelry, and relaxation, according to Bowman, this “case of ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-Azīz may, however, present an alternative to these motivations for visiting monasteries; one that is perhaps centered upon an abiding interest in ascetic practices as a core component to a pietistic life” (149). In short, one could argue the “most pious of the Umayyad caliphs” might have found in the company of monks a shared commitment of “inward struggle” that cultivated a disposition for turning away a desire for the sake of something better.

In his final and explicitly comparative chapter, therefore, Bowman explores these spiritual correspondences more deeply. His intention to re-read Muslim sources in light of this history

offers occasional insights that are breathtaking but all too fleeting. For instance, turning to the famous Light Verse (Q 24:34–37), he focuses on the mention of *buyūt*, the “houses” that God allowed to be constructed and where “His name has been commemorated,” as resonant with ritual observances in eastern Christian monasteries (226). Without guidance, however, readers are left to ponder his summary statement that “it is tantalising to consider possibility that the ‘light verse’ could be understood within the context of the monastic life” (227).

Previously, Bowman also suggested deeper connotations between the Qur’anic Arabic word for monk (*rāhib*) and its intrinsic root meaning, as presented in a Qur’anic verse about Moses (Q 7:154), for “‘veneration, ‘reverence,’ ‘awe,’ and perhaps most significantly ‘fear’” (219). But this virtuous sense of fear is conceptually linked with piety, without much attention to externals. Similarly, readers might require to understand the repeated but undeveloped claim that Islamic hagiographies adopted both the genre and terse literary style of the *Apopthegmata Patrum*, a Christian text that compiled the sayings of the “desert fathers” (149, 188, 200, 230). For the sake of comparative focus, if pursued, the outlines of a possible turn to piety must also examine parallels and differences in concrete actions, bodily reverence, and transformative means that piety would seem to require.

Despite the book’s strengths, from a historical standpoint, one might also be surprised with Bowman’s propensity to summarize with profoundly modern categories. A persistent dichotomy between religious and “secular” strikes me as problematic. Again, as a modern projection, preferential use of the term “state” to describe Muslim leadership may distort more than clarify. Additionally, it is the case that more clarity is needed about what is meant by “piety,” “righteousness,” and “fear of God.” As on display in his sixth chapter, the comparative focus falters as these notions are typically spoken in the singular, implicitly downplaying distinctiveness. Nevertheless, constructive criticisms aside, Bowman’s book urges us to reconsider the usefulness of historic lessons for the sake of mutual understanding. Overall, the lessons learned from these historical examples may provide transformative models of theological engagement. Finally, one of the strengths of Bowman’s book is its attempts to initiate exactly what is discovered through its research: an invitation to a possibly deepened, renewed, and mutually transformative inquiry.

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