Christian Monastic Life in Early Islam

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The historical interaction between Muslims and their non-Muslim subjects and neighbors is a topic of interest for many scholars who are interested in the potential for positive interreligious coexistence past and present. Several recent books speak to different aspects of this relationship with a particular focus on Christians living under the rule of the early Muslims. These include Jack Tannous's *The Making of the Medieval Middle East* (Princeton University Press, 2018), a broad look at the transition from Christian to Muslim rule in the region, and Christian Sahner's *Christian Martyrs under Islam* (Princeton University Press, 2020), which focuses more specifically on the phenomenon of martyrdom. In line with the more tightly contained scope of the latter work, Bradley Bowman's new book takes a close look at Christian monks in the Middle East and their interactions with the new societal structures and ideologies of Islam.

Unlike Sahner, whose focus on martyrdom leads by definition to accounts of interreligious conflict, Bowman finds far more positive encounters in his research on monasticism. In addition to the historical evidence that monasteries survived, and often thrived, under early Islamic rule, Bowman points to important Islamic literary works such as the *Kitāb al-diyārāt* (Book of Monasteries) of al-Shābushtī and the *Kitāb*

al-ruhbān (Book of Monks) of Ibn Abī al-Dunyā, each of which preserves many early accounts of the physical and spiritual advantages of monastic establishments and their residents. He also analyzes several well-known stories of early Muslims and their interactions with monks, especially the conversion story of Salmān al-Fārisī, the Prophet Muḥammad's interactions with Baḥīrā and other monks, and the caliph ʿUmar ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz's end-of-life visit to the monastery of Simeon Stylites. Each of these sources provides evidence that many early Muslims had great respect for the ascetic and devotional practices of the monks whom they encountered in the lands of the caliphate.

Bowman interprets this evidence through the theoretical frameworks provided by several contemporary scholars. He agrees with the emphasis placed by Tannous and other scholars on the concept of "confessional fluidity" (25), noting that the majority of Christians and Muslims had little awareness of the doctrinal details that supposedly distinguished them from each other. Most importantly, however, he draws on the ideas advocated by Fred Donner in *Muhammad and the Believers* (Belknap Press, 2010) and other works, seeing the initial community that gathered around the Prophet Muḥammad as a community of reformist "believers" (*muʾminūn*) who emphasized piety and devotion and at times transcended religious boundaries. Bowman's book represents one of the most important attempts to understand how Donner's "Believers' Movement" thesis might impact our assessment of the life of non-Muslims in the first centuries after the life of the Prophet. For Bowman, Donner's theory can explain much of the positive attitude toward monks that can be seen among early Muslims, indicating not only that early Muslims tolerated the existence of monks in their territory, but that many early Muslims saw monastic practice as legitimate and inspirational, whether or not these Muslims actively participated at times in the life of the monasteries.

The book is divided into six chapters. The first chapter provides a theoretical overview of the porous confessional boundaries that are so important for Bowman's argument, along with a discussion of the number and condition of monastic institutions in the lands of the early caliphate. The chapter closes with a discussion of the conversion account of Salmān al-Fārisī, a topic on which Bowman has written before. The fact

that Salmān's journey to Islam was facilitated in large part by Christian monks is taken as evidence that the early Muslims who told the story had some level of admiration for their monastic neighbors, even if they viewed monastic practice as a potential intermediate step on the path to Islam.

The second chapter discusses the situation of monastic establishments in the period before the rise of Islam, in particular the precarity and destruction brought by the Byzantine-Sasanian war of the early seventh century. In contrast, Bowman argues that the conquests of the caliphs caused relatively little damage to monasteries; on the contrary, a number of Christian sources from this period view the arrival of Arab rule as a divine blessing, especially for monks. For example, John bar Penkāyē writes in the late seventh century that the Muslims possess "a special ordinance from God concerning our monastic station, that they should hold it in honor" (82).

In chapter three, Bowman focuses on the ways that the empires of the region interacted administratively with monasteries and their inhabitants, addressing many Byzantine and Sasanian policies that were incorporated into early Islamic practices with little or no alteration. He presents evidence that many of the policies later considered to be foundational elements of Islamic administration with respect to their non-Muslim subjects, including the ideals of the so-called Pact of ʿUmar, were either unknown or simply disregarded in the early centuries of Islamic history. However, he also notes that the tax regimen of the caliphate could be an economic burden for monasteries and that Chalcedonian monasteries were particularly impacted because they were cut off from their imperial sources of funding and support.

An important part of the book's argument is found in the fourth chapter, where Bowman addresses the common conception that most Muslim visits to monasteries were undertaken for the sake of drinking wine and otherwise flouting the moral expectations of Islamic society. Bowman emphasizes that while this was true in some cases, other Muslims attended monasteries because they found them to be valuable sites of religious devotion or because they were travelers in need of the hospitality that monasteries provided in remote locations. He notes that most early Muslims were recent converts or were descended from

recent converts, and many of them had a Christian background, so the religious ceremonies carried out at monasteries would not be alien to them. Moreover, for those whose Islam included an emphasis on piety and asceticism, the ideas and practices of the monks were often quite congenial.

This discussion continues into chapter five, focusing on Muslim appreciation for monasticism and its significance in terms of Donner's theory of early Muslim ecumenism. Bowman also returns to the story of Salmān al-Fārisī and discusses some Qur'anic passages that have sometimes been read as condemnations of monasticism, even if this interpretation has not been unanimously held by the most influential commentators. Finally, chapter six argues that pietistic early Muslims and Christian monks could be grouped ecumenically under the title of "God-fearers" and that this terminology would have been viewed positively across communal boundaries. Bowman concludes, as he began, with a discussion of Ibn Abī al-Dunyā, who felt that "there was much wisdom to be gained through dialogue with Christian ascetics" (233).

Bowman's book covers some relatively new ground, especially in its focused application of Donner's theory to the history of Christian monasticism. His use of both Christian and Muslim sources in Arabic, Greek, Latin, and Syriac gives the work a breadth that is highly valuable in a survey of this sort. At times the organization of the book is somewhat unclear, leading to repetitions such as the recurring discussion of Salmān al-Fārisī, and there are occasionally minor inconsistencies in transliteration. Nevertheless, *Christian Monastic Life in Early Islam* is a valuable contribution to a growing field, bringing an ecumenical perspective to our view of this formative period, with a specific eye to the experiences and contributions of Christian monks in the earliest centuries of Islamic history.

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