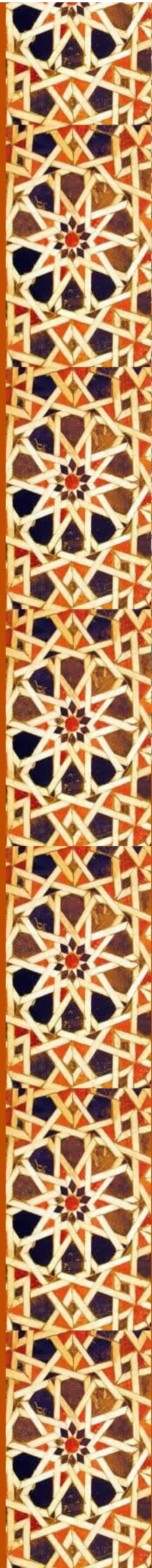

Near Eastern Languages and Civilization

The Farhat J. Ziadeh Distinguished Lecture
in Arab and Islamic Studies

How Ecumenical Was Early Islam?

Professor Fred M. Donner

University of Chicago

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

It is my distinct privilege to provide you with a copy of the eleventh Farhat J. Ziadeh Distinguished Lecture in Arab and Islamic Studies, *"How Ecumenical Was Early Islam?"* delivered by Fred M. Donner on April 29, 2013.

The Ziadeh Fund was formally endowed in 2001. Since that time, with your support, it has allowed us to strengthen our educational reach and showcase the most outstanding scholarship in Arab and Islamic Studies, and to do so always in honor of our dear colleague Farhat Ziadeh, whose contributions to the fields of Islamic law, Arabic language, and Islamic Studies are truly unparalleled.

Farhat J. Ziadeh was born in Ramallah, Palestine, in 1917. He received his B.A. from the American University of Beirut in 1937 and his LL.B. from the University of London in 1940. He then attended Lincoln's Inn, London, where he became a Barrister-at-Law in 1946. In the final years of the British Mandate, he served as a Magistrate for the Government of Palestine before eventually moving with his family to the United States. He was appointed Professor of Arabic and Islamic Law at Princeton University, where he taught until 1966, at which time he moved to the University of Washington.

The annual lectureship in his name is a fitting tribute to his international reputation and his national service to the discipline of Arabic and Islamic Studies. The event and publication would not be possible without the generous support of many contributors including students, colleagues, friends, and above all Farhat and Suad themselves, and their family members. On behalf of our Department, I extend my deepest thanks to them and to all of you who have supported the Ziadeh Fund. You truly have made a difference!

Sincerely yours,

Scott B. Noegel
Chair, Department of Near Eastern Languages & Civilization
http://depts.washington.edu/nelc/

The Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilization
at the University of Washington

The Eleventh Farhat J. Ziadeh Distinguished Lecture in Arab and Islamic Studies

Monday, April 29, 2013

How Ecumenical Was Early Islam?

Professor Fred M. Donner

FRED M. DONNER (Ph.D. Princeton, 1975) is Professor of Near Eastern History at the Oriental Institute and Department of Near Eastern Languages, and Director of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, at the University of Chicago. He has published extensively on early Islamic history, including *The Early Islamic Conquests* (1981), *Narratives of Islamic Origins: the Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (1998), and *Muḥammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (2010), and dozens of articles. He has received research grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. He is past president of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) and is a member of the Scientific Committee of the Tunisian Academy of Sciences, Letters, and Arts.

How Ecumenical Was Early Islam?

Fred M. Donner

Let me begin by expressing my deep thanks to the Department of Near Eastern Languages and its Chair, Prof. Scott Noegel, for honoring me with the invitation to speak today, and especially to Prof. Farhat J. Ziadeh, whose lifelong commitment to the highest standards of scholarship devoted to the Middle East stands as an inspiration to all of us in this field, and whose generosity made this lecture series possible. I am very pleased that he is able to be here today. And I thank him, and Prof. Noegel and many other colleagues, for their hospitality and warm reception during my visit.

The study of Islam's origins has passed through a period of profound changes over the past forty years. Until about 1970, most Western scholars would have considered the origins of Islam pretty well settled and uncontroversial. To be sure, it was recognized that there were many uncertainties on matters of detail, but the general outlines of "what happened" was thought to be known.[1]

This changed beginning in the 1970s with a series of publications that shook the foundations of our understanding of Islam's beginnings. These publications dealt with different aspects of things, and sometimes adopted mutually incompatible or contradictory views and so should not be thought to have offered a single, coherent new vision. Quite the contrary. But they all in one way or another challenged the hitherto comfortable scholarly consensus, usually by calling into question some, or all, of the

[1] A good summary of this view of Islamic origins can be found in most textbooks published before about 2000; the early chapters of P. M. Holt, Ann K. S. Lambton, and Bernard Lewis (eds), *The Cambridge History of Islam* (2 vols., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), offer a good example.

written sources on which the traditional view of Islam's origins had been based. Without attempting to summarize all their many arguments, we can single out some of the most important in what we might call this "first wave" of revisionist work. They include Albrecht Noth's pioneering study of the salvation-historical character and formal qualities of the early Islamic conquest narratives in 1973;[2] Günter Lüling's radically new approach to the study of the Qur'ān text and the life of Muḥammad, starting in 1974;[3] John Wansbrough's equally radical studies of the Qur'ān and of early Islamic historical tradition, *Qur'ānic Studies* and *The Sectarian Milieu*, published in 1977 and 1978, respectively;[4] and Patricia Crone and Michael Cook's 1977 work *Hagarism: the Making of the Islamic world*, which because of its confrontational style perhaps more than any other work forced scholars clinging to traditional views of Islam's origins to reconsider their assumptions.[5] This "first wave" was followed by many further studies, too numerous even to mention here, which attempted variously to reinforce, or to refine, or to refute some of the revisionist hypotheses already proposed, or which advanced still other revisionist hypotheses of their own. The study of Islam's origins was thus transformed in the course of the decade of the 1970s from a

[2] Albrecht Noth, *Quellenkritische Studien zu Themen, Formen, und Tendenzen frühislamischen Geschichtsüberlieferung* (Bonn: Selbstverlag des Orientalischen Seminars der Universität, 1973). In English, see the revised translation: Albrecht Noth and Lawrence I. Conrad, *The Early Arabic Historical Tradition: A Source-critical Study,* Translated by Michael Bonner (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1994).
[3] Günter Lüling, *Über den Ur-Qur'ān: Ansätze zur Rekonstruktion vorislamischer christlicher Strophenlieder im Qur'ān* (Erlangen: H. Lüling, 1974). See also his *Die Wiederentdeckung des Prophet Muḥammad: eine Kritik am "christlichen" Abendland* (Erlangen: H. Lüling, 1981).
[4] John Wansbrough, *Qur'ānic Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); John Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).
[5] Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism. The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

sleepy scholarly backwater, the surface of which saw hardly a ripple of disagreement, to a tempestuous sea of debate, whose crashing waves were whipped up by the winds of sometimes acrimonious charges and counter-charges and deeply felt disagreements over methods and evidence among different scholars.

I will not try to summarize all the different views that have been advanced about Islam's origins over the past forty years, but rather will share with you—eventually—my own vision of what Islam's origins looked like, a vision that has benefited in countless ways from the ferment the field has undergone. Indeed, my own views would not have been possible, and likely would not have occurred to me at all, without that sustained debate, to which therefore I owe a great debt—as does everyone else in this field.

Before getting to my own view of things, however, let me remind you of what we might call the starting point—that is, the traditional view of Islam's origins that remained hardly challenged until the 1970s. This traditional view was rooted in the Islamic sources themselves, which offer a quite detailed and in many ways cogent story about Islam's beginnings.

According to this traditional version, Islam as a religion began with the prophet Muḥammad, a merchant in the west Arabian town of Mecca, born sometime in the middle of the sixth century CE and died in 632 CE. He was a promising young man in his town, engaged fruitfully in the caravan trade that provided part of the town's livelihood. According to tradition, the Meccans of Muḥammad's day were polytheists who recognized many different gods, most of them linked to stars, planets, or other heavenly phenomena. They maintained in the middle of their town a cube-shaped shrine, the Ka'ba, which was the focus of a polytheistic cult of which they were the stewards—also a source of some revenue for the Meccans. Around 610 or 611, however, Muḥammad began to receive what he and his followers considered revelations from God, enjoining him to acknowledge and to

preach that there was only one God, creator of heaven and earth, and that worship of pagan idols was an affront to him—an act of supreme ingratitude by men toward their creator. These revelations came to Muḥammad in the form of powerful words that were burned into Muḥammad's memory by the intensity of the revelatory experience, and were then recited to, and later written down by, his followers. The collected revelations eventually were compiled to form the text of the Qur'ān, or sacred scripture of Islam, which for Muslims is thus literally God's revealed word. These revelations instructed people above all to recognize the one God, a strictly monotheistic creed. (Allah is merely the Arabic word for "God".) But they were also enjoined to live righteously (for example, by being always mindful of God, praying regularly, fasting, and by succoring the poor, orphans, and widows) in order to avoid grievous punishment at the Last Judgment. At the Judgment, individuals will be evaluated by God and either rewarded by being sent forever to paradise, or punished by being condemned to spend eternity in hell. Muḥammad and his followers, according to tradition, called this new religion "Islām," meaning "submission to God's will."

Muḥammad and his followers preached this strict form of monotheism to their fellow Meccans, but encountered much opposition, and eventually the prophet and his followers had to leave Mecca in 622 and take refuge in the oasis town of Yathrib (subsequently called Medina, for *madīnat al-nabī*, "city of the prophet") where he had been invited as arbiter of local tribal disputes. So in Medina, Muḥammad and his followers established the first autonomous Islamic community. During the remaining ten years of his life, Muḥammad and his followers consolidated their position in Medina (against some local opposition, including that of several large Jewish clans who lived in the town), and engaged in desultory hostilities against his old home-town of Mecca, including several sizable battles and sieges. Eventually, Muḥammad won the support of many tribal groups who lived not only in Medina but also in the surrounding countryside, and with this backing was able to force Mecca to submit. The Ka'ba shrine

was cleansed of its pagan idols and rededicated to the worship of the one God, and the Meccans with few exceptions embraced Islam. In his final years, Muḥammad ovesaw the expansion of what was becoming an embryonic state based in Medina, which incorporated not only Mecca, but also the other towns, oases, and nomadic tribal groups of western Arabia. After his death in 632, Muḥammad's followers embarked on a rapid process of expansion that brought all of the Arabian peninsula under their control, and that then spilled out into the neighboring lands of Iraq and Syria, and from there to Iran, Egypt, and North Africa. These lands they wrested in decisive military engagements from the Roman (Byzantine) empire and the Sasanian Persian empire, so that by about 650 the new Muslim state, which we usually call the "caliphate" after its leaders, the caliphs (Ar. *khalīfa*) or successors to Muḥammad, dominated the entire Near East in the name of the new religion, Islam.

So much for the traditional view of how Islam began. One thing to note about this portrayal, besides the incredible dynamism and success of the movement, is that the traditional view portrays Islam as being, from the very beginning, a distinct new religious confession. In particular, it is depicted as a religion that was distinct from the earlier monotheisms, Judaism and Christianity, both of which were widespread in the Near East (and indeed, even in Arabia)—this despite the fact that the Qur'ān contains a great deal of material that is obviously related to the Jewish and Christian traditions, such as fragments of stories about various Hebrew prophets, about Jesus, etc.

But—as we know, this is not how religions usually begin, with such a clear-eyed view of their distinctiveness. Rather, we usually see an initial period during which certain new religious ideas circulate but are not yet seen as constituting a new faith; their adherents may be a recognizable group, holding beliefs seen perhaps as heretical by others, but not yet as forming a distinct religious confession on their own. Our model here might well be the gradual emergence of the "Jesus movement" and various

Christianities from Judaism (or Judaisms) during the 1st-3rd centuries CE.

Furthermore—again looking at the record of how other religions emerge—the more or less definitive crystallization of a new faith by the movement's intellectual leadership may be followed by a rather prolonged period in which many people ostensibly belonging to the new confession still retain close ties with those of the matrix communities from which the new confession emerged. It is therefore necessary for the new religion to forcibly separate itself from the religious confession in the midst of which it had begun. For example, when we read the Easter narratives in the Gospel of John, we are struck by the effort the author makes to pin the blame for Jesus's death on "the Jews." In doing so, he almost absolves the Roman governor, Pilate, of any responsibility, making clear that it was the vocal calls of the Jews to "crucify him, crucify him" that persuaded Pilate to send Jesus to the cross. This profoundly anti-Jewish character of the text reflects the efforts of early Christians of about 90 CE, when John's gospel was written, to separate themselves definitively from Judaism, a process that was obviously still far from complete. Or we might recall the railings of St. Chrysostom against the local Christians of Antioch who, in the 4th century, still participated in Jewish festivals; these complaints can be understood as efforts by the esteemed bishop to help dissolve any remaining ties between the Christian community and the Jewish community from which it had gradually emerged—what the late Thomas Sizgorich aptly termed "boundary maintenance" of the early Christian community.[6] Presumably there were many other instances of communal mixing that troubled the "officials" or hierarchy of the developing Christian community.

For the early Islamic community, some evidence—I would say much evidence—points to a similarly murky process

[6] Thomas Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 39.

of self-definition in the early stages of its development; and the overwhelming presence in the Qur'ān of material clearly linked to the rich Jewish and Christian scriptural traditions suggests very strongly that it was from that Judeo-Christian matrix that Islam would eventually have to distance itself. (This is not to claim that the prophet or his followers began as Jews or Christians, but only that Jewish and Christian religious ideas and stories were "in the air," familiar, and provided the context in which the Qur'ān's religious ideas had to develop.)

First, however, I think we need to adjust our habits or conventions when speaking of "early Islam" because the very use of the word "Islam" to describe the origins period is misleading. It is much more fitting, I think, to refer to the early stages of the community Muḥammad founded as constituting a "Believers' movement," because that is what we find, overwhelmingly in the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān is a work addressed to the Believers (Ar. *mu'minūn*)—as it says many times when giving instruction, "O you who believe!" (*yā ayyuhā al-ladhīna āmanū*). The word "Believers" is clearly defined in the Qur'ān as one who believes in God, and the Last Day, and the need to live righteously.[7]

What is especially pertinent to the present context is that some passages in the Qur'ān define the category of Believers as including righteous "peoples of the book" (*ahl al-kitāb*)—the Qur'ān's blanket term for Christians and Jews.[8] So we can think of the early community of Believers as including those Jews and Christians who were deemed sufficiently pious in their observances.[9]

[7] I first presented these ideas in "From Believers to Muslims: Confessional Self-Identity in the Early Muslim Community," *Al-Abḥāth* 50-51 (2002-2003), 9-53, and developed them further in *Muḥammad and the Believers: at the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).
[8] For example, Q. 2:62 and Q. 5:69.
[9] Later Islamic traditional sources do not describe any Christian communities as having resided in western Arabia, but as we have seen they do mention sizable Jewish communities as living in Yathrib/Medina (and elsewhere in the region).

Evidence for an early community of Believers that included some Jews, at least, is found not only in the Qur'ān, but also in the transcription of an early document usually called the "*umma* (community) document" or "Constitution of Medina."[10] This appears to be a copy of the agreement Muḥammad drew up with the inhabitants of Yathrib/Medina when he and his followers first came there, the purpose of which was to define how the different groups were to relate to one another. What is interesting is that this early document includes mention of a number of Jewish clans, which are defined as being part of the *umma.* As the document states "they are one community, to the exclusion of all [other] people."

So we might envision the early Believers' movement as being ecumenical. In reality, "ecumenical" is also a bit misleading as a term, for it implies a group that is consciously inclusive of different religious confessions. But what we are dealing with in the early Believers' movement is a community that was not yet a clear confession, one that had not yet sharply defined exactly what its boundaries were. It was not, in other words, a community that *included* groups despite seeing them as "different" –that might qualify as "ecumenical"—but a community that *saw various groups as being in some essential ways the same*—in particular, as honoring God's unity, as believing in the impending Last Judgment, and accepting the need to live righteously according to the law. To judge from the Qur'ān, the law (*dīn*) of the Jews (the *tawrāt*, Torah) and the Christians (the *injīl*, Gospels) was acceptable, as well as Qur'ānic law; Torah and Gospels, which are mentioned with honor in the Qur'ān, were seen as earlier revelations of God's law. So a certain amount of difference was tolerat-

[10] Although the text is preserved only in several later literary sources, its style and content convince even the most critical students of early Islam that it must be an authentic transcription of a document of early date. The most extensive study of it is Michael Lecker, *The "Constitution of Medina": Muhammad's First Legal Document* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 2004). See also R. B. Serjeant, "The 'Constitution of Medina,'" *Islamic Quarterly* 8 (1964), 3-16.

ed, as long as the central tenets of being a Believer were shared.

Note that I am not trying to suggest that this confessionally more "open" (or perhaps, confused or less clearly defined?) community of Believers was some kind of wishy-washy or "anything goes" movement.[11] There are passages in the Qur'ān that roundly condemn those who do *not* subscribe to the basic ideas of One God, Last Day, and righteous behavior. Those who deny the basic tenets—the *mushrikūn* or "associators" (who associate other things with God and are thus inadequately monotheist) —are anathema, and are to be kept away from, or fought if necessary, in the name of a strict, pietistic kind of monotheism. There is thus definitely a militant edge to the Qur'ān's piety. But the boundary between Believers and *mushrikūn*, between "us" and "them," did not fall along confessional lines in Qur'ānic discourse: some Christians and Jews were doubtless considered *mushrikūn*, while others were accepted as Believers.

This "Believers' movement" hypothesis faces a number of difficulties, however, most of which arise from the sources themselves. The most fundamental problem is that the evidence that actually dates to the seventh century is extremely limited in quantity. Much of the traditional account about Islam's origins is derived from a rich trove of sources—chronicles, collections of sayings of the prophet, genealogy works, etc.—but these are of much later date (9th or 10th century or later), so it is almost impossible to be sure that a particular report in them reflects early conditions and is not an interpolation of much later circumstances. Islam had certainly crystallized as a distinct religious confession

[11] Some have criticized *Muḥammad and the Believers* on the grounds that I present there the "nice, tolerant, and open Islam" that American liberals "hanker for" (Patricia Crone, "Among the Believers: A New Look at the Origins of Islam that describes a tolerant world that may not have existed," *Tablet* [online] August 10, 2010, p. 2). But they do not seem to have read the book very carefully, since I discuss the movement's tendency to militancy and uncompromising piety quite explicitly (pp. 82-86).

by the time these sources were being written, during the rule of the Abbasid caliphs (r. 750-1258), who increasingly imposed discriminatory measures on non-Muslims.

The sources that are contemporary with the movement's beginnings—basically, sources from the seventh century—must, then, be the ones to which we turn first, as they are free of the problem of interpolation; but they are quite limited in number and in scope, and often pose challenges of their own. They include the Qur'ān (itself problematic, as we shall see), the transcript of the aforementioned early document usually called the "Constitution of Medina" or the "*umma* document," a number of texts from the Christian communities of the Near East that appear to date from the seventh century, and some actual surviving documents from the early Believers' movement as it expanded its political hegemony in the Near East--papyri, inscriptions, and coins—most of which date after about 660 CE.

A vexing feature of some of these sources is that the evidence they provide is often ambiguous and subject to conflicting interpretation, or is downright contradictory. Particularly difficult is the evidence provided by the Qur'ān, which generally I believe to be a text of early, seventh-century date.[12] In it we find verses that, as noted above, clearly support the idea of a Believers' community that includes some *ahl al-kitāb*[13]—indeed, it is from these verses that I first concluded that the original community may have been confessionally undefined. On the other hand, some

[12] John Wansbrough, in *Qur'ānic Studies*, advanced the theory that the *Qur'ān* coalesced as a fixed canon of scripture slowly, over a period of almost 300 years. For my critique of this theory, see my *Narratives of Islamic Origins* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1997), chapter 1, "The Date of the Qur'ānic Canon." Early Qur'ān fragments studied in the last several decades suggest that the Qur'ān already existed as written scripture by the late seventh century, even if not all details of the text had fully stabilized. See the works of François Déroche, e.g. *Qur'āns of the Umayyads. A First Overview* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2014).
[13] Esp. Q. 2:62 and Q. 5:69.

other verses in the Qur'ān are stridently anti-Jewish or anti-Christian (particularly hostile to the idea of Jesus as God's son)[14]—and one is even puzzlingly anti-Jewish but pro-Christian.[15] How, then, are we to explain these glaring inconsistencies in the Qur'ānic evidence? There are several logical possibilities we might pursue. (1) Perhaps the most obvious is to see the conflicting verses as relating to different specific situations or episodes in Muḥammad's life, and to argue that the various verses do not have general import, but merely reflect those particular situations, and so are not really contradictory. (2) Another explanatory possibility would be to argue that the Qur'ān is an amalgam of textual components hailing from different communities (in Arabia?), and that these different communities had different attitudes toward the *ahl al-kitāb* –a view which, however, forces us to part dramatically from the outlines of the traditional story of the prophet's life and how the Qur'ān fits into it. (3) A third possibility, equally radical in its implications, is to see these conflicting verses as belonging to different periods extending beyond the prophet's life, so that while the bulk of the Qur'ān is contemporary with him and the earliest community, some passages are interpolations that reflect the attitude prevailing in the community perhaps as much as fifty or seventy-five years later, when we know that the Qur'ān was edited in order to add diacritical marks and other aids to accurate reading—and perhaps revised.[16] There is as yet no scholarly consensus on these matters, however. They take us into the question of how the Qur'ān text evolved in its early years and what the Qur'ān text actually was in the first place, questions that are very much under debate at present and which we certainly cannot resolve today.

[14] E.g., Q. 4:171; Q. 18:4-5.
[15] Q. 5:82.
[16] On this edition see Alfred-Louis de Prémare, "'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān and the Process of the Qur'ān's Composition," in Karl-Heinz Ohlig and Gerd-R. Puin (eds.), *The Hidden Origins of Islam* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus, 2010), 189-221.

We can, however, make two observations. First, since we have clear evidence of different attitudes towards the *ahl al-kitāb* expressed in the Qur'ān, we can probably safely assume that there may always have been some tension within the community on this question. But second, since the "Constitution of Medina" and other evidence from the seventh century shows that at least some *ahl al-kitāb* were included in the life of the state and community in its earliest form, we cannot simply dismiss the passages that are more accepting of the *ahl al-kitāb* as minor special cases.

Moreover, here is other relevant seventh-century evidence, besides the "Constitution of Medina," which we have discussed briefly above, that seems to show that the early community included some Christians, at least. (We have far less information, unfortunately, on the relations of Jews and Zoroastrians with the Umayyads at this time.) We know that under the early Umayyads (r. 660-750), many Christians were involved in the activities of the new regime. Christians served of course as low-level scribes and accountants in the tax bureaucracy, as we see in many papyrus documents they wrote. But they also served as high administrators, such as the members of the Manṣūr family (especially Sergius and his son John of Damascus)—heads of the civil bureaucracy for several early Umayyad caliphs[17]—or Athanasius bar Gumoye, who was head adviser to 'Abd al-'Azīz b. Marwān, governor of Egypt in the late seventh century.[18] There seem to have been Christian soldiers in the army—notably whole contingents in the army of Yazīd b. Mu'āwiya in the early 680s.[19]

[17] See Sidney Griffith, "The Manṣūr Family, John of Damascus: Christians and Muslims in Umayyad Times," in Antoine Borrut and Fred M. Donner (eds.), *Christians and Others in the Umayyad State* (Chicago: The Oriental Institute, forthcoming).
[18] On Athanasius, see Andrew Palmer, *The Seventh Century in West-Syrian Chronicles* (Liverpool: University of Liverpool Press, 1993), 202-205.
[19] See Wadad al-Qadi, "Non-Muslims in the Muslim Conquest Army," in Borrut and Donner (eds.), *Christians and Others* (forthcoming); on Christian soldiers under Yazīd, see my *Muḥammad and the Believers,* 181.

Writing a few years later, in 687, the Syriac author John Bar Penkaye describes the regular campaigns of raiding sent to distant regions by the *mhaggrāyē* (as the newcomers were called in Syriac, reflecting the Arabic word *muhājirūn*), which returned with much plunder, and notes that "among them were many Christians, both from among the heretics and from among us," i.e., both Nestorians and Miaphysites. He also noted that Mu'āwiya allowed all religious communities to worship as they pleased.[20] So there seems to have been some fluidity in the way the new community of Believers drew its boundaries. Evidently the *mu'minūn*/ Believers and some people in the local Christian populations in the conquered regions were able to find a basis for close cooperation; the question that cannot be decisively answered was whether these Christians were actually considered part of the community of Believers, or were simply cooperating with it. But since, according to the "Constitution of Medina," Jews at a slightly earlier time were included as an integral part of the community of Believers, as we have seen above, it does not seem unreasonable to suppose that for a time Christians, too, might have been so included.

What of the notion that the Believers' movement actually began as a form of Judaism or Christianity? C. C. Torrey[21] seemed to think Judaism was formative and even says at one point in the book that it's surprising that Muḥammad did not simply become a Jew since he had borrowed so much from Judaism. Conversely, many others, including Günter Lüling and scholars of the "Inarah" school around Christoph Luxenberg have stressed the parallels with Eastern (Syriac) Christianity so insistently that they seem to be convinced that Islam really began as a kind of Christianity.[22] But I think recent work by Gabriel Reyn-

[20] Relevant passages from John Ber Penkaye are found in Palmer, *Seventh Century.* The Syriac text was published by Alfonse Mingana (ed.), *Sources Syriaques* (Leipzig: O. Harrassowitz, 1908).
[21] Charles Cutler Torrey, *The Jewish Foundation of Islam* (N.Y.: Jewish Institute of Religion, 1933).
[22] See Lüling, *Wiederentdeckung*; essays in Ohlig and Puin (eds.), *The Hidden Origins of Islam*.

olds is relevant and important here: Reynolds shows that the Qur'ān is not borrowing from contemporary Christian discourse, but rather is intervening in or responding to that discourse, offering its own interpretations that correct what it saw as its errors of theology.[23] Whether this makes the Qur'ān originally inside the discourse, or outside it, can still be debated. But, what does it matter, in the end, whether the Believers' movement (or Muḥammad himself) was "originally" Christian or Jewish? The movement had its own distinct evolution over time.

Then there is the interesting question of what we might call the "vanishing Jews" at the origins of Islam. The earliest evidence we have suggests that relations between the Believers and Jews were important. The Qur'ān has much more material that seems to reflect themes from Hebrew Bible rather than Gospels. (Though maybe filtered through Syriac *Peshitta*?) The "Constitution of Medina" makes it clear that various clans of Jews of Yathrib were part of the original community—Christians are not mentioned. The chronicle attributed to the Armenian bishop Sebeos (660s), besides offering the first somewhat detailed explanation of Muḥammad's career and the nature of his preaching—which includes a prominent role for the Jews of Edessa in inspiring it—also notes that when the "Ishmaelites" took over Jerusalem a Jew served as their governor.[24] So there is a scatter of quite early evidence suggesting some kind of close relationship between the earliest Believers and Arabian Jews.

Yet, as noted above, by the 660s Jews seem to disappear from the record of the Believers' movement; we have, in general,

[23] Gabriel Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and its Biblical Subtext* (Milton and New York: Routledge, 2010).
[24] "…their prince was from among the Jews…" See *The Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos*. (Translated, with notes, by R. W. Thomson; historical commentary by James Howard-Johnston. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999). Part I: Translation and Notes, 103. [= *Translated Texts for Historians*, vol. 31]. See also Part II: Historical Commentary, 249.

hardly any evidence for the history of Jewish communities in Arabia or the Fertile Crescent or Egypt for much of the seventh century. Christians, on the other hand, who are hardly visible in the origins phase in Medina, are under the Umayyads in the later seventh century suddenly and everywhere prominent. Was there some kind of shift within the community, or are we dealing with a form of optical illusion generated by the incompleteness of our sources? This puzzle remains.

We see, then, that there is considerable evidence that the earliest community founded by Muḥammad was an "ecumenical" one (again, a misleading word) that included some Christians and Jews, and that it continued as a confessionally indeterminate religious movement into the Umayyad period. This, however, naturally raises the question of when and how the movement lost this "open" quality and became strictly defined as "Islam," as a separate confession distinct from others, in particular distinct from Judaism and Christianity—because it is clear that this is what Islam eventually became. And we must try to decide whether this shift from a "Believers' movement" to "Islam" was a sudden one, or a gradual one.

Or, to put it the other way 'round—since what is absolutely clear in this process of genesis is that Islam ultimately emerges at the end—how far back can we see this reification of Islam as a new confession, a new religious identity separate from others? The traditional view, of course, is that Islam as a "closed" religion goes back to the very beginning, to the time of the prophet, but both the Qur'ānic evidence of openness to some *ahl al-kitāb* and similar evidence from the "Constitution of Medina" and from the early Umayyad period makes this questionable. The earliest document that definitively speaks of Islam in a reified sense, and that clearly distances itself from the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, are the inscriptions in the mosaics of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, constructed around 691 C.E. by the Umayyad *amīr al-mu'minīn* 'Abd al-Malik (r. 685-705). The documentary evidence produced by the believers/*mu'minūn* before this time seems con-

sistently to be strongly monotheist: it insists on God's oneness, but lacks the clear emphasis on the prophet Muḥammad and the Qur'ān as scripture that become the hallmarks of Islam as a unique religious confession, as we see it in the eighth century and later. Seen from this perspective, the Qur'ān's verses condemning the Trinity and the *ahl al-kitāb* seem like outliers, so the natural question arises: is it possible that these Qur'ānic verses are not original parts of the text, but interpolations added when the text was subjected to re-editing and codification under 'Abd al-Malik? This is a suggestive hypothesis, but one too large to address today, so we must leave its exploration as the subject for another occasion.

Before closing, I would like to read to you three quotes from primary sources of the seventh century that suggest, in different and interesting ways, what relations between the early Believers and Christians, for whom we have information, may have been like.

[1] The first is a passage from a Maronite chronicler, written in Syriac possibly in the 660s but only found in a later "layered chronicle" (i.e., one in which an earlier text is added onto subsequently).[25]

> Year 971, 18th [year] of Constans [the Byzantine emperor Constans II, r. 641-668]: "Many of the nomads (*ṭayyāyē)* gathered at Jerusalem and made Mu'awiya king (*malkā*). He went up and took a seat on Golgotha and prayed in it. And he went to Gethsamane and went down to the tomb

[25] E.-W. Brooks (ed.), *Chronicon Maroniticum* [= *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium,* Scriptores Syri, vol. 3), 71. Cf. Robert Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1997), 136. Hoyland misleadingly translates Syriac *ṭayyāyē,* ("nomads") as "Arabs," perhaps following the Latin translation of J.-B. Chabot (in vol. 4, 55), in line with his view that an effective "Arab identity" existed already in the early seventh century.

> of the blessed Mary and prayed in it."

If we can accept this testimony about Mu'āwiya (r. 660-680), the first Umayyad "commander of the Believers," he seems to have had a definite reverence for Jesus and Mary. Both are, of course, mentioned in the Qur'ān, Jesus as a prophet. In any case, it hardly suggests a hostile attitude towards Jesus or Christianity. On the other hand, the Armenian chronicle attributed to bishop Sebeos describes a letter supposedly sent from the "king of Ismael" ('Uthmān) to the Byzantine emperor Constans II in 653/654, in which he says, "…abandon that vain cult which you learned from childhood. Deny that Jesus and turn to the great God whom I worship, the God of our father Abraham."[26] Such a theological position is not necessarily inconsistent with the evident reverence for Jesus and prophet and his mother Mary shown by Mu'āwiya, but it suggests a less welcoming attitude toward Christianity than that implied in the *Maronite Chronicle*. Perhaps the difference was in the temperament and situation of the two men, 'Uthmān and his governor, Mu'āwiya; the latter was married to the Christian daughter of the chief of the powerful Syrian tribe of Kalb, who bore him his son and eventual successor Yazīd b. Mu'āwiya.

[2] The second quote comes from the *Canons* of Jacob, Bishop of Edessa from 684-688. These are essentially Jacob's responses to questions pose to him as bishop by his subordinate priests. Question 75 of Addai the priest to Jacob is as follows:[27]

> Concerning a Christian woman who of her own free will marries a *muhājir* (*mhaggrāyā*), is it appropriate for priests to give her communion and is there known a canon regarding this? And if her husband threatens to kill the

[26] *The Armenian History attributed to Sebeos*, 143-45.

[27] Translation from Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 604-605; I have replaced Hoylands' anachronistic translation of *mhaggrāyā* as "Muslim" with *muhājir*, "emigrant," the Arabic word from which the Syriac word was derived.

> priest if he does not give communion to her, is it right for him to consent temporarily while he (the husband) is seeking that he (the priest) be killed, | or is it a sin for him to consent? Or is it better that he give her communion lest she become a *muhājir*, since her husband is compassionate towards the Christians?

This most interesting passage, written in the 680s, hardly suggests that Christianity or Christians were oppressed by the *mhaggrāyē* / Believers at this time; particularly noteworthy is the fact that the *mhaggar* was insisting that the priest give his Christian wife communion. If anything, it suggests that the Christians (or at least the priest) viewed the *mhaggrāyē* as unacceptable (i.e., they were in his view heretics?) since he wanted to deny communion to the *mhaggar's* wife. On the other hand, it may be that this negative attitude toward the Believers was restricted to members of the clerical hierarchy–the Christian woman did marry the *mhaggar*, after all. This is exactly the same time when John Bar Penkaye, as we have seen, was describing the conquerors' raiding parties as having many Christian participants.

[3] The third quote is from the Arabic *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria*. It describes the actions of 'Abd al-'Azīz b. Marwān, governor of Egypt and brother of the *amīr al-mu'minīn* 'Abd al-Malik, both of whom died in 705 CE. It seems to record a shift on the part of the Umayyad government to a policy that was much more hostile to Christianity:[28]

> He ['Abd al-'Azīz] ordered the breaking of all the crosses which were in the land of Egypt, even the crosses of gold and silver. So the Christians of the country of Egypt became troubled. Then he wrote a number of notices and placed them on the doors of the churches in Misr and the

[28] Translation from Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 151. The original is edited and translated by B. Evetts in *Patrologia Orientalis* 5 (1910), 25 (Paragraph XVI).

> Delta, saying in them: “Muḥammad is the great messenger (*al-rasūl al-kabīr*) who is God’s, and Jesus too is the messenger of God. God does not beget, and is not begotten.”

There are several things we might note about this remarkable report. (1) The command that all crosses in Egypt should be broken suggests that crosses were intact until this time, that is, through most of the seventh century. Churches routinely had crosses on their dome, of course, so were a prominent symbol of a Christian presence in a place, but apparently this was not something the early Believers considered a problem. (2) The fact that the governor expressly ordered that his notices be posted on the doors of churches in Egypt is also interesting. Does it suggest that hitherto, Christians had been considered part of the Believers’ movement? Does it suggest that ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (or his brother, the *amīr al-mu’minīn* ‘Abd al-Malik) was trying to combat what he saw as a kind of heresy in his own community, which gathered in churches? We know that mosques were being constructed before this time; but there are well-known reports that the early Believers shared Christian churches after the conquest as places of worship (for example, in Jerusalem, Damascus and Ḥamāh),[29] and archaeologists have unearthed in Palestine evidence of churches rebuilt in the seventh century that include, in addition to the usual east-facing sanctuary, a *miḥrāb* or prayer niche in the south wall,[30] which also suggests that the early Believers and the local Christian communities may have been praying together or at least sharing the same prayer space. But this decree may mark the moment when that earlier cohabitation was officially changed. (3) The notices, besides emphasizing Muḥammad’s status as God’s messenger, also stated that Jesus was God’s messenger, followed by the assertion that God does not beget nor is begotten. This is, of course, on the one hand a direct critique of the Christian doctrine of Jesus’s divine status and of the Trinitarian doc-

[29] See references in Donner, “Believers to Muslims,” 51-52.
[30] See Leah Di Segni, “Christian Epigraphy in the Holy Land: New Discoveries,” *Aram* 15 (2003), 247-67, at 248, on the Cathisma church outside Jerusalem.

trine that Jesus was "God's son." On the other hand, the statement that Jesus is one of God's messengers, on a par with Muḥammad, reflects a basic respect for Jesus (as prophet) on the part of the early Believers that may have made possible some integration of the two groups, or at least a kind of symbiosis—whether willing or uneasy—for about a half-century. (4) It is noteworthy, too, that the phrasing of the notices 'Abd al-'Azīz is reported to have posted is very similar to that found in the inscriptions in the Dome of the Rock, erected on the orders of 'Abd al-Malik around 691 CE. It seems likely, therefore, that this report reflects a change of policy implemented throughout the Umayyad domains, the moment when Islām, as a distinct religious confession, finally and definitively separated itself from the matrix of the Believers' movement out of which it was born.

So—how "ecumenical" was "early Islam"? Or, to rephrase the question in terminology that avoids the built-in problems with both key terms: in what measure was it possible for the early Believers' movement to accommodate, and to be accommodated by, the Christian, Jewish, and perhaps other monotheist communities whom it came to govern in the seventh-century Near East? The evidence is not copious, and is sometimes ambiguous or unclear, but I hope to have shown that the strict and often uncompromising confrontation between what would later be called Muslims, on the one hand, and Christians, Jews, and others, on the other hand, was not a feature of the religious and political landscape until perhaps the last decade of the seventh century and later. Until then, it seems, the Believers' movement exhibited a certain fluidity of boundaries with other monotheist communities. This may have allowed people to identify with more than one community at the same time; and it was presumably rooted in the recognition that they shared some common ground (for example, acknowledging God's oneness, or fear of the coming Last Judgment, or in the case of Christians, their shared reverence for Jesus—whatever his theological status, as divinity or merely as prophet). This allowed them to work together for a time, rather than seeing each other unalterably as the enemy. In the end, the

contradictory theological principles enshrined in the different scriptures of these groups led to an irrevocable separation of Islam and Muslims as a distinct religious confession, but this was a process of self-definition that required at least a couple of generations to work itself to completion. The seventh century Believers' movement provided the arena in which that process took place.

Department of Near Eastern Languages & Civilization
University of Washington
Denny Hall 229, Box 353120
Seattle, WA 98195-3120