

Griffith, Sydney H. *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008.

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Summary

Few figures in the world of Christian-Muslim studies loom as large as Sidney H. Griffith, and his now nearly decade old work, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, remains one of the most important pieces of work on the subject. This distillation of 30 years' worth of research on Christians living under Muslim rule seeks to be an introductory work on the matter, particularly during the "Golden Age" of Islam—the 8th to 13th centuries. Griffith highlights the mixed feelings Christians living under Muslim rule felt in regards to Islam, noting the use of "shadow" in the title conjures up the image of protective shade and overshadowing power. The book touches on a number of key subjects—Muslim understandings of Christians (chapter 1); Christian responses to Islam (chapter 2); Arabic formulations of Christian theology and philosophy (chapters 3–5); Christian identity under Islam (chapter 6); and religious dialogue in the past and present (chapter 7). Griffith states, "The purpose of this book is to provide a succinct overview of the cultural and intellectual achievements...of the Christians who spoke and wrote in Syriac and Arabic..." (4); Griffith achieves this purpose, but his perlocutionary goal is to encourage greater inter-religious dialogue between Christians and Muslims, stating:

It could pave the way for Christians of the world of Islam to lead their coreligionists in the rest of the world into a renewed Muslim/Christian dialogue and to hasten the general recognition of the fact that there is indeed an 'Islam-Christian' heritage on which both Muslims and Christians can draw in their efforts to promote a peaceful and mutually respectful *convivencia* in the future (4).

The first two chapters paint a broad picture of Christian life in the Muslim world. The first chapter surveys the Christian world from the Muslim perspective, detailing how Christians (and Jews) were perceived in the Quran and their political status of *dhimmi* in the Muslim world. Griffith is quick to note the generally positive descriptions of Christians in the Quran but makes no means of shying away from the harder statements made by the Quran or from the actions of

Muslims in the following centuries (9–10). The second chapter looks at early Christian responses to Islam before the advent of the caliphate. In this chapter we see the beginning of the tension Christian communities had with the Muslims. Some early Christian writers note the commonality between the two monotheistic faiths, even acknowledging that Mohammed freed the Arab people from a life of paganism (38), but ever cognizant of the fact that the two faiths were hardly the same.

The next four chapters are where the book hits its stride, focusing on Christian life that was fully immersed in a Muslim context. Chapter 3 details the change from Syriac and Greek as ecclesiastical languages to Arabic being both the language of the people and the church. As Christians lived under Muslim rule, texts began to emerge that show a strong familiarity with the Quran (55), and some theologians began to write entire works in Arabic, such as Theodore Abu Qurrah. Chapter 4 further traces development of Christian theology in Arabic as communicated through the literary genres of the day: the monk in the emir's majlis; questions and answers; the epistolary exchange; the systematic treatise. Beyond internal developments, in chapter 5 Griffith explores Christian contributions to the philosophical world of Islam particularly through the works of Ḥunayn ibn Isḥāq and Yaḥyā ibn 'Adī, Christian philosophers who translated the works of Aristotle and others from Greek into Arabic. Chapter 6 returns to the internal development of Christianity though highlighting the various differences between the Christian communities of the Nestorians, Jacobites, Melkites, and others. Additionally, it traces how Christians viewed themselves within the caliphate.

The seventh, and final, chapter details the development of Muslim and Christian dialogue during the classic Muslim period, along with a way forward for Muslim and Christian dialogue today. This chapter reiterates some of the themes found in previous chapters, such as 'The Qur'ān and Dialogue,' and introduces new ones, such as 'The Religion of Abraham.' This latter section proves quite interesting as this trope is often touted as the greatest common denominator between the three monotheistic faiths (i.e. Abrahamic faiths), but Griffith demonstrates how this motif found in the Quran was dismissed by Christians, or rather, how

Christians interpreted the story of Abraham in such a way that it served as an indictment against Islam and not a point of agreement (165). The final section in this chapter focuses on setting a path forward for Christian/Muslim relations that is predicated on the lessons of history.

Review

This is a tremendous work that seeks to accomplish what few, if any, have done previously. Griffith tells the story of Christians whose once proud voices have been muffled by time; they have been nearly silenced in the East, and the West has been dull of hearing. Overall, the book is accessible to the uninitiated in the subject, straying away from delving too deep into the minutia of scholarly debate. However, though accessible, this book is by no means a textbook introduction.

As other reviewers have noted, the fact that these chapters began as public lectures (xi) often lends to the book being repetitive, and the structure is not intuitive to the novice. When defining technical terms, Griffith will often give a quick gloss to a term and supply a much greater definition far later—the term *mutakallimūn* is used three times without definition (73, 85, 90) until finally being defined as “...*mutakallimūn*, the Muslim controversial theologians” (93); then, we find this appositional definition used two more times (95, 96). This repetition may be useful for those not knowledgeable in the field, but clear definition of terms earlier on could greatly enhance the use of this book in the classroom. The structure of the book also feels a bit haphazard as the various Christian communities, who are mentioned extensively throughout the book, are not given proper definitions and context until chapter 6. Again, this does not negate the use of the book, but these issues can slow the reader down. Perhaps instructors would find it more beneficial to students to assign the chapters in differing orders as dictated by the course material.

The footnotes may prove themselves to be the most valuable resource to scholars. The footnotes punctuate nearly every page, usually with little commentary but pointing the reader in the direction of more comprehensive studies. The sheer number of Griffith’s references to his

own work is a testament to his contribution in the field.

One common theme that weaves its way in and out of every chapter is *discourse*. Griffith goes to great lengths to demonstrate the ever ongoing dialogue that Christians had with their Muslim rulers and neighbors; a dialogue that has been silent for quite some time. Griffith is not an evangelical, but his work can prove useful for those seeking to engage Muslims in dialogue. This book traces a pattern of how Christian communities have engaged Islam in the past. To those of us in the West, Islam is still perceived as a distant religion, but it was the context for those Christian communities discussed within the book. Christian dialogue with Muslims demonstrated a strong sense of shared tradition with Islam and utilized the Quran's recognition of Christians as "People of the Book" as a step stone for demonstrating the validity of the Christian faith; a step stone that remains till today. Griffith demonstrates how Christians were willing to speak their faith in the language of their Muslim neighbors—the actual language (Arabic) and the use of religious terms inherent to the Quran.

Overall, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque* is a superb work well suited for those who have little knowledge of the field or those who are well versed in the subject.