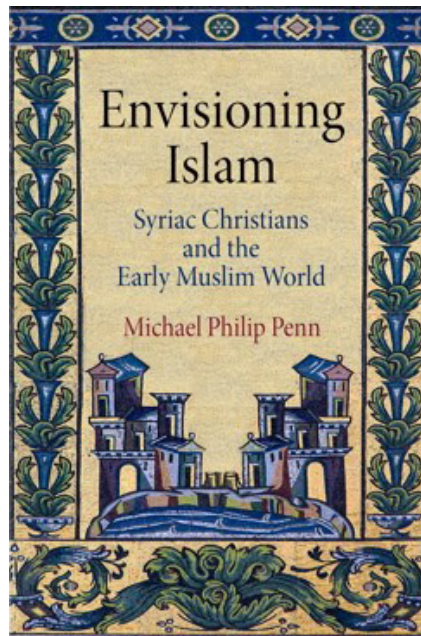


Envisioning Islam: Syriac Christians and the Early Muslim World

SYRIAC Christians were among the first people to write about Islam, when, not long after the Muslim conquests of the Middle East, they began to make sense of their new rulers, their power, their laws and their beliefs. Research into the textual heritage of Syriac writings about Islam goes back a century, yet Michael Penn's *Envisioning Islam* is the first monograph on the topic. At first sight, the work seems to be a synthesis of earlier research, but in fact Penn presents his own readings of the relevant texts and has many interesting new ideas about them. He does not claim to present an exhaustive overview of the sources and themes, but he does cover interesting terrain and has looked at no fewer than 60 different Syriac writings relevant to Islam from the first three centuries of Islam. In another volume, *When Christians First Met Muslims* (2015), which appeared simultaneously, Penn presents excerpts in translation from many of these. The collection of texts is very diverse, ranging from dry chronological lists to entertaining hagiographies and from pious advice about daily interaction with Muslims to highly dramatic apocalyptic scenarios that predict a speedy end of Islam. Penn reads his texts carefully and is very alert when it comes to the subtle strategies and messages in the texts.

In the first chapter, Penn reviews the way Syriac writers from the seventh through the ninth century adjusted their view of history in light of lasting Muslim domination. Moving from trying to portray Islam as a temporary chastisement to a gradual realization that Islamic rule was to be taken as a



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reality, the first three centuries of Islam were a period in which Syriac thinkers tried to find a place for Islam in their worldview. One of Penn's messages here

is that too much weight has been given in earlier scholarship to the view of the Syrian Orthodox historian Dionysius of Tell-Mahre (d. 845), who portrayed the rise of Islam as a liberation from Byzantine rule. Dionysius wrote two centuries after the beginning of Islam and therefore cannot be a reliable source for the claim that Syriac Christians welcomed the Muslim conquests. Moreover, this idea is not supported by other sources; on the contrary, during the first two centuries of Islam 'Syriac sources were unanimous in seeing the conquests as a lamentable development' (51).

In the next chapter, Penn discusses the labels Syriac authors gave to Muslims and what interpretation of Islam might hide behind these labels. They used the ethnic term *Tayyaye* (at the time the most common way to say 'Arab' in Syriac), and the biblical-ethnic term *Hagarenes*, but also religious terms such as 'pagan', 'Jew' and 'new Jew'. Penn explains in detail how this seemingly confusing constellation of labels reflects an ongoing process of constructing an image of Muslims in familiar categories with varying degrees of 'otherness'. Penn shows how close reading can help us to distinguish ignorance from strategizing on the part of the authors. An interesting example is his reading of Theodore bar Koni's Scholion, in which this East-Syrian theologian set his apology for Christianity in the format of a dialogue between a Christian teacher and his student. The student's identity seems ambiguous and not entirely Islamic, but Penn argues convincingly that this ambiguity forms part of Theodore's strategy to

present Islam as a patchwork of ideas, and possibly also to reflect the reality of religious hybridity found in northern Mesopotamia at the time.

Muslim rulers took up much space in the imagination of Syriac authors. They embodied the power of Islam as well as its beliefs. In Chapter 3, Penn shows how they were made into the main actors in many Syriac writings about Islam, whose authors used the figure of the ruler to shape an ideal of how Christians should be protected by Muslims rulers and of how Muslims should be seen as near-Christians. Such images could serve to counterbalance times of oppression and violence, which also feature in Syriac writings. Penn shows, too, how Muslim rulers could be presented in such ways as to underscore the orthodoxy of one's own Christianity over and against rival Christian denominations.

Chapter 4 consists of a very engaging discussion of a colourful array of sources for social history, including several fascinating pieces of hagiography. The author focuses on accounts of conversion and near-conversion, circumcision, intermarriage, the sharing of shrines, etc., but goes beyond sketching Muslim-Christian interaction on the basis of these texts. Penn acknowledges their prescriptive value and shows convincingly that their authors are primarily concerned with boundary-making in a world in which Muslim and Christian lives were intertwined and, at times, not clearly distinguishable. The Syriac image-making about Islam was clearly shaped by the reality of living under Muslim rule. The writings can often be seen as attempts to balance a sufficient level of otherness with the need to cooperate with Muslim neighbours and rulers in order to protect the community and preserve its identity. Penn's careful readings of the sources reveal how this balance was sought.

Penn would like to view Syriac-speakers as the first Christians to 'encounter' Muslims, and

therefore pays little to no attention to the fact that Greek- and Coptic-speakers witnessed the rise of Islam too and that, in areas dominated by Islam, Christians wrote many and hugely interesting things in response to Islam in Arabic. When mentioning Greek writings, he makes it sound as though these were written from afar, although some of the first Christian writings from within the Islamic realm were written in Greek in Palestine. When briefly referring to writings in other languages, Penn is inclined to exaggerate their tendencies to misrepresent Islam, so as to create a contrast between these and the images created by Syriac writers. This is problematic. First, a fair and systematic comparison of the writings about Islam of the various Eastern Christian communities should precede such a claim. Second, the author's claim that 'Syriac writings were more restrained than Greek and Latin texts in how they caricatured Islam' (55) is probably true *grosso modo*, but the types of caricatures he lists are to be found in Syriac sources too. Just as in Greek and Latin sources, we can read in Syriac that Muhammad's corpse was rotting after his failed resurrection; why the Qur'an is a laughable mishmash; and how Muslims worship Aphrodite like their pagan ancestors without even realizing it. It is just that Penn does not cite the Syriac writings in question. In other words, it seems as though some texts have been conveniently ignored. The irony

is that, although Penn makes frequent comments in the book to underline this supposed contrast in image-making between Syriac Christians and other Christians, in his conclusion he takes much of this claim away, because when he makes up the balance, he admits that the Syriac writings reviewed are very diverse in their approach to Islam and reflect a range of different experiences. Moreover, he is no longer sure that it is useful to think of the portrayal of Islam in terms of '(in)tolerance', not only because this is a modern concept, but also because the texts he studied are, in all fairness, mostly about the self and not about the other: 'these writers' emphasis always remained on Christian self-identity' (185).

More convincing is the contrast that Penn paints between, on the one hand, the close interaction between Syriac Christians and Muslims in the Middle East, and on the other, the distance between the Western world and Islam, as it is perceived in the West, and intensified by writings such as Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* (1996). Penn's irritation about such a black-and-white world view in the United States was one of the motivating factors behind this book project. Hopefully readers will find this work engaging and agree with Penn's conclusion (186) that 'for centuries Christianity and Islam exhibited too much permeability, interdependence, and convergence to be defined as firmly bound, independent entities'.

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