

Sidney H. Griffith, THE CHURCH IN THE SHADOW OF THE MOSQUE: CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS IN THE WORLD OF ISLAM Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008. ISBN 978-0-691-13015-6 (cloth), 220 + xiii pages

This book distills forty years of scholarly labor into an introduction to the ancient and still living Churches of the East easily read by one with no knowledge of Arabic. It seeks to tell “the story of the religious, cultural, and intellectual achievements of the Arabophone Christians.”

Though standing in the Latin Christian tradition of Augustine, Peter of Cluny, Francis of Assisi, Louis Massignon, and the Second Vatican Council’s embrace of tolerance between religions, the author admires the theological inventiveness, rationality, and linguistic mastery of Arabic-speaking Christians. He aims to entice both today’s diminished Christian communities of the Middle East and the strong churches planted in or by the West to take time to hear these voices of Christians who were compelled to articulate their faith in a language whose concepts and style are shaped by the Arabic Qur’an.

If Dr. Ratzinger in 2006 had consulted Dr. Griffith as to which Eastern Christian authority to cite when discussing at Regensburg University the rationality of faith and the mistaken project to dehellenize Christian faith, His Holiness might not have chosen a Greek-speaking Byzantine Emperor – and so might have avoided the unintended uproar over being thought to imply that Islam is a religion of violence. Griffith might have suggested instead the Arabic-speaking Christian intellectual Yahya ibn Adi, born in the city of Takrit in Iraq in 893 A.D. Yahya became head of the Baghdad Aristotelians, using Aristotelian logic as an auxiliary discipline to defend the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. “He was convinced that in the end reason could serve the interests of revelation, and devotion to philosophy could preserve the decencies of life in common.” He argued: „Men are a single tribe (*qabil*), related to one another; humanity unites them. The adornment of the divine power is in all of them and in each one of them, and it is the rational soul.” Yahya moved in aristocratic circles close to the Caliph, but he preferred scholars, monks, and ascetics who chose “clothing of hair and coarse material, traveling on foot, obscurity, attendance at churches and mosques and so forth, and abhorrence for luxurious living”. The task of the spiritually serious, Yahya said, is to “give people an interest in eternal life.” (p. 125).

Griffith is realistic about the limited impact on Islam of this 500-year Arabophone theological effort. One Islamic thinker who responded to what he saw as Christian error was Ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1328), who remains authoritative among self-conscious Muslims today. In the wake of the Mongol conquest of once-tolerant Abbasid Baghdad, Ibn Taymiyyah turned his intellect against the internal Christian threat. On the whole, however, the primary readers of Arabophone theologians were their fellow Christians

in Baghdad, Jerusalem, Egypt, and Spain. In today’s English-speaking world, Griffith’s lucid reintroduction of these thinkers should be welcomed by at least two groups: Christians seeking to honor non-European expressions of Christian faith, and Muslims still laboring to reconcile Islamic ways of knowing with the Western honoring of empirical knowledge and ideas of cause and effect.

Richard J. Jones



Washington Theological Consortium 487 Michigan Avenue NE Washington, DC 20017
Phone 202.832.2675 fax 202.526.0818 www.washtheocon.org

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