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“There is no harm in it”: Muslim Participation in Levantine Christian Religious Festivals (750–1000)

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ABSTRACT

This article explores early Muslim participation in local and large Christian festivals through the lens of two discussions within a tenth-century legal *responsa*, the *Ahl al-milal*. The local festivals of Job at Dayr Ayyūb and the Epiphany at Ṭūr Tabūr, as well as the larger festivals of Palm Sunday, Holy Fire and Easter, provide evidence of shared attendance at festivals in the ‘Abbāsīd period (750–1000). Islamic, and some Christian, legal, literary and geographical literature presents these events as Christian celebrations with shared narratives of venerated figures, which involved both practical and enjoyable aspects. Although the sharing of these celebrations was a common factor, there was a diversity in local practices. A trend developed amongst Muslim attendees to limit their participation to the market and activities outside the church building in some areas of the Levant, but not in Jerusalem. This seems to have occurred spontaneously in some areas and was not specifically due to a ruling by a jurist.

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Muslims and Christians in the Middle East have participated in each other’s festivals from the advent of Islam to the present day. In the ‘Abbāsīd period (750–1000) in the Levant, shared celebrations and sacred spaces are particularly prominent. The veneration of figures such as Abraham/Ibrāhīm, John the Baptist/Yahyā b. Zakariyyā, and the Virgin Mary/Maryam, amongst many other local saints, represent shared traditions between Christianity and Islam and can therefore contribute extensively to our understanding of Islam in this period.¹ Significantly, understanding which practices were shared would also clarify what conversion to Islam from Christianity may have entailed in the early centuries of Muslim rule.

CONTACT Anna Chrysostomides  a.chrysostomides@qmul.ac.uk,  School of History, Queen Mary University of London, London, UK.

¹For further studies on shared shrines, pilgrimage sites and celebrations: regarding Mit Damsis see Myriam Wissa, “Together on the Way to the Monastic Church of Mit Damsis: Copts and Muslims at the Mūlid of Saint George in Medieval Islamic Egypt and Beyond”, *Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 7/2 (2016): 229–34. Regarding the Kathisma, see Rina Avner, “The Kathisma: A Christian and Muslim Pilgrimage Site”, *Aram* 19 (2007): 541–57; for multiple Palestinian sites, see Daniel Reynolds, “Monasticism and Christian Pilgrimage in Early Islamic Palestine c.614–950”, PhD Thesis, University of Birmingham, 2013, especially pp. 378–414; regarding al-Ruṣāfa, see Elizabeth Key-Fowden, *The Barbarian Plain: Saint Sergius between Rome and Iran* (London: University of California Press, 1999); regarding the church of Hagios Giorgos at Lydda, see D. Pringle, *The Churches of the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem, a Corpus*, volume II: L-Z (excluding Tyre) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 9–27.

While Muslims were a social majority in terms of their cultural capital, they were a numerical minority in the ‘Abbāsid Levant.² Christian communities, on the other hand, while a social minority, were a numerical majority. Christians’ diverse worldviews, customs and practices would have been commonplace, and therefore often viewed as normative, at a time when Muslim communities were still establishing themselves.

Muslim attendance at Christian festivities appears to have happened at various points throughout the year. While some Muslim jurists had strong opinions on where to draw communal boundaries, average Christians and Muslims appear to have given little thought to Muslim presence at Christian festivals. This phenomenon was even unavoidable in some areas, particularly in Syria, where mosques were often inside large church complexes until they slowly separated throughout the eleventh to fifteenth centuries.³ In other areas, such as Baghdad, we see urban Muslims flocking to rural monasteries for Lenten festivals.⁴

Most Christian festivals appear to have had a related market, which was attended by people from other religious traditions. While some sources suggest that Muslims predominantly attended the festivities without being drawn to the religious ceremonies, as discussed below, this does not appear to be in response to the ruling of jurists, but rather a custom that developed organically over time in certain areas. This, of course, does not include the outdoor processions that would have been a part of many of these Christian festivities. Processions and other outdoor religious symbols and songs and would have been unavoidable for Muslim attendees of Christian festivals, even if their intention was simply to participate in the related market.

Jerusalem, as a shared holy city that was uniquely significant for both Christians and Muslims, appears to have been the exception to the trend. As discussed below, in this city, Muslim *imāms* and city officials participated in the religious ritual of the Holy Fire ceremony for almost a century. Admittedly, it is possible that this was not an exception but rather an accident of reporting. Shared participation may have happened elsewhere as

²Regarding the timing of Islamisation and conversion for different areas of the *dār al-Islām*, see Richard Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), ch. 3, “Iran”, and ch.7, “Iraq”; Michael Morony, “The Effects of the Muslim Conquest on the Persian Population of Iraq”, *Iran* 14 (1976): 41–59; Bethany J. Walker, “The Islamization of Central Jordan in the Seventh-to-Ninth Centuries: Lessons Learned from Hisbān”, *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 40 (2013): 143–75; Nehemia Levtzion, “Conversion to Islam in Syria and Palestine: Survival of Christian Communities”, in *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands Eighth-to-Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. Michael Gervers and Ramzi Jibran Bikhazi (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1990), pp. 289–311; Uriel Simonsohn, “Conversion to Islam: A Case Study for the Use of Legal Sources”, *History Compass* 11/8 (2013): 647–62; Milka Levy-Rubin, “New Evidence Relating to the Process of Islamization in Palestine in the Early Muslim Period: The Case of Samaria”, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 43/3 (2001): 257–76; Shaun O’Sullivan, “Coptic Conversion and the Islamization of Egypt”, *Mamluk Studies Review* 10/2 (2006): 65–79; Donald P. Little, “Coptic Conversion to Islam under the Bahrī Mamlūks, 692–755/1293–1354”, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 39/3 (1976): 552–69; idem, “Coptic Converts to Islam during the Bahrī Mamluk Period”, in *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands Eighth-to-Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. Michael Gervers and Ramzi Jibran Bikhazi (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1990), pp. 263–88; Linda G. Jones, “Islām al-kāfir fi ḥāl al-khuṭba: Concerning the Conversion of ‘Infidels’ to Islam during the Muslim Friday Sermon in Mamluk Egypt”, *Anuario de Estudios Medievales* 42/1 (2012): 53–75; John Iskander, “Islamization in Medieval Egypt: The Copto-Arabic ‘Apocalypse of Samuel’ as a Source for the Social and Religious History of Medieval Copts”, *Medieval Encounters* 4/3 (1998): 219–27; Étienne de la Vaissière, *Islamisation de l’Asie centrale: Processus locaux d’acculturation du VII^e au XI^e siècle* (Paris: Association Pour l’Avancement des Études Iraniennes, 2008).

³Mattia Gualdetti, *In the Shadow of the Church: The Building of Mosques in Early Medieval Syria* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), pp. 158–70.

⁴Al-Shābushtī, *Kitāb al-Diyārāt*, ed. Kūrkiš Awwad (Beirut: Dār al-Zā’id al-‘Arabī, 1986), p. 14; trans. in Jack Tannous, *The Making of the Medieval Middle East: Religion, Society, and Simple Believers* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), pp. 469–70.

well: chroniclers, geographers and theologians were far more likely to record life in Jerusalem than in smaller, more rural towns and villages.

Throughout this article the term “shared festivals” will be used as a deliberately flexible term. It is not entirely clear how early Muslim communities perceived these festivals and more likely than not there was significant regional variation. It is better, for the time being, to consider the events themselves as a whole, involving both religious ritual elements and markets, which were associated with the liturgical calendar and its corresponding rituals. These were both often tied into local agricultural patterns, which would have further affected the understanding of those who took part in these festivities. At once religious, practical and fun, the festival markets were not what we would consider “secular” today. They were unavoidably associated with the feast day of the figure being ritually celebrated. Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), when complaining of Levantine Muslims participating in the markets associated with Christian festivals, claims that he saw Muslims burning incense and hanging crosses on the doors of their homes as Christians did. He describes a market on the Lenten holiday of *al-Khamīs al-Kabīr*, Maundy Thursday, (the Thursday before Easter), as being full of the “sounds of these tiny knockers and with the mostly absurd wording of incantation by astrologers and others, all of which is either unlawful or smacks of unbelief”.⁵ His description evokes both smell and sound, creating a living sense of walking through a market where hymns were sung, astrologers advertised their work, crosses hung in doorways and people of both faiths came to celebrate and enjoy themselves. It is difficult to determine where the religiously significant aspects of the celebration end and where the more practical aspects of the market begin. Even if one were to draw a line between the liturgy and the market, it remains unclear exactly which elements of these festivals Muslims would have participated in. That said, many accounts outside of events outside Jerusalem emphasise enjoying the market and the general atmosphere of celebration.

The topic of shared festival attendance is remarkably complex and, in the context of early Islam, rarely studied in detail except through the lens of pilgrimage. This article is partially intended as an initial survey to see how this phenomenon may inform our understanding of the formation of Islam as a religious tradition, one of a ruling minority, as well as the development of Eastern Christian groups under Muslim rule, as a numerical majority but social minority in terms of cultural capital and political power.

When viewed in the larger context of boundary demarcation between Christians and Muslims, our exploration of why and how Muslims participated in Christian festivals can aid our understanding of how the average person, or “simple believer”, as defined by Jack Tannous, would have understood religious identity and practice.⁶ This information becomes available through the recorded actions of communities and individuals, and particularly through the religious elites’ or literate authors’ opinions of those actions. If in the Umayyad and ‘Abbāsīd periods, and even in some cases up to the fourteenth century, Muslims attended Christian festivals, this indicates an acceptance of Christian festivals as a normal part of social life, despite the religious significance that these events carried.

⁵He describes personal, hand-held versions of the clappers that called Christians to prayer. Muhammad Umar Memon, *Ibn Taymiyya’s Struggle against Popular Religion: With an Annotated Translation of his Kitāb Iqtidā’ aṣ-ṣirāt al-mustaqīm mukhālafat aṣḥāb al-jaḥīm* (Paris: Mouton, 1976), p. 210.

⁶Tannous, *Making of the Medieval Middle East*.

With the exception of questions of whether or not gift-giving on non-Muslim occasions was licit, festival attendance in itself rarely comes up as a question for jurists between 750 and 1000 CE. Even as late as the lifetime of al-Bīrūnī (d.ca. 1050), shared festival attendance appears to be more commonplace than not. It is likely that early Islam interacted differently with local practices that it encountered as it spread, much as Christianity had before it. At times, these encounters would have involved the adaptation of new Muslim communities to existing local practices. This was a recognised facet of the spread of Islam even in the early medieval period, as reflected in a Ḥadīth compiled by al-Bukhārī (d. 870):

The Prophet said, “You will follow the ways of those nations who were before you, span by span and cubit by cubit so much so that even if they entered the hold of a lizard you would follow them.” We said, “O God’s messenger, [do you mean] the Jews and the Christians?” He said, “Whom else”.⁷

Thomas Sizgorich uses the community narrative development theory of Ronald Grigor Suny alongside the anti-Jewish polemics of John Chrysostom to argue that a central aspect of community definition is the role of religious elites in creating stark boundaries between groups. These arguments are often rooted in meaningful communal narratives and discourage mingling with other communities. Sizgorich highlights the necessary tension between these lines being drawn and the inevitability of the average group-member, in this case Christians, crossing those carefully drawn lines.⁸ The significance of this comparison to our evidence on festival attendance is that we do not have a large amount of textual evidence forbidding Muslims outright from participation in Christian festivals during the period of this study. It is not until the Fāṭimid Caliph al-Ḥākim (r. 996–1021) that we see firm statements and actions from a religious and political leader against Muslim attendance at Christian festivals.⁹

Significantly later, during the fourteenth century, Ibn Taymiyya makes one of the first strongly polemical statements against Muslims participating in the festivals of People of the Book, particularly Christians. His *Iqtidāʾ al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*, written around 1315–1316, prohibits Muslims from indulging in popular practices during Christian festivals such as, “colouring eggs, incurring stupendous expenses, dressing children in decorative clothes, etc.”.¹⁰ He also laments that, “A great many of such people spread their clothes under the sky, in fervent hope that Mary’s blessing will descend upon them”.¹¹ Throughout this text, Ibn Taymiyya goes to considerable effort to interpret many of the same

⁷Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, ed. and trans. Muḥammad Muhsin Khan, volumes I–IX (Riyadh: Darus-salam, 1997), IX: 259, no. 7320.

⁸Thomas Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity: Militant Devotion in Christianity and Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), pp. 23–4.

⁹He goes so far as to burn down the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, albeit for more reason than simply the Muslim interactions with Christians during the celebration of Holy Fire the Saturday before Easter. For an overview of al-Ḥākim’s many strict attempts to differentiate between Christians and Muslims in multiple contexts, see Paul E. Walker, “Al-Ḥākim and the Dhimmīs”, *Medieval Encounters* 21 (2015): 345–63.

¹⁰Memon, *Ibn Taimiyya’s Struggle*, 211. The *Iqtidāʾ* is part of a broader intellectual trend under the Bahri Mamlūks discouraging innovation. Jon Hoover, “Kitāb Iqtidāʾ al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm mukhālafat aṣḥāb al-jahīm”, in *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History Online (600–1500)*, ed. David Thomas (Leiden: Brill, 2009–). Ibn ʿArabī attempts to persuade the Sultan ʿIzz al-Dīn Kaykāʾūs I (r. 1211–1220) to enforce the *shurūṭ ʿUmar*, see Salam Rassi, “Justifying Christianity in the Islamic Middle Ages: The Apologetic Theology of ʿAbdishōʿ bar Brikhā (d. 1318)”, PhD Thesis, University of Oxford, 2015, pp. 219–20, citing Ibn ʿArabī, *Al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*, Ed. ʿUthmān Yahyā, 4 vols. Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, n.d., IV: 547.

¹¹*Kitāb iqtidāʾ al-ṣirāṭ* in Memon, *Ibn Taimiyya’s Struggle*, 211.

Ḥadīth, *tafsīr* and *fiqh* sources used here to mean that Muslims should not participate in Christian festivals in any way. He even goes so far as to imply that Ibn Ḥanbal was too lenient in allowing Muslims to attend just the market at Christian festivals: “One who participates wholly or partly in their practices does he not precipitate for himself the punishment thereof?”¹² Ibn Taymiyya’s detailed descriptions of Christian festivals in the Levant, which he admits to have attended himself (“Such is what I have been told by reliable people, which is further confirmed by my own observations in and around Damascus in Syria”) make clear that Muslims were still taking part in the festivities in the early fourteenth century.¹³

There are many instances of outright acknowledgement of Muslim participation in at least some aspects of Christian festivals by both the literate elites and some religious elites (even Ibn Ḥanbal himself). But there is a remarkable lack of tension surrounding Muslim participation in Christian festivals and this is highly significant for our understanding of the development of Islam between 750 and 1000. If firm boundaries were not being drawn between Christians and Muslims regarding these festivities, even by the religious and political elites, does that mean that these Christian festival days and markets were considered acceptable? Or at the very least, were they thought of as not causing any harm, as Ibn Ḥanbal states in the legal opinion discussed in detail below? The ambiguity of this situation is surely significant in understanding how average Muslims in the ‘Abbāsīd period saw themselves and understood their identity and faith, particularly in comparison with the careful separation between Christian and Muslim communities and participation in festivities stressed by Ibn Taymiyya and others concerned with innovation in the fourteenth century.

David Frankfurter’s methodological model from *Religion in Roman Egypt* is particularly useful in the context of early Muslim attendance of Christian festivals. He attempts to free the reader from the assumption of Christianity’s uniformity and theological significance to the average person, while highlighting the diversity of local practices that maintained previous religious traditions throughout Late Antique Egypt.¹⁴ This article hopes to create, albeit somewhat anecdotally for the time being, a space in which we can focus on, “the anthropology of small communities in dynamic relationship with ever-changing great traditions”.¹⁵ Even if Muslims are simply attending Christian festivals for recreation and see no harm in that, this in itself tells us about the formation of Islam as a religious tradition. The average Muslim’s, or “simple believer’s” acceptance of Christian festivals, as well as regular instances of friendly interactions between the Muslim ruling minority and the numerical majority Christian communities in the Levant, suggests a lingering openness to other monotheistic traditions. This openness is also attested in a variety of other social contexts.

When we take into consideration eighth- to tenth-century debates amongst the ‘*ulamā*’ over the licit or illicit nature of inter-religious marriages, baptising children of Christian–Muslim unions, attendance at Christian funerals, the use of a Christian as a *walī*, or guardian, the ability of Muslims who had apostatised to act as a *walī*, and

¹²Ibid., 204.

¹³Ibid., 207–8.

¹⁴David Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt: Assimilation and Resistance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 7, 23–37, 52–65.

¹⁵Ibid., 7.

whether or not non-Muslim family members could inherit from Muslims, we can see shared festival attendance as normative in a world of overlapping familial lines, social networks and religious practices (baptisms, funerals).¹⁶ Here, it is the questions asked of jurists, rather than their prescriptive responses, that in many instances suggest a society that includes Christian–Muslim relationships in familial and social contexts as well as a variety of overlaps in practice and ritual attendance. In some instances, people would present themselves as Christian or Muslim depending on the social circumstance.¹⁷ Families with Christian and Muslim members were vying for inheritance and wondering about the permissibility of attending funerals of another faith. In all of these contexts, we see jurists involved and attempting to “define, declare, and stubbornly defend communal boundaries”, just as Chrysostom did between Christian and Jewish communities.¹⁸

Yet, these attempts at boundary creation are hardly present in the discourse on Christian festivals. This is remarkable, given the many implementations of the concept of *lā tashabbahū* (“Do not assimilate yourselves”) and variations of the *shurūt* ‘Umar through time, alongside the jurisprudential boundary maintenance in the areas of marriage, inheritance and funeral attendance.¹⁹ The closest thing to firm boundary markers

¹⁶For inter-religious marriage, see Lev E. Weitz, *Between Christ and Caliph: Law, Marriage, and Christian Community in Early Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 201–20; Uriel Simonsohn, “Communal Membership despite Religious Exogamy: A Critical Examination of East and West Syrian Legal Sources of the Late Sasanian and Early Islamic Periods”, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 75/2 (2016): 249–66; Anna Chrysostomides, “Ties that Bind: The Role of Family Dynamics in the Islamization of the Central Islamic Lands, 700–900 CE”, PhD Thesis, University of Oxford, 2018, esp. pp. 90–118, 142–80. Regarding Muslims baptising children, see al-Māturidī, *Tafsīr al-Māturidī, al-musammā, Ta’wilāt ahl al-sunna*, ed. Ibrāhīm and al-Sayyid ‘Awaḍayn (Cairo: Lajnat al-Qur’ān wa-al-Sunna, 1971), p. 315; al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī: Jāmi’ al-bayān ‘an ta’wil āy al-Qur’ān*, ed. ‘Abdallāh ibn ‘Abd al-Muḥsin Turkī, volumes I–XXVI (Riyadh: Dār ‘Ālam al-Kutub, 2003) II: 603. For further discussion on baptism, see Chrysostomides, “Ties that Bind”, 213–41; regarding later examples of the continuation of this practice see, David Taylor, “The Syriac Baptism of St. John: A Christian Ritual of Protection for Muslim Children”, in *The Late Antique World of Early Islam: Muslims among Christians and Jews in the East Mediterranean*, ed. Robert Hoyland (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 2015), pp. 437–59; under the Ottomans, see F.W. Hasluck, *Christianity and Islam under the Sultans*, volume I (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929), pp. 30–7. For similar practices in Crete, see Manolis Peponakis, *Exislamismi kai epanekkhristianismi stin Kriti (1645–1899)*, (Rethymno: Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, 1997), esp. pp. 75–6, and in the Balkans, Speros Vyronis, “Religious Changes and Patterns in the Balkans, Fourteenth-to-Sixteenth Centuries”, in *Aspects of the Balkans: Continuity and Change. Contributions to the International Balkan Conference held at UCLA, October 23–28, 1969*, ed. H. Birnbaum and S. Vryonis Jr. (The Hague/Paris: Mouton, 1972), pp. 151–76, esp. 173–6. Regarding Muslim participation in Christian funerals, see Tannous, *Making of the Medieval Middle East*, 410 for Muslim adoption of Christian funerary practices, and 445–7 for Muslim attendance at Christian funerals. Regarding inheritance, for just one example among many, see ‘Abd al-Razzāq, *Al-Muḥannaḥ*, ed. Ḥabīb al-Raḥmān Qāsimī, volumes I–XI (Beirut: Al-Majlis al-‘Ilmī, 1970–1972), VI: 14–19, 24–5; for discussion, see Tannous, *Making of the Medieval Middle East*, 448; Yohanan Friedmann, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam: Interfaith Relations in the Muslim Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 35–6, 55–8. Regarding apostates and Christians acting as *walī*, see al-Shāfi’ī (d. 820), *Kitāb al-Umm*, ed. Rif at Fawzi ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, volumes I–XI (Man-soura: Dār al-Wafā’ lil-Ṭibā’a wa-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzi’, 2001), VII: 410.

¹⁷Anna Chrysostomides, “There Is No God But God’: Islamisation and Religious Code Switching, Eighth-to-Tenth Centuries”, in *Islamisation: Comparative Perspectives from History*, ed. A.C.S. Peacock (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), pp. 118–33. This could also happen accidentally in polite conversation; see Thomas Sizgorich, “Mind the Gap: Accidental Conversion and the Hagiographic Imaginary in the First Centuries A.H.”, in *Christianity, Islam, and Beyond, Papers from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Sawyer Seminar, University of Oxford, 2009–2010*, ed. Arietta Papaconstantinou, Neil McLynn, and Daniel L. Schwartz (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 163–74.

¹⁸Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief*, 24.

¹⁹For further reading on the *shurūt* ‘Umar, see a complete study on these regulations known as the *ghiyār* and later as the *shurūt* ‘Umar, in Milka Levy-Rubin, *Non-Muslims in the Early Islamic Empire: From Surrender to Coexistence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); for discussion of *lā tashabbahū*, see *ibid.*, 127. Levy-Rubin is questioned by Luke Yarbrough, “Origins of the *ghiyār*”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 134/1 (2014). See also M.J. Kister, “Do Not Assimilate Yourselves . . .’: *La tashabbahu*”, *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 12 (1989): 321–71; Albrecht Noth, “Problems of Differentiation between Muslims and non-Muslims: Re-reading the ‘Ordinances of ‘Umar’ (al-shurūt al-‘Umarīyya)”, in *Muslims and Others in Early Islamic Society*, ed. Robert Hoyland (Aldershot: Ashgate Variorum, 2004), pp. 103–24, esp. 119–21; A.S. Tritton, *The Caliphs and Their non-Muslim Subjects: A Critical Study of the Covenant*

from jurists regarding festivals from 750 to 1000 CE are rather vague statements about not entering the church building itself or not partaking of the eucharist.

Thus, the descriptions of Muslim attendance at Christian festivals in chronicles and *belles lettres* fit seamlessly into a culturally blended social world. Muslims, many of whom were either converts from Christianity or descended from such converts, do not seem to be asking questions about Christian festival attendance or rituals such as baptism until the start of the ninth century and, even long after, there is evidence of shared celebrations, which seem to have posed little to no problems for the average Muslim. This indicates a centuries-long period of blurred boundaries and acceptance of mutual practices from the eighth to eleventh centuries in the Levant.

Easter and Palm Sunday are mentioned frequently throughout a wide range of Islamic texts: historical, legal, literary and geographical. Within early Islam, these festivals appear to have been celebrated by Christians and Muslims alike. The changing celebration of Easter and Palm Sunday, as well as of smaller festivals, in Islamic sources seems to be a story of glacially slow differentiation between monotheisms. The narratives discussed below exhibit the formation of Islamic communities rather than stories of persecution or toleration between a ruling minority and numerical majority. This relationship played itself out in practical ways that suggest that religious boundaries were more porous than previously assumed. This article will explore a discussion of both the large celebrations of Easter and Palm Sunday and the smaller, local festivals of Dayr Ayyūb and Ṭūr Tabūr loosely through the lens of a ruling in the *Ahl al-milal*, a compilation of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal's (d. 855) legal *responsa* compiled by Abū Bakr al-Khallāl (d. 923).²⁰

Archaeological sources can also provide considerable evidence as to how easy it would have been for Muslims to participate in Christian festivals. The importance of the physical proximity of Christian and Muslim sacred spaces surely played a role in shared participation in festivals. From 750 to 1000 in the Levant, shared worship space was common. In Aleppo, Homs, Shīva and Damascus during the Umayyad period, mosques were built either within church complexes, where a building was appropriated for Muslim use, or directly beside church complexes. The mosques remained in the same locations during the ʿAbbāsīd and Fāṭimid eras.²¹

Sacred space

In places without mosques, or possibly simply when they felt like it or for special occasions, Muslims would pray in churches. There is a preserved debate during our period of enquiry within the Ḥadīth literature. ʿAbd al-Razzāq (c. 744-826) preserves several Ḥadīth traditions attempting to prohibit Muslims from praying in Christian churches containing images,²² while Zayd b. ʿAlī b. al-Ḥusayn (d. 740) is preserved in

of ʿUmar (London: Cass, 1970); Antoine Fattal, *Le statut légal des non-musulmans en pays d'islam*, (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1958); Mark Cohen, "What Was the Pact of ʿUmar? A Literary-Historical Study", *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 23 (1999): 100–57.

²⁰Saud al-Sarhan, "The Responsa of Aḥmad Ibn Hanbal and the Formation of Hanbalism", *Islamic Law and Society* 22/1.2 (2015): 1–44; Christopher Melchert, *The Formation of the Sunni Schools of Law, Ninth-to-Tenth Centuries C.E.* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), pp. 143–55; Nimrod Hurvitz, *The Formation of Hanbalism: Piety into Power* (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 4–5.

²¹For a detailed archaeological study, see Guidetti, *In the Shadow of the Church*.

²²ʿAbd al-Razzāq, *al-Muṣannaf, Bāb al-ṣalāt fi l-bīʿa*, I: 411–12, nos. 1608–1612; Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity*, 5–20.

his *Musnad*, compiled a generation before ‘Abd al-Razzāq by Ibrāhīm b. al-Zibriqān (d. 799), as saying that there was no harm in praying in Christian spaces.²³ Clearly there were Muslims doing this, some knowingly with permission from respected sources, and some probably because they did not know that there was any problem with praying in Christian spaces. If Muslims were already praying either within or near church complexes, whether this included the church itself or not, they were probably already in the midst of festival preparations for large events taking place in that same physical space and would therefore have been affected by them in some way, whether this meant participation or avoidance. Our sources largely point towards participation, even in the ‘Abbāsīd period, although it is difficult to assess whether their reasons were religious, simply for enjoyment, for the sake of markets attached to the festival, or all of the above. There were likely a variety of motivations ranging from simply following habitual patterns of life (without thinking too deeply into its possible wider significance) to carefully attending only the market, in order to differentiate themselves as Muslims while obtaining otherwise un-obtainable goods.

Church complexes and mosques would have been in the centre of most villages and cities, or near a central road or gate. They would have been physically near the local market, also centrally or strategically located for practical purposes and perhaps to exhibit the grandeur of a city.²⁴ In Syria, markets were often associated with religious festivals: Aleppo’s large market was originally a part of the celebration of the two local saints Mār Asyā and Mār Ish‘ayā’. The saints’ celebration was on 15 October, and the market or fair took place on 16 October. Amman/Philadelphia had a similar situation on 10 August in celebration of the local martyr Aelianos.²⁵ There is a common link between a celebration of a saint’s day and a special festival market, meaning that everyone living in the area would likely require goods only sold at these times of the year. This is especially the case for the festival of Job, and associated market at Dayr Ayyūb, discussed below, held in April or May, which fell at the time crops were sown locally.²⁶

Local festivals

Our window into the local festivals of Dayr Ayyūb and Ṭūr Tabūr begins with a *responsa* conversation recorded in the *Ahl al-milal*, a legal *responsa* of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal compiled by Abū Bakr al-Khallāl via relations and students of Ibn Ḥanbal, which is a layered text – both geographically and through time. It represents material from at least three generations. This particular chapter in the *Ahl al-milal* only contains two *responsa*, which

²³Suliman Bashear, “Qibla Musharriqa and Early Muslim Prayer in Churches”, *The Muslim World* 81/3–4 (1991): 267–82, p. 280. The intermediary layer here is via Abū Khālid al-Wāsītī (fl. eighth century). Even if this particular tradition stemmed from Abū Khālid or Zayd himself, the information contained in the tradition appears to remain relevant to Ibrāhīm in the early ‘Abbāsīd era.

²⁴Guidetti, *In the Shadow of the Church*, 73–5, outlines the reasons for the difference in locations of churches/mosques and markets as being dependent upon whether or not a city in Syria had maintained its population through the Arab conquest. In the cities such as Palmyra, which experienced severe population decline, private residences were turned into churches on strategic routes or by main gates. “Central” here is still applicable in terms of the convenience of these buildings’ locations within the urban layout.

²⁵André Binggeli, “Annual Fairs, Regional Networks, and Trade Routes in Syria, Sixth-to-Tenth Centuries”, in *Trade and Markets in Byzantium*, ed. Cécile Morrisson [Dumbarton Oaks Byzantine symposia and colloquia, volume IV] (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2012), pp. 281–96, esp. 287–8.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 290.

cover, respectively, two small (Ṭūr Tabūr/t) and Dayr Ayyūb) and one large (Palm Sunday) Christian celebrations. These function as two different archetypal acknowledgements of Christian celebrations.

#132

I [Muhannā l-Shāmī] asked Aḥmad about being present at these [Christian] festivals which take place with us in Syria, such as Ṭūr Tābūr/t and Dayr Ayyūb, etc. and Muslims were present at it. They attend the fairs and they bring cattle to them, and sheep, flour, wheat and other things. But they only go to the fairs to buy and do not enter the churches at them, [is that ok?].

He [Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal] said, “If they do not enter the churches at them, but only attend the market, there is no harm (*lā ba’ās*) [in that]”.

#133

Abū Qutayba al-Baṣrī heard from Ibn Sīrīn, he said in [what] He said to him [Muḥammad], “And [they are] those who do not testify to falsehood . . .” Abū Qutayba al-Baṣrī said, “It was Palm Sunday”.²⁷

Ṭūr Tabūt and Ṭūr Tabūr are both mentioned here in different manuscripts, Ṭūr Tabūt was likely a scribal error.²⁸ The inclusion of both Ṭūr Tabūr and Dayr Ayyūb suggests that these smaller festivals are used here as well-known symbols of small, local Christian celebrations, rather than being relevant in and of themselves. For the purpose of this legal text, the originators or transmitters of these rulings required examples for large and small festivals – to our *fuqahā’* the specific festivals under discussion mattered less than the overarching concept of the ruling. Dayr Ayyūb and Ṭūr Tabūr have a different significance when attempting to understand how these festivals were perceived and the level of participation within them of different religious groups. When considered in this light, it is obvious that both of these places were widely known for holding annual celebrations in which both Christians and Muslims participated.

The speaker in #132 is Muhannā l-Shāmī, who speaks from the perspective of living in Syria. Al-Shāmī is reporting to Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal how Muslims in Syria participate in Christian local festivals – they do not go into the churches, and here he specifically uses the word for the church building, rather than the church complex as a whole,²⁹ but they do participate in the markets. The question “is this ok?” is taken for granted because this text is a *responsum*. Given the layout of churches, mosques and markets in Syrian cities, and also taking into consideration that processions were often involved in these celebrations, this would signal two things, which we shall reflect on over the following pages.

First, Muslims generally did not enter the actual church building (*bī’a*) on festival days. It is not possible to completely understand the motives behind this, but we can consider likely possibilities. It could be caused by a lack of interest, or because the average Muslim would have been attending these festivities for the market and would not have

²⁷ Abū Bakr al-Khallāl, *Kitāb Ahl al-mīlāl wa-l-ridḍa wa-l-zanādiqa wa-tārik al-ṣalāh wa-l-farā’id min kitāb al-Jāmi’*, ed. I.M. al-Sūltān (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Ma’ārif lil-Nashr wa-l-Tawzī’, 1996), pp. 121–3 nn. 132, 133. Q 25:72.

²⁸ Al-Khallāl, *Ahl al-mīlāl*, 121 n. 3.

²⁹ *Kanīsa*, referred to the entire church compound, while *bī’a*, used here, specifically referred to the consecrated church building itself. For further discussion and examples, see Guidetti, *In the Shadow of the Church*, 47.

been near the church at other times. Another possibility is that some families, particularly those resulting from inter-religious marriages, would have included adherents of multiple faith groups in one extended family. It is entirely possible that no one thought anything of it if all members of such a family entered the church building during the festival. Finally, it was unlikely that someone could visibly distinguish a Muslim from a Christian unless they knew them personally, so Muhannā l-Shāmī could be making assumptions based upon his own social circle, likely amongst the *'ulamā'* and their families. On the other hand, this *responsum* indicates that, at least amongst the Muslim religious elite within Syrian communities, there was an established way of participating in traditional festivities and markets (i.e. not entering the church itself). This mode of participation allowed local Muslims to remain a part of the festivities, which were likely considered a significant tradition in their region, yet also signalled to everyone that they were not Christian.

If we accept that this transmission contains reliably preserved information from sometime before Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal's death in 855, this provides a *terminus ante quem* for the development of this orthopractic aspect of the religious identity formation of Muslim communities. This precedent, likely only practised by the religious elite in each community, suggests that these festivals may have been considered local celebrations that contained some Christian-only elements.

However, just because they were local traditions does not mean that they were not also religious and understood as having religious significance to the Christian community. The separation between Christianity and Islam requires conscious creation in the *Ahl al-milal*. The festivals themselves are described as Christian by those interested in drawing boundaries, i.e. the type of people likely to be involved in a legal *responsum*. But even Ibn Ḥanbal does not stop any Muslims from participating in them. This *responsum* provides the closest thing that we see in the texts that mention festivals before 900 in the Levant to the type of tensions between boundary maintenance by religious elites and the actions of the average person, which have been highlighted by Sizgorich and Tannous. Even commentators who, in all other aspects of life, are most interested in drawing boundaries between Christianity and Islam, draw only the faintest of lines regarding festivals. Once again, we are reminded that Muslims in the Levant, particularly in Syria pre-900 were a numerical minority who could only organise their interactions with the numerical majority Christian communities on regionally important days in a limited way. Here, Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal himself is portrayed as only being interested in marginally differentiating between the two faith groups during these celebrations.

Second, Muslims who were present at these celebrations would still have witnessed some religious aspects of the festivities, suggesting that these special days and markets were not necessarily Christian-only celebrations during Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal's lifetime. It is striking that the differentiation in the *responsa* is not whether or not to enjoy these celebrations, but rather how to make one's religious affiliation clear while enjoying them. The textual evidence implies a differentiated participation, with Muslims remaining outside churches during festivals. But we cannot assume that this behaviour was universally adopted in practice and, even if Muslims were only in the market, they may well have witnessed the 'religious' celebrations that took place outside the church complex or in the roads nearby.

The Christians of Dayr Ayyūb, ancient Dennaba, Late Antique Carneas and present-day Shaykh Ṣaʿd in the region of Ḥawrān, held a local festival in honour of Job (Ayyūb) originally on 6 May, a date which apparently changed sometime between 750 and 1000. The tomb was a place of pilgrimage in Late Antiquity and the medieval period and continues to be so till today.³⁰ It makes its first appearance in the narrative of the pilgrim Egeria, who describes an unfinished church near the recently “discovered” tomb of Job in Carneas in 384.³¹ Egeria describes the tomb as being underneath the altar of the church.³² She also notes that there were numerous holy men from Carneas whom she had met in Jerusalem and whose descriptions of Job’s tomb inspired her journey there, suggesting that before there was a large monastic compound, there were already ascetics in the vicinity.³³

Dayr Ayyūb was one of many sacred Christian sites that became regional markets in the late Roman period. It grew into an inter-regional market in the Umayyad and ʿAbbāsīd periods.³⁴ As late as the thirteenth century, the German Christian pilgrim Master Thietmar visited the large market and noted that:

Also, not far from the place where the Dan rises is the tomb and pyramid of St. Job, which is regarded religiously by all. Annually at the beginning of summer people of many nations congregate at the markets round about it: Arabs, Parthians, Idumians, Syrians, and Turks, and many others spend time there with their flocks.³⁵

Dayr Ayyūb did not fade as a site of mutual interest to multiple communities, in addition to serving as a regional market between Late Antiquity and the thirteenth century. Thietmar’s statement that Job was “regarded religiously by all” in combination with his list of ethnicities is interesting in the context of inter-religious interest in the festival at Dayr Ayyūb. Would those participating in the festival have seen it as a religious function? If so, the fact that Thietmar does not observe any type of dispute regarding which religious group could claim ownership of the celebration and market suggests that participants had no proprietary understanding of the figure of Job. The celebration and market appear to have been shared as a local, seasonal celebration and market. It is unclear whether this indicates that Muslims and Christians thought of it as something religiously shared. It is possible that each had developed their own way of celebrating Job in addition to the market at this point.

We can compare this account with al-Bīrūnī’s (d. 1048) late tenth- to early eleventh-century discussion and his dating of the Dayr Ayyūb festival to 23 April (Nisān) in his

³⁰Binggeli, “Annual Fairs”, 286, 288–9.

³¹Leah di Segni, “On the Development of Christian Cult Sites on Tombs of the Second Temple Period”, *ARAM* 18–19 (2006–2007): 381–401, p. 384; Egeria, *Diary of a Pilgrimage*, trans. George E. Gingras (New York: Newman Press, 1970), pp. 70–1, 75: “... As they excavated the place shown to them [by a holy man], they found a cave, into which they penetrated about a hundred feet; suddenly, those who were excavating saw a stone. When they had completely uncovered the stone, they found carved on top of it ‘Job’. In honour of Job, at that time and in that place, was built a church which you see, but in such a way that the stone with the body was not moved to another spot, but was placed where the body was found so that the body would lie beneath the altar. I do not know which tribune built this church but it has remained unfinished to this day”.

³²Egeria, *Diary*, 75.

³³*Ibid.*, 70–1.

³⁴Binggeli, “Annual Fairs”, 287–9, 291–2. Dayr Ayyūb was also used as a strategic location to gather troops by the Umayyad Caliph Marwan II (d. 750) in two conflicts; al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, trans. John Alden Williams, volumes I–XL (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), XXVII: 5–7, 19. Thanks to Simon Pierre for this reference.

³⁵Thietmar, *Pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the Holy Land, 1187–1291*, ed. Denys Pringle (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 100.

section entitled, “On the days of the Greek calendar as known both among the Greeks and other nations”.

People hold a fair at Dayr Ayyūb. Abū Yahyā b. Kunāsa says that the Pleiades disappear under the rays of the sun for forty days, and this fair is held when the Pleiades appear. So the Syrians make them rise fifteen days earlier than they rise in reality, because they are in a hurry to settle their affairs. This fair lasts seven days. Then they count seventy days until the fair of Buṣrā. Through these fairs, that are held alternately in certain places, the commerce of these countries has been promoted and their wealth been increased. They have proven profitable to the people, to both buyers and sellers.³⁶

The lack of a festival of Job in this section may at first seem as though al-Bīrūnī thinks the religious aspects of the market are not worth mentioning. However, the Melkite festival of Job, which he lists as 6 May in his section “On the festivals and memorable days of the Syrian calendar, celebrated by the Melkite Christians”, was timed to the appearance of the constellation Pleiades.³⁷ Al-Bīrūnī does not directly connect the feast of Job to a place.³⁸ He simply lists the date and name of the prophet celebrated. Considering the widespread celebrations of Job amongst Melkite communities throughout Syria, it was likely common knowledge that this was simply an early celebration of the festival of Job. Significantly, the festival of Job appears in both the Christian Melkite section and the section that records festivals celebrated by “Greeks and other nations”. Al-Bīrūnī may be writing to an audience who are aware of the celebration and market at Dayr Ayyūb and consider it Christian, but who are also aware that the figure being celebrated is relevant for the Muslim community as well.

The shared nature of the figure being celebrated may have been enough to justify participation in the less confessional aspects of the festival, such as the market. Al-Bīrūnī presents the festival of Job both as a Melkite Christian celebration and as one celebrated locally, to some extent, by everyone. The dual nature of how he presents this festival points to the liminal nature of these celebrations within early Islam. They are at once Christian celebrations, yet at the same time the shared appreciation for the figures being celebrated and the less religious aspects of the festivities make them acceptable even amongst the Muslim religious elite.

Al-Bīrūnī also mentions a separate celebration, under the heading of “On the festivals and memorable days of the Syrian calendar, celebrated by the Melkite Christians”, at nearby Ṭūr Tabūr on 6 August (Āb), and gives great detail about the religious reasons behind it,

[The] Feast of Ṭūr Tabūr, regarding which the Gospel relates that once the prophets, Moses, the son of Amram, and Elias, appeared to Christ on Mount Tabor, when three of His disciples, Simeon, Jacob, and John were with Him, but slept. When they awoke and saw this, they were frightened, and spoke: “May our Lord, i.e. Messiah, permit us to build three tents, one for Thee, and the other two for Moses and Elias”. They had not yet finished speaking when three clouds standing high above them covered them with their shadow; then Moses and Elias entered the cloud and disappeared. Moses was dead already a long time before that, whilst Elias was alive, and is still living, as they say; but he does not show himself to mankind, hiding himself from their eyes.³⁹

³⁶Al-Bīrūnī, *The Chronology of Ancient Nations*, trans. C. Edward Sachau (London: William H. Allen and Co., 1879), p. 251.

³⁷Binggeli, “Annual Fairs”, 291–2.

³⁸Al-Bīrūnī, *Chronology of Ancient Nations*, 292.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 297. Al-Bīrūnī very closely paraphrases Matthew 17:1–8.

He does not give any details about this celebration, aside from naming it as the Feast of the Transfiguration, which celebrates the Trinity amongst the more broadly Abrahamic figures of Moses and Elijah. From 1212 to 1215, just before Thietmar's pilgrimage, Ṭūr Tabūr began the process of transforming into a Muslim site.

From Cana of Galilee I came to Mount Tabor, where the Lord was transfigured before the Apostles Peter, John and James, with Moses and Elijah appearing with Him. This mountain is extremely high. On its summit has been built a church, where there was a noble abbey of the black order, but now the Saracens have occupied it and fortified it strongly by a wall, with towers standing forward on it.⁴⁰

Al-Malik al-ʿĀdil (d. 1218) and his son al-Muʿazzam ʿĪsā (d. 1227) built a castle in place of the Benedictine Abbey on the mountain. However, Thietmar was still able to visit the church and the site remained religiously significant.⁴¹

By the time of al-Masʿūdī (d. 956), the Dayr Ayyūb shrine dedicated to Job had been transformed into a mosque. Al-Masʿūdī describes the same shrine in Dayr Ayyūb in 943 as a mosque only, with a stone associated with Job's suffering inside, meaning that in the late tenth century we have evidence of an increasingly shared site of religious significance.⁴² J.F. Legrain and Elizabeth Campbell assume that this indicates Christian activities associated with the Tomb of Job at Dayr Ayyūb had been lost by the tenth century.⁴³ However, al-Masʿūdī's omission of Christian celebrations or a Christian claim to Job/Ayyūb does not indicate a loss of Christian claim to this sacred space or celebrations in this area, as we have the later attestation by Thietmar that people of all local faiths acknowledged Job as a sacred figure and participated together in the festival market associated with him.

Al-Masʿūdī identifies what was previously associated with Job's tomb as the stone upon which Job suffered, which he says is inside the mosque of Ayyūb.⁴⁴ Speaking of Job's tribulations and the stone and well associated with him, he says:

His story is related in the Qurʾān.⁴⁵ The mosque of Ayyūb and the spring in which he washed his body, are famous to this day (ca.944): they are not far from Nawā and al-Jawlān in the province of the Jordan, between Damascus and Tiberias. The distance of this mosque and spring from the town of Nawā is about three miles. The stone on which Ayyūb rested at the time of his affliction, when his wife died of puerperal fever, is still in that mosque.⁴⁶

⁴⁰Thietmar, *Pilgrimage*, 97.

⁴¹Ibid. For the Benedictine abbey, see Pringle, *Churches of the Crusader Kingdom*, II: 63–81. For the Ayyūbid castle built in its place, see Antonio Battista and Bellarmino Bagatti, *La fortezza saracena del Monte Tabor* (AH. 609–15: AD. 1212–18) [Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, Collectio Minor, volume XVIII] (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press 1976), pp. 26–33; Pringle, *Churches of the Crusader Kingdom*, II: 66–7.

⁴²Al-Masʿūdī, *Kitāb Murūj al-dhahab wa-maʿādin al-jawhar*, trans. Aloys Sprenger, *El-Masʿūdī's Historical Encyclopædia entitled 'Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems'* (London: Oriental Translation Fund of Great Britain and Ireland, 1843), p. 89.

⁴³Elizabeth Campbell, "A Heaven of Wine: Muslim-Christian Encounters at Monasteries in the Early Islamic Middle East", PhD Thesis, University of Washington, 1999, p. 226; Jean-François Legrain, "Variations musulmanes sur le thème de Job", *Bulletin d'Etudes Orientales* 37/8 (1985–1986): 51–114, p. 71.

⁴⁴Al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, 88–9. Ibn ʿAsākir (d. 539/1145) associated Dayr Ayyūb with Job, as does al-Harawī (d. 1215) in his *Kitāb al-Ziyārāt* and Yāqūt (d. 1229), but none of them explicitly mention the festival dedicated to the prophet. Ibn ʿAsākir, *Al-Tārīkh al-kabīr*, ed. ʿAbd al-Qādir Badrān, volumes I–VIII (Damascus: Maṭbaʿat Rawḍat al-Shām, 1911), III: 191; al-Harawī, *Guide des lieux de pèlerinage*, trans. Janine Sourdél-Thomine (Damascus: Institut Français de Damas, 1957) p. 41; Yāqūt al-Hamawī, *Muʿjam al-buldān*, volumes I–V (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1956) II: 499, V: 306. See also Legrain, "Variations musulmanes", 72.

⁴⁵Q 4:163; 6:84; 21:83; 38:41.

⁴⁶Al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, 89.

Apparently, the Christian shrine had been fully appropriated by the Muslim community at this point: the tomb that Egeria claimed lay below the altar in the unfinished church in the fourth century is now a stone recognised as the place Job sat upon according to Muslim tradition and is situated within a mosque. However, a reassignment of the meaning of the stone and a change of hands of the main sacred space associated with Job does not necessarily indicate that the memory of the Christian festival had faded. It shows the interest of the local, minority Muslim community in the figure of Job and a local site dedicated to him. After all, the head of John the Baptist remained a part of the Umayyad Mosque after its conversion from a shared church-mosque ecclesiastical complex into the main caliphal mosque.⁴⁷

Dayr Ayyūb and Ṭūr Tabūr appear to follow along a similar trajectory as the shrine at al-Ruṣāfa, which eventually grew to accommodate a mosque and shared courtyard in addition to the church.⁴⁸ This allowed local communities to retain a veneration for St. Sergius, regardless of whether they adhered to Christianity or Islam. Dayr Ayyūb and Ṭūr Tabūr add further evidence that local figures and festivities often went through a decades- or centuries-long phase of being permissible for both Christians and Muslims, regardless of the original tradition with which these festivities were associated. The shared nature of these iconic monotheistic narratives and cast of characters functioned to create certain festivities and sacred times of the year that permeated the boundaries of religious affiliation and enabled shared enjoyment by Christians and Muslims alike. Larger festivals, on the other hand, held a different and more universal significance for Christians, which provoked a variety of responses from Levantine Muslim communities. Despite the undeniably Christian nature of these celebrations, they remained spaces of shared enjoyment for Christians and Muslims in many instances.

Large festivals

#133: Abū Qutayba al-Baṣrī heard from Ibn Sirīn [what] He said to him [Muḥammad], “And [they are] those who do not testify to falsehood ...” Abū Qutayba al-Baṣrī said, “It was Palm Sunday”.⁴⁹

In response to hearing that Muslims had attended a Christian festival, or so this is implied in the placement of the next report, Ibn Sirīn (d. 728) quotes the first half of Q 25:72, “And [they are] those who do not testify to falsehood, and when they pass near ill speech, they pass by with dignity”.⁵⁰

This half of Q 25:72 was associated with attendance of non-Muslim, specifically *mush-rikūn*, festivals up until the lifetime of al-Suyūṭī in the sixteenth century. When this verse became commonly associated with Christian festivals is difficult to establish. The earliest references are within the *Ahl al-milal*, and the *Tafsīr* of Abū Bakr al-Khallāl’s contemporary, Ibn Abī Ḥātim (d. 938). Al-Thaʿlabī (d. 1035) and al-Suyūṭī both include Ḥadīth that

⁴⁷Guidetti, *In the Shadow of the Church*, 85. See also Elizabeth Key Fowden, “Sharing Holy Places”, *Common Knowledge* 8/1 (2002): 124–46, pp. 129–34.

⁴⁸For an in-depth study of al-Ruṣāfa, see Key-Fowden, *Barbarian Plain*.

⁴⁹Abū Bakr al-Khallāl, *Ahl al-milal*, 122–3, n. 133. Q 25:72.

⁵⁰Al-Khallāl, *Ahl al-milal*, 122–3, n. 133.

associate “falsehood” with *mushrikūn* festivals in their tradition-based exegesis of this verse.⁵¹

During the ninth and tenth centuries, the term *mushrikūn* was in the process of becoming a common synonym for “People of the Book” (Jews and Christians) within Islamic jurisprudential and exegetical circles. This debate is evident within *fiqh* and *tafsīr* collections.⁵² Within the *Ahl al-milal* itself, there is discussion of who exactly was meant by *mushrikūn* in a conversation regarding Q 2:221, which regulates who a Muslim man can marry:

Can a (Muslim) man marry a *mushrika*?

[‘Abd Allāh’s father (Ibn Ḥanbal)] said: The prophet said “Do not marry *mushrikāt*”.⁵³

[‘Abd Allāh’s father] said: [It means] people of idols, and he says they are polytheistic women, so it is not permissible for us to marry people of idols.

He said: And People of the Book, they are also *mushrikūn* except that God the most almighty made it permissible for us to marry them and eat their food.⁵⁴

Mushrikūn therefore, in the context of ‘Abbāsīd and later interpretation regarding Q 25:72, for many likely referred to Christian and Jewish as well as polytheistic festivals.

In #133 of the *Ahl al-milal*, this verse is specifically associated with Palm Sunday. This association can also be found in multiple *tafsīr* works. Again we see it in Ibn Abī Ḥātim, who quotes the exact same chain of transmission and tradition from Ibn Sīrīn as well as al-Sūyūṭī. Al-Suyūṭī claims that, as received through al-Sha’bī (d. 720s), the Companion Ibn ‘Abbās associated the first half of this verse with, “*mushrikūn* festivals, meaning: Palm Sunday and others like it”, signifying the continued application of this interpretation through the sixteenth century.⁵⁵ Ibn Sīrīn and al-Sha’bī were contemporaries. It is possible that traditions associating Q 25:72 with a warning about attending large Christian festivals, exemplified by Palm Sunday, began in the early eighth century. If the origin in the early eighth century is realistic, this would place the association of this verse with Palm Sunday roughly around the time of the Umayyad caliph ‘Umar II’s tax reforms. These reforms attempted to draw non-Arab Muslim converts into the broader Muslim social structure by allowing them the same taxation and economic

⁵¹ Al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Durr al-manthūr fi l-tafsīr bi-l-ma’thūr*, volumes I–III (Qum: Maktabat Ayat Allāh al-Uzma al-Mar’ashī I-Najafī, 1982–3), III: 80–1 (Q 25:72). Al-Tha’labī, *Al-Kashf wa-l-bayan ‘an tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, volumes I–X (Beirut: Dār Ihyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 2002), VII: 151 (Q 25:72). Ibn Abī Ḥātim, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘aẓīm: Musnad al-Rasūl Allāh wa-l-saḥāba wa-l-ṭabī’in*, volumes I–VIII (Riyadh: Maktabat Nizār Muṣṭafā I-Bāz), VIII: 2738, nos. 15450 (singing), 15454 (festivals), and 15455 (Palm Sunday). Thank you to Arafat Razzaque for suggesting the *Mawsū‘at al-tafsīr al-ma’thūr*.

⁵² For discussion of this development, see: G.R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History* [Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 45–111. See also al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-bayān ‘an ta’wīl āy al-Qur’ān*, volumes I–XXVI, ed. ‘Abd al-Sind Ḥassan Yamāma (Cairo: Markaz al-biḥūth, 16–711, 2001), 16–711.

إحلاله و من احرائر من أهل الكتاب، و الحرائر غير الإمام، كما قلنا: لا يحل نكاح مشركة غير كتابية

⁵³ Q 2:221.

⁵⁴ Al-Khallāl, *Ahl al-milal*, 246, n. 477.

وثان، يقال لهم مشركات، فلا يحل لنا أبي عبد الله [قال]: قلت فالرجل يتكلم المشركة؟ قال: قال النبي - عليه السلام - {لا تتكلموا المشركاة}. قال: فأهل ال نكاح أهل الأوثان قال: و أهل الكتاب يقال لهم أيضاً مشركون إلا أن الله عز وجل قد أحل لنا نكاحهم و ذياتهم

⁵⁵ Al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, III: 80–1 (Q 25:72). For information on al-Sha’bī and his role in early Islamic Hadith compilation, particularly the formation of *isnād* chains, see G.H.A. Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition: Studies in Chronology, Provenance and Authorship of Early Ḥadīth* [Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 19–20.

rights as Arab Muslims.⁵⁶ The reforms were a move toward giving religious identity priority over an ethnic one. The early to mid-700s were a time of slow consolidation of Muslim identity away from a conception of conqueror Arabs vs. the local, non-Arab, conquered populations and into one of socio-religious affiliations (i.e. Muslims and People of the Book). If we choose to take a more sceptical approach to the sources, then at the very least, as attested in the *Ahl al-milal* and contemporary *Tafsīr* of Ibn Abī Ḥātim, we can safely say that by the tenth century Muslim jurists and exegetes associated this verse with Muslims attending the Christian festival of Palm Sunday, and possibly larger Christian festivals more generally. If we take this transmission as accurately attributed to Ibn Sīrīn, it suggests a long history of Muslims attending Palm Sunday in one way or another, otherwise there would have been little reason for Ibn Sīrīn to issue this warning or for others to have preserved it.

In addition to an association with *mushrikūn* festivals themselves, al-Suyūṭī records a tradition linking “falsehood” in the first half of Q 25:72 with behaviour that was frequent at such festivities, such as “singing” and “entertainment”. He includes another tradition with singing, lamenting and instructions not to “become agitated”, “excited in one’s heart” or “desiring” when hearing singing and lamenting.⁵⁷ Al-Thaʿlabī similarly associates this verse with “singing,” and “markets”.⁵⁸ Considering how close the town markets and mosques were to Christian churches (in the Levant they could be in the same, or very closely neighbouring, compounds), it would have been impossible to ignore the songs and festivities of Christians celebrating major festivals, even in instances where there was no festival market.

These descriptions bring to mind the slowly developing proscriptions of the *shurūṭ* ʿUmar, which specifically note that Christians should keep noise and Christian symbols to a minimum in both markets and festivals. Abū Bakr al-Ṭurṭūshī’s (d.c. 1126) version of the *shurūṭ* reads,

We shall not display our crosses or our books in the roads or markets of the Muslims. We shall only use clappers in our churches very softly. We shall not raise our voices in our church services or in the presence of Muslims, nor shall we raise our voices when following our dead.⁵⁹

Ibn al-Murajjā (fl. 1040s) and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya’s (d. 1350) versions add the following (in italics), “We shall not display our crosses or our books in the roads or markets of the Muslims, *nor shall we conduct processions on Palm Sunday and Easter*”.⁶⁰

As Milka Levy-Rubin posits, these proscriptions for non-Muslims are not part of the *lā tashabbahū* literature but signify a negotiation of public space and symbolic soundscapes of the eighth century and later medieval Near East. Rather than prohibit Muslims from attending festivals and markets, these additions to the *shurūṭ* ʿUmar specifically restrict

⁵⁶For a detailed study on ʿUmar II’s tax reforms, see H.A.R. Gibb, “The Fiscal Rescript of ʿUmar II”, *Arabica* 2/1 (1955): 1–16. For his life and other reforms, see Paul M. Cobb, “ʿUmar (II) b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz”, in *EP*, X: 821–2. See also Antoine Borrut, “Entre tradition et histoire: Genèse et diffusion de l’image de ʿUmar II”, *Mélanges de l’Université Saint-Joseph* 58 (2005): 329–78; G.R. Hawting, *The First Dynasty of Islam: The Umayyad Caliphate AD 661–750* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2000) pp. 15, 18, 77.

⁵⁷Al-Suyūṭī credits the tradition on singing and amusement to Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanīfiyya and the latter to al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī. Al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, III: 80–1 (Q 25:72).

⁵⁸Al-Thaʿlabī, *Al-Kashf wa-l-bayan*, 151 (Q 25:72).

⁵⁹Levy-Rubin, *Non-Muslims*, 172.

⁶⁰Ibid.

non-Muslims from creating public spaces that were overtly Jewish, Samaritan or Christian.⁶¹

Now may be a good time to note that Christian clergy throughout Late Antiquity and the medieval period were known to complain about how rowdy and uncontrolled religious festivals could become. Michael the Great (d. 1199), patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church, complained about Christians who “gave themselves to intemperance, drunkenness, dancing, and other types of lust and debauchery during the festivals of martyrs”.⁶² He even went so far as to claim that, during the Arab conquest of Syria, the attack on the monastery of Simeon the Stylite on the day of its festival was a punishment from God for exactly this type of bad behaviour.⁶³ This was not just a Christian complaint, a Ḥadīth recorded by ‘Abd al-Razzāq in his *Muṣannaf* explicitly warns Muslims not to enter church complexes during Christian festivals “because a frenzy descends upon them”.⁶⁴

Ibn Sirīn’s and al-Sha’bī’s reaction to Muslims attending a Christian festival is a remarkably vague statement about participation in another religion’s celebrations. There seems to be no outright prohibition; rather, there is advice on how one should behave when participating. He merely quotes a verse of the Qur’ān associated with an understanding of how Muslims should “not testify to falsehood”, the second half of which suggests that they should “pass by with dignity”. There is no specific requirement that Muslims not enter the church, just that they should act with dignity when doing so, which would include being careful not to participate in any religious practice that might be considered *shirk*, or association with the divine. There is a reminder that Muslims are not supposed to associate Jesus with the Christian Trinity, within the cluster of verses surrounding Q 25:72: “And those who do not invoke with God another deity ...”,⁶⁵ which could be taken as a type of boundary demarcation in a generally monotheistic culture. However, this is only alluded to, and is not stated directly. Depending on the outlook of the Muslims involved, Q 25:72 could have included a wide range of shared practice. The fact that associating this verse with shared festival attendance was considered necessary at all suggests that this was a common activity. This subtle demarcation between Muslim and Christian participation in a widely accepted Christian festival would fit with a broader eighth-century reality of frequent Christian–Muslim social interaction and blurred religious boundaries amongst “simple believers”. Responsa #133 is far more understated and flexible than the usual attempts to differentiate Muslim social actions from those of non-Muslims.

This section of the *Ahl al-milal* was thought necessary for inclusion within a tenth-century *fiqh* work, and may have been referencing traditions from the early eighth century that remained relevant to Muslim religious elites until as late as the sixteenth century. Christian festivals and their related markets clearly remained enticing to Muslims. However, those who participated in them may even have felt they were a

⁶¹Ibid., 127–8, 158–62. Complaints about clappers as well as the noise of prayer and song was common in legal literature and chronicles; see Tannous, *Making of the Medieval Middle East*, 403–4, 406–7; Rassi, “Justifying Christianity”, 215, 218–22.

⁶²Campbell, “Heaven of Wine”, 203.

⁶³Ibid., 202–5; Jean Maurice Fiey, “Fêtes des couvents, fêtes populaires”, *Al-Turāth al-Sh’abi* 2 (1969): 121–30, p. 122. For further examples, see Tannous, *Making of the Medieval Middle East*, 467–9.

⁶⁴‘Abd al-Razzāq, *Muṣannaf*, I: 411.

⁶⁵Q 25:68.

local tradition, firmly tied to their community at large, despite also being associated with Christianity. Christians and Muslims developed their own prescribed ways of celebrating Palm Sunday, the Holy Fire ceremony, and Easter in different cities of the *dār al-Islām*. Rather than being celebrations of purely religious affiliation, this widespread phenomenon of shared participation in communally distinct ways indicates a complex intersection of religious and local tradition.

Muslim attendance at larger Christian festivals, such as Easter and Palm Sunday, is attested to throughout the ‘Abbāsīd era and into the early modern period. A poem attributed to Abū Nuwās (d. c. 815) is one potentially early literary example of this. His erotic imagery of Christians often depicted what would now be considered insider knowledge of Christian ritual.

By the baptism of the Ancient Monastery,
 By its metropolitans and by the catholicus,
 By Simon, by John, by Jesus,
 By Saint Sergius, by the compassionate priest,
 By the birth of the Messiah, by the day of Epiphany ...
 By Holy Mary and by the day of Easter.
 By the Bread of offering and by the ancient Wine by the crosses ...
 By the opening Gospel [reading] of Palm Sunday,
 When the Christians recite it along the way,
 By the great crosses which then appear,
 And by the sash on the delicate waist,
 By the beauty inscribed on you, have you not
 Pity for my burning desire, of the dryness of my throat?

Your devotees are tempted to come to the Christians, to leave Islam and apostatise.⁶⁶

Here Abū Nuwās is describing a procession, something that, again, Muslims would have easy access to even if they were participating in aspects of the Lenten and Easter festivals outside the church building. His references to communion, a Christian ritual, which other texts assume that Muslims do not participate in, imply that a Muslim could be in a Christian sacred space during these celebrations. Considering the near contemporary references to Muslims remaining outside churches on festival days and not taking communion (which are discussed further below), Abū Nuwās’s reference to the Easter

⁶⁶Al-Shābushtī (d. c. 1000) attributes this poem to Abū Nuwās. As the poem matches Abū Nuwās’s general style and subject matter, as well as playing with the likely commonly known concept of Muslims remaining outside of churches on festival days, there is a possibility that this was an Abū Nuwās poem, or a forgery from the ninth century; al-Shābushtī, *Kitāb al-Diyārāt*, ed. Gurgis Awaad (Baghdad: al-Ma’ārif, 1951), pp. 131–2; trans. in Steve Cochrane, “From Beit Abhe to Angamali: Connections, Functions and Roles of the Church of the East’s Monasteries in Ninth Century Christian-Muslim Relations”, PhD Thesis, University of Middlesex, 2014, pp. 135–6.

communion (consecrated bread and wine) is particularly striking.⁶⁷ One would presumably have to be inside the church to witness this.

Abū Nuwās's suggestion that Muslims could know about the Eucharist, and may even be seduced by it, is tongue in cheek. Considering his penchant for irreverent and mischievous behaviour, however, it would only be effective as an erotic and religious reference if it described an action that was prohibited by some and practised by others in the Muslim community. The idea of communion was likely to have been general knowledge, but it is the fact that Abū Nuwās plays off of what is general knowledge, and also a seemingly widely accepted rule about Muslims not entering churches during festivals, that makes this line of the poem significant. Here, Easter and Palm Sunday are clearly Christian festivals, yet they are accessible by Muslims.⁶⁸ This theme could only have been provocative if some Muslims were, indeed, entering churches and witnessing communion. Abū Nuwās consistently bates those he labels as "hypocrites" in his poetry with references to sexual activities and drinking, and there is no reason to think this poem is an exception.⁶⁹ The final line cements the tension between fears of the lure of other faiths and a more common, carefree attitude to participation in Christian celebrations.

Al-İşfahānī (c. 897–967), in his *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, treats Palm Sunday as a festival in which the Muslims of Baghdad happily joined, especially those of the elite classes. He describes slave girls in the 'Abbāsīd court dressing specially for this festival and carrying around olive and palm branches.⁷⁰ This suggests a hybrid of traditionally Christian and elite 'Abbāsīd practice – the famous slave women entertainers of the court participate in and to some extent embody the celebration of the Christian holiday in a predominantly Muslim context.⁷¹

Al-Muqaddasī (d. 990), in his entry on Syria in *Aḥsan al-taqāsīm fī ma'rīfat al-aqālīm*, explicitly states that Muslims knew or were "acquainted with" several Christian festivals, including Easter. He explains that these festivals were major points of the year, "by which they [Muslims] determine the seasons of the year".⁷² It is difficult to know what he means by "know", or what the local Muslim participation in these festivals might have been. However, the incorporation of local proverbs about seasonal festivals and their dates

⁶⁷This is, of course, assuming that the discussion in al-Khallāl, *Abū Bakr Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad, Kitāb Ahl al-Milal wa-al-Riddah wa-al-zanādiqah wa-tārik al-ṣalāh wa-al-farā'ī'd min kitāb al-Jāmi'*, ed. I.M. al-Ṣulṭān. Al-Riyāḍ: Maktabat al-Ma'ārif lil-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī, 1996, no. 132 about remaining in the market was actually a judgement made during the lifetime of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal or his son, 'Abd Allāh. There is the possibility that there was a change in practice between the lifetimes of Abū Nuwās and Ibn Ḥanbal.

⁶⁸For Christian communities in Baghdad, see Philip Wood, "Constantine in the *Chronicle of Seert*", *Studies in Late Antiquity* 1/2 (2017): 150–72; Michel Allard, "Les chrétiens à Bagdad", *Arabica* 9/1 (1962): 375–88; J.M. Fiey, *Chrétiens syriaques sous les Abbassides surtout à Bagdad, 749–1258* (Leuven: Secrétariat du Corpus SCO, 1980). Thank you to Philip Wood for these references.

⁶⁹As an example, see "Come on, pour me some wine", in *Classical Arabic Literature: A Library of Arabic Literature Anthology*, trans. Geert van Gelder (London: New York University Press, 2012), pp. 43–4. For the sexual allure of Christians in 'Abbāsīd literature, see Sizgorich, "Mind the Gap", 163–74.

⁷⁰Abū l-Faraj al-İşfahānī, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, ed. Aḥmad b. al-Shīnqīṭī, volumes I–XXI (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Taqaḍdum, 1905), XIX: 138. See also Salahuddin Khuda Bakhsh and David Samuel Margoliouth, *The Renaissance of Islam* (London: Jubilee Printing and Publishing House, 1937), p. 419.

⁷¹Whether or not this ritual was repeated annually is unknown, as are the specific religious affiliations of the slave women involved.

⁷²Al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan al-taqāsīm fī ma'rīfat al-aqālīm*, ed. Michael Jan de Goeje (Leiden: Brill, 1877), pp. 182–3; trans. Basil Collins, *The Best Divisions for Knowledge of the Regions* (Reading: Garnet, 2001), p. 153 (here slightly adapted). The feast at Lydda is actually the feast of St. George; see Guidetti, *In the Shadow of the Church*, 85. Al-Muqaddasī also claims that the Caliph al-Mahdī (r. 775–785) visited Lydda during the festival of St. George; *Aḥsan al-taqāsīm*, 176.

into the calendar would suggest a widespread and popular continuation of Christian celebrations in these areas.

Al-Shābushtī (d.c. 1000), in his *Kitāb al-Diyārāt* (Book of monasteries), describes ʿAbbāsīd Baghdadi citizens as going to four monasteries around the city – one for each Lenten festival. The monastery of Samālū was the place of choice for Easter:

At Easter in Baghdad there is an amazing spectacle there, for every Christian comes and takes communion in it and every Muslim who loves pleasure and amusement heads there to stroll about. It is among Baghdad's celebrated places for excursion and known areas of revelry.⁷³

Even in this literary source, a difference between Christians and Muslims is taken for granted with regard to the rite of communion. Christians participate in communion at Easter, and Muslims are present and participate in the festival, but do not receive communion.⁷⁴ This could possibly be the result of the earlier legal proscriptions seen above becoming normal practice, where Muslims are cautioned not to enter Christian places of worship during their festivals but are allowed to attend the celebration. Though it is equally possible, if not more likely, that Muslims in and around Baghdad simply did not feel drawn to the more sombre aspects of Christian practice. They may have accidentally adhered to this common proscription through a lack of interest.

Yaḥyā I-Anṭākī (fl. mid. 900s–1030s) was a Melkite Christian author who lived under the Fāṭimid Caliph al-Ḥākim and it is speculated that he fled to Antioch when al-Ḥākim granted *dhimmis* permission to move to Byzantine territory around 1015.⁷⁵ He describes a tenth-century procession from the Church of Lazarus to the Church of the Resurrection on Palm Sunday, in which the Muslim governor of Jerusalem and his whole staff were at the head of the procession.⁷⁶ It is telling that the Muslim governor and his staff were considered a necessary and normal part of this religious procession in honour of Palm Sunday. This is similar to the description of Ibn al-Qāṣṣ below regarding an *imām* in Jerusalem participating in the Holy Fire rituals at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Muslims in different parts of the Levant appear to have subscribed to a variety of local practices regarding which aspects of Christian festivals were acceptable. This substantial differentiation reflects local practices being developed amongst Muslim communities as opposed to an overall legal proscription that was universally followed.

Ibn al-Qāṣṣ al-Ṭabarī (d. 946–7), in his astrological work *Dalāʾil al-qibla*, describes the Holy Fire in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre on the Saturday evening before Easter. He clearly does not believe that the fire is miraculous, but he also seems to have no problem with the obvious Muslim participation in this ritual at the Tomb of Jesus, which was *inside* the complex of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

... Muslims, Christians and all those who attend see the place where the tomb is located, humbly beseeching God and praying to him from mid-day to dusk. The muezzin of the

⁷³Al-Shābushtī, *Kitāb al-Diyārāt*, ed. Awwad, 14; trans. Tannous, *Making of the Medieval Middle East*, 469–70.

⁷⁴This is similar to the Christian practice of revoking rights to the Eucharist as a strategy for distinguishing different confessional communities in Late Antiquity and the early medieval period. See Tannous, *Making of the Medieval Middle East*, 134–44, 156–9. It may well be that it was the Christian communities who were preventing known Muslims from participating in the Eucharist. Thanks to Philip Wood for this reference.

⁷⁵Mark N. Swanson, "Yaḥyā ibn Saʿīd al-Anṭākī", in *Christian-Muslim Relations. A Bibliographical History*, volume II: (900–1050), ed. David Thomas and Alex Mallett (Leiden: Brill, 2010), pp. 657–61.

⁷⁶Yaḥyā b. Saʿīd al-Anṭākī, *Histoire de Yahya ibn Saʿīd d'Antioche: continuateur de Saʿīd ibn Bitriq*, ed. A.A. Vasiliev [Patrologia Orientalis] (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1924–57), Arabic and French, p. 487.

Friday mosque, the *imām* and the amir of the city come and advance towards the tomb, they arrive there with lamps that they place on the tomb, while it is closed. Christians have extinguished their torches and lamps and wait until they see a bright white fire. They light a lamp, and by that fire lamps are lit in the mosque and in the churches.⁷⁷

Here there does not seem to be any issue with Muslims being inside a church complex on a festival day. The *imām* and muezzin themselves participate in the ceremony, even lighting the mosque with light from the famous Holy Fire. This reference does not suggest an understanding of Easter as a Christian-only holiday. The muezzin and *imām* of the Friday mosque in Jerusalem would have been important figures, given the sacred nature of Jerusalem for Muslims. The participation of Muslim religious elites in Easter festivities, particularly the religious aspects of those festivities, would suggest that early Muslim communities found a significance in this celebration that transcended communal boundaries.

Al-Bīrūnī, who lived during the very end of our period of enquiry, also discusses this shared practice of the Holy Fire.⁷⁸ This was likely preserved in one manuscript of al-Bīrūnī's *Chronology of Ancient Nations* because it was still happening. Al-Bīrūnī also seems to know quite a bit about how Lent and Easter were calculated, and has an entire chapter entitled "On the Christian Lent, and on those feasts, festive days which depend upon Lent and revolve parallel with it through the year, regarding which all Christian sects agree among each other".⁷⁹ He goes on at length about how to calculate the various Christian celebrations that fall during this time. While this is not necessarily informative on how the average Muslim in the 'Abbāsīd era may have experienced the Lenten festivals or Easter, it certainly shines some light upon how much information was available to the literate.

Conclusion

Christian and Muslim texts from multiple genres, alongside Levantine architecture from 750 to 1000, provide ample evidence of shared participation in festivals and associated markets celebrating jointly revered religious figures. Throughout this period, when Muslims were a numerical minority, a common, though not universal, practice began amongst the Muslim communities of participating in shared religious celebrations in a uniquely Muslim way. Many Muslims sold goods and shopped in the associated markets and enjoyed the singing, processions and exuberant atmosphere, often within the church or monastic complex, while not entering the church itself or partaking in the Eucharist. This subtle distinction between Muslims and Christians in how these celebrations were enjoyed becomes increasingly common in Muslim sources from the tenth

⁷⁷For a French translation of the passage, adapted here, see Marius Canard, "La destruction de l'Église de la Résurrection par le Calife Ḥakīm et l'histoire de la descente du feu sacré", *Byzantion* 35 (1965): 16–43, p. 36. For the Arabic text, see Ibn al-Qāṣṣ al-Ṭabarī, *Dalā'il al-qibla*, fragment edition by J. Šafā, *Al-Machriq* 16 (1913): 578–9; the complete text is in MS Ahmad Taymur 103, fols. 47v–48r, Dār al-Kutub – The National Library of Egypt. For further details of this source, see F. Sezgin, "Kitāb Dalā'il al-qibla li-Ibn al-Qass': Das Buch über die Orientierung nach Mekka von Ibn al-Qass'", *Zeitschrift für Geschichte der Arabisch-Islamischen Wissenschaften* 4 (1987–1988): 7–92.

⁷⁸Canard's translation was quoted by al-Bīrūnī in an alternative manuscript version of al-Bīrūnī's *Chronology of Ancient Nations*, edited by Kračkovskij in *Xristianskij Vostok* 3/3 (1914), p. 288. 'Dans la réimpression des oeuvres de Kračkovskij par l'Académie des Sciences d'U.R.S.S.' Kračkovskij found a manuscript of al-Bīrūnī's *Chronology of Ancient Nations* with this particular passage that was not included in Sachau's edition.

⁷⁹Al-Bīrūnī, *Chronology of Ancient Nations*, 299.

to eleventh centuries, with the exception of Jerusalem. However, the shared attendance at both small and large Christian festivals persisted into the fourteenth century.

The majority of people who would be converting to Islam in Egypt, Iraq, Syria and Palestine would have been People of the Book, and the majority of the general population in most of these places would have been Christian for a large portion of the ‘Abbāsid period. New converts did not sever familial ties, as is evidenced by both Christian and Muslim legal and literary texts from 750 to 1000, which commonly discuss inter-religious families.⁸⁰ Levantine Muslims may have either felt it was a family tradition to attend the major Christian festivals, regardless of faith community, or they may have seen these celebrations as something else, something more related to location or ethnicity than religious identity. Religious identity, while recognised as an inherent aspect of these celebrations, appears to have been fluid and conditional upon a multitude of individual factors in the context of festivals, just as it was in the areas of marriage, daily socialisation, education, baptism, employment, etc. It is notable that even in the very stylistic, elite literature explored above, we see a reference to Christians and Muslims participating in significant local festivals in their own community-specific ways.

While Muslim sources created by religious elites strove to establish robust distinctions between Christian and Muslim communities through outwardly visible actions, dress and mannerisms, these efforts at boundary creation barely extended to Christian celebrations between 750 and 1000. Even those who sought to patrol religious boundaries saw these festivals as part of the natural order of life. This is remarkably different from the impassioned Christian pleas of John Chrysostom intended to keep Christians away from Jewish celebrations and synagogues. It also differs substantially from the involved fourteenth-century condemnation of Muslims who participated in these festivals by Ibn Taymiyya. There are abundant examples in both large and small Christian festivals to mark shared religious figures, narratives and celebrations. In these early centuries of Islam, it would appear that there may have been a more openly accepting outlook amongst many Muslim communities throughout the Levant, and that it lasted longer than previously believed.

⁸⁰Regarding the issue of non-Muslim *walīs*, see Mālik b. Anas, *Mudawwana al-kubrā*, recension of al-Ṣahnūn, volumes I–V (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1994), II: 116. Al-Shāfi‘ī, *Kitāb al-Umm*, VII: 410. Regarding the issue of non-Muslim witnesses at a wedding, see al-Khallāl, *Ahl al-milal*, 228, nn. 419, 420. Regarding the issue of apostasy and family life, see ‘Abd al-Razzāq, *Muṣannaf*, VI: 82–3, 164; Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaf*, ed. Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm Laḥidān and Ḥamad b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Jum‘a, volumes I–XVI (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Rushd Nāshirūn, 2006), VI: 560–61; al-Shāfi‘ī, *Kitāb al-Umm*, VII: 420. For a Christian source based upon inter-religious family dynamics, see Ph.A. Dimitrakopolou, “Hagios Bakkhos o Néos”, *Epistēmōnikē Epetērīs tēs Philosophikēs Scholēs tou Panepistēmiou Athēnōn* 26 (Athens: University of Athens, 1977–1978): 331–63.