# From Acolyte to *Ṣaḥābī*?: Christian Monks as Symbols of Early Confessional Fluidity in the Conversion Story of Salmān al-Fārisī

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## Abstract

This paper will examine the narrative of Salmān al-Fārisī/"the Persian" and his conversion to Islam, as recounted in the eighth-century *Sīra* of Ibn Isḥāq, as a lens into the laudatory interpretation of Christian monasticism by early Muslims. This account of Salmān al-Fārisī (d. 656 CE), an original *Companion* (*ṣaḥābī*) of the Prophet Muḥammad, vividly describes his rejection of his Zoroastrian heritage, his initial embrace of Christianity, and his departure from his homeland of Isfahan in search of a deeper understanding of the Christian faith. This quest leads the young Persian on a great arc across the Near East into Iraq, Asia Minor, and Syria, during which he studies under various Christian monks and serves as their acolyte. Upon each master's death, Salmān is directed toward another mystical authority, on a passage that parallels the "monastic sojourns" of late antique Christian literature. At the conclusion of the narrative a monk sends Salmān to seek out a "new Prophet who has arisen among the Arabs." The monks, therefore, appear to be interpreted as "proto-Muslims," as links in a chain leading to enlightenment, regardless of their confessional distinction. This narrative could then suggest that pietistic concerns, shared between these communities, superseded specific doctrinal boundaries in the highly fluid and malleable religious culture of the late antique and early Islamic Near East.

## Key Words

Salmān, *Sīra*, monasticism, conversion, acolyte

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## Introduction

The impact of Christian monasticism and asceticism in the late antique Near East was not limited by sectarian constraints. To the contrary this particular facet of Christian devotion, long honored within the Roman/Byzantine sphere for piety and austerity, seems to have held significant interest for Muslim chroniclers, hagiographers, Qur'ānic exegetes, and theologians as well. This paper examines the narrative of Salmān al-Fārisī "the Persian" and his conversion to Islam, as recounted in the eighth-century *Sīra* of Ibn Isḥāq (the earliest extant biography of the Prophet Muḥammad), as a lens into the laudatory interpretation of Christian monasticism offered by early Muslims. In this account, Salmān is a seeker of religious knowledge, studying under various Christian teachers and monks while traveling a great arc across the Near East, ultimately acknowledging the perfection of Islam. In many ways, this quest mirrors the spiritual sojourns of eastern monasticism in late antiquity.[1]

Fred Donner has argued that an inter-confessional flexibility existed within the earliest stages of Islam,[2] a situation in which distinct religious boundaries may have been blurred in deference to shared notions of monotheistic piety and devotion. This article will examine the conversion story of Salmān al-Fārisī and the role of Christian monks along his journey as further evidence for the transcending of doctrinal barriers during this period.

The figure of Salmān the Persian is most generally recognized, in terms of his contribution to Islamic history, as one of the earliest non-Arab converts to Islam, being an important source of *ḥadīth* transmission, as a member of the *ṣaḥāba*, or *Companions* of the Prophet, and for his strategic planning during the Battle of the Trench (*al-khandaq*) in the year 627 CE.[3] Over time, his legacy came to enjoy great prominence amongst Shīʿī traditionalists as well as the mystical orders. The

[1] In part, these types of travels between late antique monastic communities were undertaken with the intention of collecting the wisdom of various sages and composing biographies of regional religious authorities. Such was the case with the fifth-century Lausiac History of Palladius and the Historia Religiosa of Theodoret, among others. See the discussion of "Desert Ascetics and Distant Marvels" in Georgia Frank, *The Memory of the Eyes: Pilgrims to Living Saints in Christian Late Antiquity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2000) 35–78. For Christian ascetics of the period this "wandering" was perhaps also a method of *imitatio Christi*, taking scenes of travel in the life of Christ and the apostles as the highest form of religious devotion. See Daniel Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks: Spiritual Authority and the Promotion of Monasticism in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2002) 14. For the connection between knowledge and travel in the pre-Christian era, see Ian W. Scott, "The Divine Wanderer: Travel and Divination in Late Antiquity," in *Travel and Religion in Late Antiquity* (ed. Philip Harland; Waterloo, ON: Wilford Laurier University Press, 2011) 101–22.

[2] Fred Donner articulated this idea in the article "From Believers to Muslims: Confessional Self-Identity in the Early Islamic Community," *al-Abhath* 50–51 (2002–2003) 9–53, and later expanded the concept into a full monograph entitled, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010).

[3] See Josef Horovitz, "Salmān al-Fārisī," *Der Islam* 12. 3–4 (1922) 178–83 and Louis Massignon, *Salmân Pâk et les prémices spirituelles de l'Islam iranien* (Tours: Arrault, 1934).

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Iṣfahānī background of Salmān, in particular, was increasingly emphasized as the Muslim population of Persia began to flourish in subsequent centuries, with his tomb in Ctesiphon maintaining its important status as a place of visitation until the modern period.[4]

This article examines Salmān's initial embrace of Islam and the monks who bore considerable responsibility as his devotional guides along the path. This conversion narrative, found within the *Sīra* of Ibn Isḥāq, casts Christian holy men as intercessors between confessional distinctions. In doing so, the narrative not only seems to express an appreciation for Christian asceticism but can perhaps also be interpreted within the larger framework of a piety-driven, nebulous spirituality that characterized the early Islamic movement. Although the narrative's decisive point is Salmān's acceptance of Islam in Medina, at the feet of the Prophet himself, Christian ascetics provide the critical direction within the narrative. The crux of the account, therefore, supports Donner's proposal for a synthesis between certain facets of late antique Christianity and an emergent Islam; one more specifically in which monasticism appeared as an "intermediary stage."[5] The over-lapping of religious identities in such a case hinges upon shared tenets of righteousness, but without a rigidly defined dogmatic structure.

This analysis contends that the ultimate source of early Muslim interest in Christian monastic life was articulated through an inclusive, piety-centered religious orientation that extended from the late antique period. Within this zeitgeist of late antiquity,[6] laden with themes of veneration for "holy men" and ascetic figures,[7] the flexible parameters for confessional identity came to be a defining characteristic of devotion. This inclination, at least in its nascence, may perhaps be considered a component to an early "believers" movement.[8] In turn, membership within such

[4] Sarah B. Savant, *The New Muslims of Post-Conquest Iran: Tradition, Memory, and Conversion* (Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization; Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013) 61–62; Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, "The Corruption of Christianity: Salām al-Fārisī's Quest as Paradigmatic Model," *Studia Orientalia* 85 (1999) 115–26.

[5] See Jane McAuliffe, *Qur'anic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), esp. 240–59.

[6] See Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), particularly the final chapter dealing with inherited traditions between early Islam and the Byzantine/Eastern Christian world.

[7] A significant amount of scholarship has been composed on this subject. See Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) 103–52; Robert Kirschner, "The Vocation of Holiness in Late Antiquity," *Vigiliae Christianiae* 38 (1984) 105–24; Arthur Vööbus, *A History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient: A Contribution to the History of Culture in the Near East*, Vols. I & II, (Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium; Louvain: Secrétariat du Corpus, 1958–60); Sebastian Brock, "Early Syrian Asceticism" in *Numen* 20 (April, 1973) 1–19, in addition to several works relating to the Syrian Church.

[8] See Fred Donner, "From Believers to Muslims," at 19–21. The core beliefs are mentioned as well in Donner's *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam*, which is an expansion of the original article. It should, however, be conceded here that the "believers" model is not without

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a group of *mu'minūn,* or "believers," would have been based upon a shared core of spiritual principles without regard to exclusive sectarian identities. The most essential concepts of this shared core would include a rigid monotheism, faith in a final judgment, and the acceptance of messengers from God.[9] The movement likewise seems to have emphasized the inherent immorality of the current age, hence the focus on a certain and looming apocalyptic reckoning.[10]

The simple acknowledgment of the aforementioned concepts was not sufficient for full inclusion into the category of *mu'minūn*. As stated by Fred Donner, "the Qur'an makes it clear that to be a true Believer mere intellectual acceptance of these ideas was not sufficient; one also had to live piously. According to the Qur'an, our status as creatures of God demands pious obedience to His word; we should constantly remember God and humble ourselves before Him in prayer."[11] Seeing themselves as existing in a world where iniquity was endemic, early Muslims strove to differentiate their group by expressing a loftier moral standard based not only on belief, but on righteous conduct as well.[12] Just as submission and humility before God were interpreted as key elements within this morality, the proposed piety-centered community would therefore have maintained a profound sense of humility as a fundamental criterion for genuine belonging. In terms of practicing such a precept, which accords with "living piously," the traditional tenets of late antique monasticism would seemingly translate with relative ease into this kind of religious matrix. One of the crucial implications here is the prospect for pliability and fluidity of exchange across confessional divides, in part relating to Christian and Muslim theological interaction in a somewhat amorphous, pietistic milieu.[13]

There have been several contemporary studies on the references to Christian monks and the interpretation of Christian monasticism in early Islamic literature.[14]

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its critics. See Robert Hoyland, "Reflections on the Identity of the Arabian Conquerors of the Seventh-Century Middle East," *Al-ʿUṣūr al-Wusṭā* 25 (2017) 113–40, in which the author challenges the notion of a non-confessional, monotheistic society within the foundational period of Islam.

[9] Fred Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, 60–61.

[10] Ibid., 66–67.

[11] Ibid., 61.

[12] Ibid., 66.

[13] The central argument in the "believers" thesis suggests that fluidity in inter-religious discourse from this era corresponds to, or perhaps yields, the systematic development over time of a more clearly defined perception of confessional distinction within the early Islamic community. This formula is in relative accord with the conventional assessment of the hardening sectarian lines which, though undergoing a process of formulation and delineation in the Umayyad period, appear to have been fundamentally realized in the transition from Umayyad to Abbasid authority in the middle of the eighth century. The "believers" proposition can therefore ultimately be viewed as an important contribution to the analysis of the rise and establishment of Islam within a dynamic late antique religious context. Such a claim would correspond with assessments by historians such as Averil Cameron and Peter Brown, which tended to interpret and historically situate the rise of Islam in its perceived indigenous context within late antiquity—that of an intellectually vibrant, religiously diverse and complex, ascetic and eschatologically-minded culture of the Near East.

[14] G. Troupeau, "Les Couvents Chrétiens dans la Litterature Arabe," *Études sur le christianisme*

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The terms *ruhbān*, or "monks," and *rahbānīya*, "monasticism," appear throughout various Muslim literary genres of this period, including geographical texts, historical chronicles, poetry, theological treatises, hagiographies, discourses on Muslim asceticism, and *ḥadīth* scholarship. While one cannot argue that the medieval Muslim commentators held one definitive position on the merits of this Christian institution, it should be stated that the practice of monasticism clearly held genuine fascination for Muslims throughout this period. Moreover, monks appear to have been generally regarded in a positive light, particularly in discussions concerning the wisdom, rigor, and virtue associated with *rahbānīya*.[15]

When the term *ruhbān* appears in verse 82 of Sūrat al-Mā'idah, for example, the Qur'ānic exegete al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) insists that the implicit approbation of monastic life is owed to the fact that monastic beliefs are so comparable to those of the Muslim faithful (*fa-hum lā yabᶜudūna min al-mu'minīn*).[16] According to his logic, Christians, as a whole, are more likely to be counted in fellowship with Muslims (*bi-qurb mawaddatihim li-ahl al-īmān bi-llāhi wa rasūlihi*)[17] because of the presence of these monastic devotees. Though these figures may not speak for the entirety of practitioners, their personal sense of holiness represents a broader sense of kinship between religious groups.

The passage from the Qur'ān states: "You will find the people most intensely hostile to the believers are the Jews and pagans, and that the nearest in affection to them are those that say: 'we are Christians' (*alladhīna qālū innā Naṣāra*). That is because there are priests (*qissīsīn*) and monks (*ruhbān*) among them who are free from arrogance (*lā yastakbirūna*)."[18]

*arabe au Moyen Âge* (1995) 265–79; Hilary Kilpatrick, "Monasteries Through Muslim Eyes: The Diyārāt Books," in *Christians at the Heart of Islamic Rule: Church Life and Scholarship in 'Abbasid Iraq* (ed. David Thomas; Leiden: Brill, 2003) 19–37; Elizabeth and Garth Fowden, "Monks, Monasteries and Early Islam," in *Studies on Hellenism, Christianity and the Umayyads,* (ed. Garth and Elizabeth Fowden; *Meletemata* 37; Athens: KERA, 2004) 149–74; Suleiman Mourad, "Christian Monks in Islamic Literature: A Preliminary Report on Some Arabic Apophthegmata Patrum," *Bulletin for the Royal Institute on Inter-Faith Studies* 6 (2004) 81–98; Elizabeth Fowden, "The Lamp and the Olive Flask: Early Muslim Interest in Christian Monks," in *Islamic Cross Pollinations: Interactions in the Medieval Middle East* (ed. Anna Akasoy, et al.; Gibb Memorial Trust, 2007) 1–28; Ofer Livne-Kafri, "Early Muslim Asceticism and the World of Christian Monasticism," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 20 (1996) 105–29; Christian Sahner, "Islamic Legends about the Birth of Monasticism: A Case Study on the Late Antique Milieu of the Qur'ān and Tafsīr," in *The Late Antique World of Early Islam: Muslims Among Christians and Jews in the Eastern Mediterranean* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 2015) 393–435; Sidney Griffith, *Arabic Christianity in the Monasteries of Ninth-Century Palestine* (Aldershot: Ashgate Variorum, 1992); idem, *The Beginnings of Christian Theology in Arabic: Muslim-Christian Encounters in the Early Islamic Period* (Aldershot: Ashgate Variorum, 2002); idem, "Michael, the Martyr and Monk of Mar Sabas Monastery, at the Court of the Caliph 'Abd al-Malik; Christian Apologetics and Martyrology in the Early Islamic Period," in *ARAM* 6. 1 (1994) 15–48.

[15] Ofer Livne-Kafri, "Early Muslim Asceticism and the World of Christian Monasticism," 105–107.

[16] al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi'ah al-bayān ᶜan ta'wīl al-Qur'ān* (15 vols.; Egypt: Dār al-Maᶜārif) 10:505.

[17] Ibid.

[18] *Qur'ān, Sūrat al-Mā'idah*, v. 82 (5:82).

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The ninth-century Muslim essayist al-Jāḥiẓ, when writing of this passage from *Sūrat al-Mā'idah*, establishes an even more specific point of reference to these monks that resonates between their Qur'ānic interpretation and certain vignettes within the *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* of Ibn Isḥāq (d. 767).[19] The monks who guide Salmān al-Fārisī to Islam in the *Sīra*, mentioned by al-Jāḥiẓ below, are of primary interest to this paper's proposal for flexible confessional identities in the early Islamic period. Jāḥiẓ writes:

> In this verse itself there is the best proof that God did not mean these particular Christians and their like, those being the Melkites and Jacobites. Rather, He meant only the kind like Baḥīrā and the likes of those monks whom Salmān served (*wa innamā ᶜana ḍarb Baḥīrā wa ḍarb al-ruhbān alladhīna kāna yakhdimuhum Salmān*).[20]

These figures who are associated with Salmān, according to al-Jāḥiẓ, are distinct from the more reprehensible Christians who identify themselves as either Chalcedonians/Melkites (*al-milkānīya*) or Jacobites (*al-yaᶜqūbīya*).[21] It would then appear that individual monks, perhaps those adhering to a particularly strict asceticism and disavowing a distinct confessional allegiance, formed a kind of "middle ground" in the early and classical Muslim understanding. In this way the monastic version of religious devotion seems to be interpreted as a more faithful rendering of the original *dīn ᶜĪsā* (the religion of Jesus) and its precursor, the *dīn 'Ibrāhīm* (the religion of Abraham), as opposed to the more popular forms of Christianity. The intrinsic purity offered by the monastic life had also previously

[19] There are several relevant studies on the development of the *Sīra*. See Uri Rubin, *The Eye of the Beholder: The Life of Muḥammad as Viewed By the Early Muslims* (Princeton, N.J.: Darwin Press, 1995); *The Life of Muḥammad* (ed. Uri Rubin; The Formation of the Classical Islamic World 4; Aldershot: Ashgate Variorum, 1998); John C. Rankin, *The Real Muḥammad: In the Eyes of Ibn Isḥāq* (West Simsbury, CT: TEI Publishing, 2013); Gregor Schoeler, *The Biography of Muḥammad: Nature and Authenticity* (London: Routledge Press, 2011); Muhammad Hamidullah, *Muhammad Ibn Ishaq: The Biographer of the Holy Prophet* (Karachi: Pakistan Historical Society, 1967); Gordon D. Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet: A Reconstruction of the Earliest Biography of Muhammad* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989).

[20] al-Jāḥiẓ, *Thalāth Risā'il*, (ed. Joshua Finkel; Cairo: al-Matbaᶜat al-Salafīyya, 1926) 14. Baḥīrā, the monk from Boṣtra, was commonly recognized as the first person to acknowledge the future prophetic significance of the young Muḥammad. See Rudolph Sellheim, "Prophet, Chalif, und Geschichte: Die Muhammed-Biographie des Ibn Isḥāq," *Oriens*, 18 (1965–1966) 33–91; F. Nau, "L'expansion nestorienne en Asie," *Annales du Musée Guimet*: *Bibliothèque de vulgarization* 40 (1914) 193–383; and T. Nöldeke, "Hatte Muḥammad christliche Lehrer?," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* (1858) 699–708, esp. 704; Stephen Gero, "The Legend of the Monk Baḥīrā, the Cult of the Cross, and Iconoclasm," *La Syrie de Byzance à l'Islam, VIIe-VIIIe siècles* (Damascus: Institut Français de Damas, 1992) 47–58; Barbara Roggema has also greatly contributed to the interpretation of the Baḥīrā narrative as it appears in both Muslim and Christian sources, in *The Legend of Sergius/Baḥīrā: Eastern Christian Apologetics and Apocalyptic in Response to Islam* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009).

[21] The Melkites and Jacobites are also specifically targeted by the ninth-century theologian Abū ᶜĪsā al-Warrāq. See *Early Muslim Polemic against Christianity: Abū* ᶜĪsā al-Warrāq's "Against the Incarnation," (ed. David Thomas; Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

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been judged, by Christian figures such as St. Ephrem, as the only measure of sincere Christianity.[22] For certain Muslim commentators as well, these monks represented the last vestiges of a "true Christianity," which was not only untainted by the corrupted teachings of the church but also receptive to the prophethood of Muḥammad.[23] The justification offered by al-Ṭabarī for this spiritual connection is the "presence of those among them that are steadfast in their duties to God; those that have entered monastic life in monasteries and hermitages, and are wise in their knowledge of scripture and practice the recitation of their texts."[24] The exegesis here is quite lucid, placing the monastic tenets of solemnity and learning in close parallel to those of the Muslim community. It is, furthermore, the consummate humility of the institution which serves as a key determinant for religious virtue. Such themes are revisited in the account of Salmān's journey to Islam. Inasmuch as the guides of Salmān are openly demonstrated to be Christians, their degree of wisdom and piety sets them apart from the larger Christian community, transferring them into a more fluid confessional environment.

## The Narrative

The report of Salmān is included among other conversion stories and testimonials that might best be termed "annunciation narratives."[25] Mecca, the contextual backdrop, is depicted here in the *Sīra* as a place with some degree of religious discontent on the eve of Islam, a depiction that draws attention to certain religiously conscious individuals and their quest for a higher truth than that offered by the traditional Arabian paganism.[26] Though several of these seekers embrace Christianity, this portion of the Ibn Isḥāq text does also recognize the existence of the *ḥanīfīya*[27] as a primordial, abstract monotheism that is distinct from either Judaism or Christianity.[28] Julius Wellhausen interpreted this pre-Islamic *ḥanīfīya*

[22] John Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity and Christian Divisions, The Church 450–680 A.D.* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1989) 83.

[23] Barbara Roggema, *The Legend of Sergius/Baḥīrā,* 37.

[24] al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi'ah al-bayān,* 10:505.

[25] Uri Rubin, *The Eye of the Beholder*, 21–22, 44–53. Cf. Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, "The Corruption of Christianity," 116–17.

[26] Walid A. Saleh, "The Arabian Context of Muḥammad's Life," *The Cambridge Companion to Muḥammad* (ed. Jonathan E. Brockopp; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 21–38, at 31.

[27] G.R. Hawting has taken this problematic term as an identification of pure monotheism, a non-denominational form of the original *dīn 'Ibrāhīm*. See G.R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 21.

[28] See Uri Rubin, "Hanifiyya and Kaᶜb—An Inquiry into the Arabian Pre-Islamic Background of the *dīn 'Ibrāhīm,*" *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 13 (1990) 85–112. Montgomery Watt has suggested that the original name for the movement founded by Muḥammad was not *Islam*, but rather *tazakkī*, or "righteousness." It is after the Hijra that the most numerous references to a community of *mu'minūn* begin to occur. It appears that in the early terminology of "believers," Jews would have been included under this general rubric. During the period of the Prophet's break with the Jews of Medina, he claimed to have been following the religion of Abraham, the *ḥanīfīya*;

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as a "religion of seekers" that emerged from "a mood which was widespread throughout Arabia in the period before Muḥammad and dominated many of the most noble spirits . . . the ground was then prepared for the emergence of Islam."[29] By way of example, the story of Zayd ibn ᶜAmr's pursuit of the *ḥanīfīya*, the religion of Abraham, takes him from pagan Mecca and across the whole of Iraq before his meeting with a Christian monk at Balqā', in Syria. The monk then reveals to Zayd that he is "seeking a religion that no one today can guide you toward, but the time has drawn near when a Prophet will arise in your own homeland. He will be dispatched with the *ḥanīfīya,* the *dīn 'Ibrāhīm*, so you should follow it, for he is about to be sent and his time is at hand."[30]

As demonstrated by the example of Zayd ibn ᶜAmr, these vignettes are highlighted by acknowledgements of the predestined arrival of Muḥammad by pagan, Jewish and Christian observers. Uri Rubin has suggested a highly biblical framework that consciously situates Muḥammad in an ancient pattern of prophetic annunciation.[31] Among the various groups that recognize the advent of this new Arabian prophet, Christians appear to be the most receptive to the message. The episodes are not solely cast in the *Sīra* as a foretelling of Muḥammad's future emergence, but rather at times they entail a recognition of the Prophet in his own lifetime. Both the well-known story of Baḥīrā[32] and the account of Salmān's conversion fall into this latter category. It is of some note that both the *Ṭabaqāt al-Kabīr* of Ibn Saᶜd (d. 845) and the *Ḥilyat al-Awliyā'* of Abū Nuᶜaym al-Iṣfahānī (d. 1038) provide similar versions of this story in biographical entries for Salmān al-Fārisī.[33]

The exposition begins with Salmān recounting, in first-person narrative style, his youth in the village of Jayy, near Iṣfahān. His early years unfold under the watchful eye of his father, a local *dihqān* and ardent practitioner of Zoroastrianism (*al-majūsīya*). Over time Salmān is drawn toward the Christian faith that he sees practiced in the neighboring communities, a move that he himself claims was initially brought about by the beauty of their liturgical chanting (*fa-samiᶜatu aṣwātahum fīhā wa hum yuṣallūna*).[34] When Salmān asks the Christians about

and the Prophet's religion may have been called exactly that for some time afterward. See Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977) 301–302.

[29] Julius Wellhausen, *Reste arabischen Heidentums* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1961) 234. Cf. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, 27.

[30] Ibn Hisham, *al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya* (ed. Mustafa al-Saqqa et al.; 4 vols.; Beirut: Dar al-Khayr, 1997) 1:186.

[31] Rubin, *The Eye of the Beholder*, 21–22.

[32] See Barbara Roggema, *The Legend of Sergius/Baḥīrā*.

[33] Ibn Saᶜd, *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kabīr, al-Ṭabaqat al-'Ūla,* (11 vols; Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 2001) 4:69–79. The similarity in narrative is not altogether surprising given that both al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Saᶜd owed much of their *maghāzī* material, or "exploits of the Prophet," as well as the *mubtada'*, or "beginnings," to Ibn Isḥāq via his student Salamah. See Gregor Schoeler, *The Biography of Muḥammad: Nature and Authenticity*, 32. Abū Nuᶜaym al-Iṣfahānī, *Ḥilyat al-Awlīyā*, (11 vols.; Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1967–68) 1:190–95.

[34] Ibn Hisham, *Sīra,* 1:173.

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the foundations of their tradition, they reply that its origins lie "in Syria" (*thuma qult lahum: aina aṣl hādhā al-dīn? Qālū: bi-Shām*). Salmān then reports staying with the Christians in their church until sunset that evening. Learning that his son spent time in a church, Salmān's father is outraged. After being scolded by his father for this perceived betrayal of his Magian birthright, he is placed in fetters and forbidden to leave the house, lest these unwelcomed influences continue their advance. Salmān is eventually able to free himself from the shackles and conspire with a group of travelling Christian merchants, who help him escape into the wider world and flee to Syria. Upon his arrival to the Bilād al-Shām, he begins inquiring about men of knowledge[35] and suitable places to learn more about Christianity. He is directed to a local bishop (*usquf*), a man recognized for his erudition in the faith, and he becomes an attendant in the bishop's church.

In due course however, Salmān discovers that the bishop is "an evil man" (*wa kāna rajul sū'*), who uses alms money (*ṣadaqa*) granted to the church for his own personal treasury and withholds funds for the poor. Even as Salmān's hatred for such an affront is swelling, the corrupt bishop dies and is subsequently replaced by a virtuous appointee. This new master continues the religious education of the young Persian. So profound is the affection between the disciple and teacher that Salmān declares, "I have never seen a man, who was not praying the five prayers that was more righteous (*āfḍal*), more ascetic (*āzhad*) in religion, more committed to the Hereafter (*ārghib fī al-ākhira*), or more constant through night and day, than this man. I loved him more than I had ever before loved another."[36]

The above passages in the *Sīra* also reflect the limitations of any uniform interpretation of the monasticism we find in the Qur'ān. Accordingly, in this stage of the narrative Salmān witnesses both the righteous and iniquitous monks. The charge against this first figure, whose refusal to grant alms money to the local Christians prompts Salmān's castigation of him as an "evil man," resonates with a negative assessment of monasticism in the Qur'ān. A similar condemnation of such greed is delivered in *Sūrat al-Tawbah*: "O Believers, many are the rabbis and monks who devour the wealth of the people in falsehood and hinder them from the path of God. To those that gather up gold and silver and do not spend it in the cause of God, announce for them a woeful punishment."[37]

The concurrence here between the *Sīra* and the Qur'ān is an excellent example of the dual function of the Ibn Isḥāq text: it is simultaneously an attempt to demonstrate a linear chronology of the Prophet's *Life* in biographical fashion as well as to provide exegesis on the holy scripture of the Qur'ān.[38] Wansbrough has

[35] Ibid, 1:174. The precise question uttered by Salmān is: "*man afḍal ahl hādhā al-dīn ᶜilmān*?"

[36] Ibid.

[37] *Qur'ān, Sūrat al-Tawbah*, v. 34 (9:34).

[38] Gordon D. Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet: A Reconstruction of the Earliest Biography of Muhammad*, 2–4. Newby suggests that the exegetical nature of the *Sīra* is particularly concerned with the middle portion of the text. This section known as the *Kitāb al-Mubtada'*, or the "Book of Sending Forth," is "a commentary on the Bible as well as a commentary on the Quran."

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commented on this hermeneutical technique, stating: "In my study of the Muslim haggadah I drew attention to two characteristic narrative techniques employed in the Sīra: exegetical, in which extracts (serial and isolated) from scripture provided the framework for extended *narratio*; and parabolic, in which the *narratio* was itself the framework for frequent if not continuous allusion to scripture."[39] These juxtapositions of monastic virtues and vices in the *Sīra* represent a microcosmic view of monasticism in the Qur'ān, providing commentary on the more general verses on the basis of specific episodes from the *Life* of the Prophet. In effect, the narrative serves as an explanation for both assessments of monasticism in the sacred text. It should also be stressed that the honorable qualities of the monks within the account outweigh the negative sentiments. The disparity here is shown directly through the individual qualities of several righteous monks contrasted with a single immoral example.

Upon the deathbed of his beloved teacher, Salmān is directed to seek out his next virtuous master. At this point in the narrative the dying man explains that most others have abandoned or distorted the true religion (*baddalū wa tarakū akthar mā kānū ᶜalayhi*), so it is necessary to embark on another journey to find the remaining, genuinely righteous men of the faith.[40] This instruction sets Salmān upon a great circuit of travel, studying with various holy men throughout the region: first to al-Mawṣil, then to Naṣībīn, then on to ᶜAmmurīya in Byzantine territory. The cycle of an aged master pointing the way to distant, further guides is replicated in this portion of the narrative. Upon the death of his teacher in ᶜAmmurīya, Salmān is confronted with the possibility that there are none left who still abide by this spiritual manner of life. Just before expiring, however, the master refers Salman to an unnamed prophet who will arise among the Arabs and whose advent is at hand. It is therefore in this land, the land of the Arabs, that the Persian will finally be able to end his long search for spiritual enlightenment. This prophet, according to the venerable old man, will be dispatched carrying the religion of Abraham (*wa huwa mabᶜūth bi-dīn Ibrāhīm*)[41] and will migrate between two lava fields set among palm groves.[42]

This account detailing the conversion of Salmān al-Fārisī to Islam may, of course, be interpreted in a variety of ways. The proposition that the narrative represents a polemical attitude,[43] in which Islam is demonstrated to be superior to

[39] John Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978) 2.

[40] Ibn Hisham, *Sīra,* 1:175.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid. While the details here clearly serve as an allusion to the eventual *Hijra* of Muḥammad, it could also be a foreshadowing of the description of the "holy man moving between two thickets" that is to come at the end of the narrative.

[43] For the rise of Christianity in Muslim polemics, see Jacob Mann, "An Early Theologico-Polemical Work," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 12–13 (1937–1938) 417–43. Additionally, there is a systematic assessment of medieval Muslim arguments to counter Christianity in Hava Lazarus-

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Christianity—in other words, the final phase in the journey toward true religious fulfillment—is reasonable at first glance. Such would be a powerful admonition of Christianity indeed, coming from the mouths of learned Christian monks themselves. With the details of the text in mind, however, to simply view the story as a polemic leaves much unanswered. The merits of Christianity, after all, are not dealt with explicitly, and there is a notable absence of any kind of theological or christological debate within the narrative.[44] There is, likewise, no judgment on the institution of monasticism here, the only criticism being that one of these teachers is not conducting his office in a righteous manner. By contrast, the other masters that educate Salmān are overwhelmingly seen in a favorable light. One might expect a straightforward polemic to take a stance on these concerns. In a more nuanced interpretation, Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila has suggested the story is a device detailing the gradual corruption of Christianity in its historical context: while perhaps the great majority of Christians have fallen away from the original teachings of Christ, there endure a select few who adhere to the authentic message. The Christians that guide Salmān are therefore seen as the last remaining "real followers of Christ—growing old and dying out,"[45] just in time for the next and final revelation to appear. In this respect the proposal by Hämeen-Anttila can be integrated into a model for an early *mu'minūn* movement, one in which certain groups are included among the "believers," not on the basis of their theology, but by their pious standard of living. Whereas the argument for a polemical reading of the story insists on a tangible delineation between the two faiths, with one necessarily superseding the other, the contention here leans more toward a synthesis of traditions with a focal point on the ascetics themselves and their manner of living.

It is worth emphasizing that the "guides" along this spiritual sojourn of Salmān are explicitly identified as Christian ascetics. The years spent serving and studying under these various religious masters is ultimately the way in which the path to Islam is slowly revealed. The relationship between Salmān and his teachers is analogous to that of an initiate, or acolyte, and his monastic mentor. The narrative feature of travel between spiritual advisers, with each in turn pointing the way to another source of further illumination, clearly parallels themes found in late antique monastic literature and hagiographies.[46] The *topos* of the itinerant ascetic, it has

Yafeh, "Some Neglected Aspects of Medieval Muslim Polemics against Christianity," *The Harvard Theological Review* 89.1 (1996) 61–84.

[44] Hämeen-Anttila, 118.

[45] Ibid, 124.

[46] See discussion of "Desert Ascetics and Distant Marvels" in Georgia Frank, *The Memory of the Eyes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) 35–78. This journey also recalls the conversion story of Kaᶜb al-Aḥbār, which involves travelling and studying under various Jewish scholars to finally reach Islam. See Ibn Saᶜd, *Ṭabaqāt*, 8:2, 156 on biographical form. For an analysis of Kaᶜb's conversion, see both Moshe Perlmann's "The Legendary Story of Kᶜab al-Aḥbār's Conversion to Islam," in *The Joshua Starr Memorial Volume* (New York: The Conference on Jewish Relations, 1953) 85-99, and "Another Kᶜab al-Aḥbār Story" in *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 45.1 (1954) 48-58.

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been suggested, may actually represent a certain type of monastic pilgrimage. The wanderer here is not necessarily a *peregrinus* to a particular shrine or sacred place,[47] but rather a seeker of knowledge via the peripatetic life. The deliberate quest to make contact with holy people, or at least the prospect of meeting other pious figures along the road, the sharing of their life stories, and the acquisition of wisdom from collective experience are themes that resonate throughout the literature of this period.[48] Moreover, these figures are acknowledged within the narrative as supreme founts of religious virtue and knowledge. Such a motif occurs throughout sources from late antiquity[49] and even into the Islamic period in the form of Muslim hagiographical texts.[50] The defining characteristics of the holy men in this account do indeed correspond to a severity in ascetic practice and wisdom in spiritual affairs. It is likely not a coincidence that a location such as Naṣībīn, or Nisibis, for instance, has been recognized as a premier center of monastic scholarship since antiquity.[51]

As this portion of the narrative comes to a close, an alternate ending is supplied in the form of an *isnād* traced to ᶜUmar ibn ᶜAbd al-Azīz. The variant account claims that Salmān's teacher in ᶜAmmurīya does not send him directly to the prophet among the Arabs, but instead to a particular place in Syria where he will find a man of exceeding virtue and miraculous powers. Salmān follows his instructions and finds this man living between two thickets,[52] periodically healing the masses of the sick

[47] Maribel Dietz, "Itinerant Spirituality and the Late Antique Origins of Christian Pilgrimage," *Travel, Communication and Geography in Late Antiquity: Sacred and Profane*, ed. Linda Ellis and Frank Kidner (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004) 125-134, at 126. Dietz suggests that the *instabilitas* aspect of pilgrimage was the ritual in and of itself, without regard to an explicit destination. This is "monastic" in the sense of a retreat from the familiar and dedication to the hardships of a wandering life.

[48] Ibid, 127–29. Mun'im Sirry has discussed a rather analogous phenomenon in medieval Muslim hagiography, where the pious seeker reaches a pinnacle of asceticism through direct contact with an imminent teacher. See Mun'im Sirry, "Pious Muslims in the Making: A Closer Look at the Narratives of Ascetic Conversion," *Arabica*, T. 57, Fasc. 4 (2010) 437–54. The "conversion" here is not, however, between confessional traditions, but rather a movement within traditional Islam toward a more ascetic or "Sufi" lifestyle.

[49] See Thomas Sizgorich, "Narrative and Community in Islamic Late Antiquity," *Past and Present*, 185 (2004) 9–42, at 11. The quote from Sizgorich specifically refers to Muḥammad's encounter with the monk Baḥīrā, but it applies here as well: ". . . these narratives employ a figure—the monk—which had been recognized and acknowledged for more than four centuries in communities of variant confessional alignments as a discerner of truth and godliness to support truth claims crucial to early Muslim programmes of communal self-fashioning."

[50] See Suleiman Mourad, "Christian Monks in Islamic Literature," 81–98.

[51] See Arthur Vööbus, *History of the School of Nisibis*, *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, Subsidia 26 (Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1965) as well as Adam Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and Christian Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006). The story of the temporary conversion to Christianity of the Jewish philosopher David b. Merwān al-Mukkammaṣ (d. 937) takes place in Nisibis under a prominent Christian teacher. See Jacob Mann, "An Early Theologico-Polemical Work," 417–18.

[52] The word in the *Sīra* here is *ghaiḍatayn*, with the dual ending. Identical terminology is preserved in the Ibn Saᶜd, *Ṭabaqāt*, 4:74.

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and infirm that appear before him. In phrasing that is reminiscent of the travels by the unnamed Arabian prophet,[53] this holy man "passes between each thicket (*yakhruj fī kul sana min hādhihī al-ghayḍa ilā hādhihī al-ghayḍa mustajayzā*), where people gather for his curative attention." When Salmān eventually makes his way through the throngs of witnesses, he inquires of this mystic concerning the *dīn Ibrāhīm*, the *ḥanīfīya*, and the narrative takes an unexpected turn. The last lines of the passage state:

> The man replied, "you have questioned me about something that people today do not ask about! The time has arrived that a prophet will be sent forth with this religion [the *dīn Ibrāhīm*] from among the people of the *ḥaram*. Go to him, and he will deliver it to you." Then he again entered [into the thicket]. The Messenger of God then said, "if what you have told me is true, O Salmān, then you met Jesus the son of Mary."[54]

## "The Monks Whom Salmān Served" and Fluid Confessional Identities

In the latter, alternate account, at the narrative's conclusion the figure of Jesus[55] is invoked to provide the seeker, Salmān, with a final set of instructions for his religious quest. The end of the passage then depicts the Persian sitting before the Prophet Muḥammad and relating this story of his encounter with the mystic "between the thickets." What is in effect being described here is a continuum of revelation on the basis of this *ḥanīfīya*, from the Prophet Abraham, through Jesus, and culminating in the message of Muḥammad. Quite literally, in the case of this last passage, Jesus is depicted as pointing the way to Islam. The wise teachers of Salmān are, likewise, represented as junctures along this spiritual path, apparently without regard to denominational constraints. It is only by virtue of Salmān's long spiritual journey as a monastic acolyte amongst these pious Christians that his position as a *ṣaḥābī*, or *Companion*, comes to be realized. The quest for the *ḥanīfīya*, or the purest expression of ancient monotheism, is at the heart of this sojourn. In its Qur'ānic context the *ḥanīfīya* is itself entirely devoid of confessional affiliations, as demonstrated by the following lines of *Sūrat* Āl *ᶜImrān:*

> O People of the Book, why do you argue about Abraham when both the Torah and the Gospel were not revealed until after him? Have you no sense? Indeed you have argued about things of which you have some knowledge. Must you now argue about that which you know nothing? God knows, but you know

[53] The dual is utilized in both cases, with the terms *ḥarratayn* ("two lava fields") and *ghaiḍatayn* ("two thickets") respectively, accompanied by terms indicating motion between these areas. Ibn Hisham, *Sīra,* 1:178.

[54] Ibn Hisham, *Sīra,* 1:179.

[55] For the differing views on the life, and death, of Jesus in the Islamic tradition, see Gabriel Said Reynolds, "The Muslim Jesus: Alive or Dead," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 72.2 (2009) 237–58.

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not. Abraham was neither Jew nor Christian. He was a *ḥanīfān muslimān* and not an idolater.[56]

In post-Qur'ānic Arabic terminology the *ḥanīfīya* tends to be synonymous with true belief, or with being a Muslim, while the community itself is sometimes referred to as *al-ḥanīfa*.[57] The concept of a continuum of revelation applies here in that all of the prophets from antiquity to Muḥammad revealed this same message, though it was distorted over the ages by both the Jews and Christians.[58] If Christian monks, or at least factions within the monastic fold, were understood by the early Muslim community to represent some of the few remaining repositories of this ancient tradition, it stands to reason that they were also seen as occupying an "intermediate phase" along the continuum. The statement offered by al-Ṭabarī, namely that monks are spiritually akin to "true believers" because of their rigorous and solemn devotion,[59] further explains the early Muslim interest in these men. Such would indicate a fluid religious environment in which confessional distinction was of less concern than the level of personal piety demonstrated by a particular individual or institution. This in-between stage regarding the perception of monasticism appropriately parallels the presentation of ascetic teachers in the narrative of Salmān. They appear for the acolyte as a middle ground or transitional level of spiritual awareness, serving as necessary points of guidance along the path to Islam.

Aside from the traditional reverence for the "holy man" that permeated late antique confessional divides, the principal motif of piety that is so fervently

[56] *Qur'ān, Sūrat Āl ᶜImrān*, vv. 65–67 (3:65–67). A similar sentiment appears in verse 135 in *Sūrat al-Baqarah*.

[57] François De Blois, "Naṣrānī (Ναζωραîνos) and ḥanīf (ἐθνικόσ): Studies on the Religious Vocabulary of Christianity and Islam," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 65.1 (2002) 1–30, at 18. Waardenburg provides a similar assessment in the use of the term *ḥanīfīyya*, as one of the original names for the movement, which was not only a reaction against the paganism of Mecca, but also a "reform movement' with regard to the local Christian and Jewish communities. See Jacques Waardenburg, "Towards a Periodization of Earliest Islam According to Its Relations with Other Religions," *The Qur'an: Style and Contents* (ed. Andrew Rippin; The Formation of the Classical Islamic World 24; Aldershot: Ashgate Variorum, 2001) 93–116, at 102.

[58] Khalid Blankenship, "The Early Creed," *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology* (ed. Tim Winter; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 33–54. On *taḥrīf*, or "alteration of scripture," see also Gabriel Said Reynolds, "On the Qur'anic Assessment of Scriptural Falsification (taḥrīf) and Anti-Jewish Polemic," *The Journal of the American Oriental Society* 130.2 (2010) 189–202.

[59] Christopher Melchert has discussed the multifaceted religious terminology of the early Islamic period with an interest toward groups maintaining a piety-driven worldview. Working on the basis of G.S. Hodgson's *Venture of Islam*, Melchert attempts to draw parallels and contrasts between group identities across the broad spectrum of juridical-theological movements in the ninth century. See Christopher Melchert, "The Piety of the Hadith Folk," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34.3 (2002) 425–39.

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stressed within the Qur'ān,[60] by virtue of terms like *birr* and *taqwā,*[61] may provide an additional basis for a laudatory appraisal of Christian monasticism amongst early Muslims. This is surely the case with the exposition of al-Ṭabarī concerning monasticism. Though the terms *ruhbān*[62] and *rahbānīya*[63] occur in only a few passages within the Qur'ān itself, there is again the caveat of determining a harmonized scriptural assessment of the monastic institution.[64] Thus, we find in these Qur'ānic allusions what appear to be both positive and negative evaluations of the monastic station. As Christian Sahner has expressed in sharp terms: "We see the Qur'ānic monk as both hero and villain: a loyal follower of Jesus and Muḥammad, but also a perverter of the true Christianity."[65] The *Sīra*, in its capacity as scriptural exegesis, provides a model for these conflicting views. Still, there does seem to exist a particular connection between the Muslim *umma* and their monastic counterparts from the earliest stages of the Prophet's movement. These communities subscribed to remarkably similar ideas of religious devotion; chief among them an uncompromising and demanding sense of personal piety.

Adding to the complexity of the early Muslim perception of monasticism are cases in which the institution appears to be condemned, or at least specifically prohibited within Islam.[66] A certain *ḥadīth*[67] is commonly cited as a proof for the denunciation of monasticism by the Prophet Muḥammad, which states, "There is no monasticism in Islam (*lā rahbānīya fī'l-Islām*), the monasticism of this community

[60] Fred Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 14; Princeton, N.J.: Darwin Press, 1998) 67.

[61] For a discussion on the nuance of these terms, see Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009) 29, 61, 110, and 137.

[62] *Qur'ān, Sūrat al-Mā'idah*, v. 82 (5:82); *Sūrat al-Tawbah*, v. 31 and 34 (9:31, 9:34).

[63] *Qur'ān, Sūrat al-Ḥadīd*, v. 27 (57:27).

[64] Edmund Beck, "Das Christliche Mönchtum Im Koran," *Studia Orientalia* 13.3 (1946) 3–29; Daniel Sahas, "Monastic Ethos and Spirituality and the Origins of Islam," in *Acts of the XVIIIth International Congress of Byzantine Studies* (ed. Iho Ševçenko et al.; Sheperdstown, WV: Byzantine Studies Press, 1996) 27–39; Sara Sviri, "Wa-Rahbāniyatan Ibtadᶜūhā: An Analysis of the Traditions Concerning the Origins and Evaluation of Christian Monasticism," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 13 (1990) 195–208; See also section on the "Vocation of Monasticism," in Louis Massignon, *Essay on the Origins of the Technical Language of Islamic Mysticism* (trans. Benjamin Clark; Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997) 98–104.

[65] Sahner, "Islamic Legends about the Birth of Monasticism," 294–395.

[66] See Sarah Sviri, "Wa-Rahbāniyatan Ibtadᶜūhā," 195–201 as well as Emran El-Badawi, "From 'Clergy' to 'Celibacy': The Development of *Rahbānīyyah* Between the Qur'ān, Ḥadīth and Church Canon," *Al-Bayān* 11.1 (2013) 1–14.

[67] One of the earliest incarnations of this statement comes from the *Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt al-kabīr* of Ibn Saᶜd.

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is *jihād*."[68] This reproach, as Massignon has argued,[69] is not necessarily directed against the religious merits of monasticism itself, but may rather represent a criticism of the social values attached to the monastic lifestyle. The primary affront in this case is the institution of celibacy within ascetic circles. It is on this basis that Ibn Saᶜd rejected monasticism as an innovation within Islam (*al-rahbānīya al-mubtadaᶜa*), likewise expressly due to the connection to an "un-married life" as it existed in its Christian parameters.[70]

Massignon has, moreover, argued against the authenticity of this *ḥadīth*, claiming that it appears to have come into use no earlier than the middle to late second century of the Islamic era.[71] The reasoning behind Massignon's rejection of the *ḥadīth*, in its varied incarnations, is that the statement apparently comes into common acceptance at a time when Muslim polemics concerning Christianity were on the rise. Given the historical context suggested by Massignon, the statement could be understood as forming part of a larger theological reproof against rival confessions. He suggests, furthermore, that the "*lā rahbānīya*" statement may have a connection to criticisms against the emerging Sufi traditions, stemming from the more conservative elements, on the basis of potential influences from foreign imports. Given the similarities between Christian and early Muslim ascetic practices, a statement such as this against monasticism could have concurrently served as a denunciation of Sufism and other mystical/ascetic developments within Islam.[72]

In contrast to the more controversial and potentially negative *ḥadīth* elements mentioned, the twelfth-century exegete al-Zamakhsharī discusses the impetus behind the development of monasticism in a most affirmative manner. This

[68] Ibn Saᶜd, *Ṭabaqāt,* 5:70. For a comprehensive explanation of this nuanced term *jihād*, see Reuven Firestone, "Jihād," *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'ān* (ed. Andrew Rippin and Jawid Mojaddedi; Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006) 376–388. In essence, Firestone argues that *Jihād* can take on a range of meanings and can be applied to different kinds of action. It easily becomes a religiously laden term because it represents the most basic ethical message of religion, that one must strive to do the good by overcoming the bad. The term *jihād* is frequently used as part of this idiomatic expression "in the path of God" to convey a sense of deep religious commitment to certain defined acts of devotion. Though in particular usage this term can be applied to the concept of war in defense of Islam and the community, it can also be employed in a more general sense, referring to "religious piety." Early variations of this *ḥadīth* are reported by ᶜAbdallāh ibn al-Mubarāk (d. 797) in the *Kitāb al-Jihād* in the following two formats: "Every community has its monasticism (*li-kull umma rahbānīya*), and the monasticism of this community is *jihād* in the path of God (*fī sabīl Allāh*)" and "A person mentioned itinerant asceticism (*al-sīyāḥa*) in front of the Prophet, to which the Prophet replied: "God has given to us instead *jihād* in the path of God, and the extolment of God (*takbīr*) throughout every lofty place." See ᶜAbdallāh ibn al-Mubarāk, *Kitāb al-Jihād* (ed. Nazīh Ḥammād; Mecca, 1978) 37–38.

[69] See section on the "Vocation of Monasticism" in Massignon, *Essay on the Origins of the Technical Language of Islamic Mysticism*, 98–104.

[70] Ibid. cf. Ignaz Goldziher*, Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law* (trans. Andras and Ruth Hamori; Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981) 134–36.

[71] Massignon, *Essay on the Origins of the Technical Language of Islamic Mysticism*, 99.

[72] Ibid, 99–100.

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section within the *Kitāb al-Kashshāf* provides commentary on verse 27 of *Sūrat al-Ḥadīd,* which includes the statement: "As for monasticism, they instituted themselves (*ibtadᶜūhā*)."[73] The verse has been alternatively interpreted as evidence for the incompatibility between monasticism and Islam, in that it is an artificial and unnecessary "innovation" to religious life. The dissenting explanation of monasticism, provided by al-Zamakhsharī, is two-fold: first, it represents a withdrawal into the spiritual in an attempt to distance oneself from external temptations (*fitan*); and second, it is a necessary device to avoid persecution in the early years of the church.[74] Within this historical context some members of the community had to seek refuge in the mountains and outlying areas. It was in this tradition of flight or retreat that the concept of monasticism first originated, according to al-Zamakhsharī's understanding. While not mandated directly by God, those who initiated this lifestyle were simply trying to please him.[75]

Of particular interest is that al-Zamakhsharī uses the term "believers" (*mu'minūn*) when referring to the pious followers of the teachings of Jesus, those that were forced into virtual self-exile as a means of escaping oppression.[76] In other words, the exegete acknowledges that many of these "true believers" resorted to the monastic lifestyle in an effort to preserve their religion. This religion, the *dīn ᶜIsā* in its purest form, is consonant with the teachings of both Abraham and Muḥammad in the framework of the *ḥanīfīya*. The "disobedient" referred to in the verse, the *fāsiqūn*, are those who failed to uphold their contract with God. The idea of monasticism therefore holds considerable merit and is seen as a binding agreement between man and the divine, worthy of reward when faithfully practiced, yet reprimanded when the terms of the monastic station are not carefully observed.[77]

Muqātil ibn Sulaymān (d. 767), in an elucidation of a seemingly unrelated passage in the Qur'ān (v. 87 within *Sūrat al-Mā'idah*), provides an example from

[73] The traditional rendering of the full v. 27 of *Sūrat al-Ḥadīd* follows: "As for monasticism, they instituted themselves (*ibtadaᶜūha*), We did not prescribe it for them except that they were seeking to please God; but they did not observe it faithfully (*fa-mā raᶜawhā ḥaqq riᶜāyatihā*). So We rewarded those among them who are true believers; but many of them are disobedient (*wa kathīr minhum fāsiqūn*)."

[74] al-Zamakhsharī, *Kitāb al-Kashshāf ᶜan ḥaqā'iq ghawāmiḍ al-tanzīl wa ᶜuyūn al-aqāwīl fī wujūh al-ta'wīl* (6 vols.; Riyadh: Maktabat al-ᶜUbaykān 1998) 6:52–53.

[75] al-Zamakhsharī, *Kitāb al-Kashshāf*, 53. The commentary then goes on to explain that on a grammatical level, the phrase in question should be read as "We placed in their hearts compassion and mercy and monasticism. . . . We did not prescribe it for them except that they should seek, through it, the approval of God." Edmund Beck further interprets the passage to reflect that Muḥammad, particularly during the early Medinan period, revered the ascetic ideal and monasticism due to the extreme versions of piety exhibited by their devotees. The meaning of the passage is, however, that such radical devotion was ultimately incompatible with human frailty and was therefore not explicitly enjoined to the pious by divine decree. Beck is essentially arguing that while the merits of monasticism were lauded, practical concerns compelled the Prophet to advocate for a more moderate set of parameters for worship. See "Das Christliche Mönchtum Im Koran," 17–18.

[76] Ibid.

[77] Ibid.

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the life of Muḥammad that appears specifically to prohibit severe versions of asceticism as a part of his community.[78] The Qur'ānic verse in question states: "O you who have believed, do not prohibit the good things which God has made lawful for you (*mā 'āḥalla Allāh lakum*), and do not transgress. Verily, God does not like transgressors."[79] Muqātil then cites a *ḥadīth* in which several of the Prophet's leading Companions, among them ᶜAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib and ᶜUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, attempt to express rigorous piety by refusing food, maintaining an abstinence from women (their wives), and wearing course garments. Going even further, the group intends to set up monastic cells (*yabnū ṣawāmiᶜa*) and take up the monastic life (*fa-yatarahhabū fīhā*). The Prophet discovers their plans and promptly issues the following injunction: "He who does not follow my example (*sunna*) is not one of mine. . . . Our *sunna* concerns clothing, eating, and [taking] wives. Whoever averts this *sunna*, he does not belong to me."[80]

The citation above clearly serves as another example from the *ḥadīth* corpus that seeks to restrict the influence of extreme asceticism within the Muslim community. Sara Sviri has examined this type of material and concluded that there was indeed a trend within early Islam to denounce monasticism.[81] For Sviri the strong stance against monasticism reflects the highly aggressive mentality of the early *umma*, as the traditionally monastic preference for being non-combatants and engaging in spiritual withdrawal from the material world would have been seen as anathema to a militaristic society.[82] As Massignon suggests, however, there are reasons to believe that this negative view of monasticism appears rather late in the Islamic tradition and may have held ulterior purposes beyond just admonishing Christian asceticism. Additionally, it may be suggested that a key component within the *ḥadīth* provided by Muqātil has been undervalued. While the centerpiece of the tradition is, of course, the Prophet's mandate concerning the *sunna*, one can also find a subtle indication of the early view of monasticism as demonstrated by some of the *Companions*. Within their understanding, the truly pious existence could perhaps be achieved by emulating the example of monastic life (*fa-yatarahhabū fīhā*).[83] Though spurned by the Prophet in this instance, the episode may reveal an early Muslim inclination toward a connection between the monastic station and radical piety.

Going back to the explicit admiration for the *ruhbān* in verse 82 in *Sūrat al-Mā'idah*, al-Ṭabarī insists that the positive appraisal is founded upon three main

[78] Muqātil ibn Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulīmān* (ed. Shiḥātah; 5 vols.; Cairo: al-Hay'ah al-Miṣrīyah al-ᶜAmmah lil-Kitāb 1979) 1:498–99.

[79] *Qur'ān, Sūrat al-Mā'idah*, v. 87 (5:87).

[80] Muqātil ibn Sulaymān, *Tafsīr*, 499. El-Badawi provides an additional report on "proper conduct" from the *Majmū*ᶜāt al-fatāwā of Ibn Taymīyyah (d. 1328) that utilizes the core lesson from this same *ḥadīth* to emphasize the stance against celibacy. See El-Badawi, "From 'Clergy' to 'Celibacy,'" 9–10.

[81] Sviri, "Wa-Rahbāniyatan Ibtadᶜūhā," 195–201.

[82] Ibid, 201.

[83] Muqātil ibn Sulaymān, *Tafsīr*, 499.

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monastic characteristics: their absolute dedication to religious observance, in this case by withdrawing to monasteries and hermitages apart from the secular world, the presence of a learned class among them who focus on holy scripture, and their resolute humility.[84] Muqātil ibn Sulaymān likewise provides an exposition of verse 82 from *Sūrat al-Mā'idah*. In the explanation he suggests that when the word *ruhbān* appears in scripture it is to be understood as "those pious men of the cells" (*mutaᶜabbid aṣḥāb al-ṣawāmiᶜa*),[85] "those who do not act pridefully in matters of faith" (*lā yatakābirūna ᶜan al-īmān*).[86] The foremost characteristics of the monk, therefore, appear to transcend the boundaries of confessional distinction by virtue of his righteousness, with his piety consistently emphasized. The monk was understood as a standard of devoutness par excellence in the late antique world, and the image remained virtually unchanged in the Islamic period, with an appreciation

[84] al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi'ah al-bayān*, 10:505–506. So important was this theme of humility in the practice of asceticism in late antiquity that it became a sort of game between competing hagiographers as to which of their subjects displayed the highest degree of spiritual perfection. See John Wortley, "The Spirit of Rivalry in Early Christian Monasticism," *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 33 (1992) 385–404. This characteristic of submission or obedience to the divine is clearly reflected in the Arabic term traditionally employed for "monk," *rāhib*, which carries an intrinsic root meaning of "veneration," "reverence," "awe," and perhaps most significantly, "fear." See *Lisān al-ᶜArab* of Ibn Manẓūr's entry for the root *rahiba* (vol. V), in which the words *khawf* (fear) and *fajᶜa* (fright) are provided as related meanings. al-Ṭabarī likewise provides the definition of *rāhib* in this section of his commentary as equating to *khawf*, or "fear of God." See al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi'ah al-bayān*, 10:502. It may even be suggested that this connotation of "fear of the divine" is more heavily pronounced in the Arabic terminology than in other languages from the region, in which the monk can literally be understood as "God-fearer." Whereas in the typical designations of both μοναχός and the practice of ἀναχωρεῖν from the Byzantine tradition, and *iḥidayē* most commonly utilized in Syriac, the emphasis falls on the solitary nature of the monastic existence. In both of these cases the central element, from which the designations arise, concerns a retreat from the material world into spiritual seclusion. Such terminology is discussed in Claire Fauchon, "Les forms de vie ascétique et monastique en milieu syriaque, Ve-VIIe siècles," *Le Monachisme Syriaque*, (ed. F. Jullien; Études Syriaques 7; Paris: Geuthner, 2010) 37–63. The Syriac term also carries the sense of celibacy, as the *iḥidayē* is isolated from both worldly affairs and from the bonds of married life. A virtually analogous term for these consecrated celibates is *qaddīshē*, or "saints/holy ones." See Sidney Griffith, "Asceticism in the Church of Syria: The Hermeneutics of Early Syrian Monasticism," *Asceticism* (ed. Vincent J. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis; New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) 220–45, at 223.

[85] Muqātil ibn Suleimān, *Tafsīr*, 497.

[86] Ibid. The sentiment coincides with certain features within the cycles of Syriac rules for monastic conduct and provides a virtually analogous assessment of the bond between fear, humility, and the pious existence. The regulations imposed on monastic communities by the fourth-century Mār Ephrēm of Edessa, for example, contain the following passage: "It is good for you that you are being educated in the fear (*deḥltē*) of your masters; and becoming humble (*makīk*), and chaste (*nekhef*), and disciplined (*maṭkus*). Do not become undisciplined." The sixth-century *Rules of Jōḥannan Bar Qūrsos* likewise provide guidelines for the initiates that highlight a particular concern over the "fear of God": "They shall be sent into monasteries to read books and to learn the conduct of the fear of God (*deḥlṭ 'Elohē*). For if many send their children to far off countries because of the instruction of this world, how much more fitting it is for those who have set apart and offered their children to God, that they must send them into the holy mountains for spiritual wisdom." See Arthur Vööbus, *Syriac and Arabic Documents Regarding Legislation Relative to Syrian Asceticism* (Papers of the Estonian Theological Society in Exile; Stockholm: ETSE, 1960) 24–50.

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for the wisdom and piety of the monk being transferred into a new religious matrix. Some of these men would have remained exemplars for an extreme version of righteous behavior, though perhaps not for all Christians, or even for all Christian monks. Since the development of the early *umma* would have been predicated on precisely this tenet, it stands to reason that these monastic figures would have held significant influence in its pietistic orientation, which would suggest the idea of a "believers' movement." The aforementioned *ḥadīth*, in which the *Companions* attempted to model their own devotional behaviors within a monastic framework, would substantiate this idea.

As has been shown, in al-Zamakhsharī's use of the term *mu'minūn,* for example, the connection between groups of "believers," Muslims, and Christian monks would surely hold the capacity to transcend confessional boundaries in the early stages of Islam. The monks that the exegete references in his commentary of *Sūrat al-Ḥadīd* are marked by their devotion and "true belief" with precisely the same term often utilized in the Qur'ān to depict the fledgling Muslim *umma*. This bond amongst such communities would have been forged from their most general and mutual understanding of the importance of rigorous devotion in worship and way of life. These types of figures, it can be argued, are represented in the narrative of Salmān as paragons of righteousness, regardless of the fact that they are acknowledged to be Christians.

This brings us full-circle back to the construct of the "believers" movement and the shared notions of piety between religious groups. What precisely this *piety* meant for the early Islamic community is explained by Donner in *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing*, where it is defined within its Qur'ānic context. According to Donner, the overriding concern in Muslim holy scripture is that humankind has a duty to be pious "as a religious obedience—which, in the Qur'ānic terms, means submission (*islām*) to God's revealed law for men: belief in one God and the Last Judgment, performance of basic ritual duties—prayer, fasting, righteous and modest manner."[87] The theme of piety and morality is such a constant one, in terms of its absolute injunction within the Qur'ān, that it may be concluded that this was indeed "the essence of Muḥammad's message."[88]

As put by al-Jāḥiẓ in his *Thalāth Risā'il*, when *Sūrat al-Mā'idah* speaks of monks in laudable terms it is referring to precisely "the likes of those monks whom Salmān had served."[89] These figures, according to the commentary of al-Jāḥiẓ, are distinct from the reprehensible Christians who have taken a distinctly confessional stance. In this sense the Christians of Salmān defy categorization along confessional lines, even within the confines of Christian sectarianism itself. It would, therefore, be reasonable to think that these kinds of pious monks were also capable of traversing larger confessional barriers, those of a more inter-religious nature, and that they

[87] Fred Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins,* 67.

[88] Ibid, 75.

[89]al- Jāḥiẓ, *Thalāth Risā'il,* 14.

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continued to be interpreted as idealized beacons of righteousness into the early Islamic period. If we take Donner's suggestion that "the community of Believers was originally conceptualized independent of confessional identities. . . . Believers could be members of any one of several religious confessions—Christians or Jews, for example—if the doctrines of their religious confession were consonant with strict monotheism and not too inimical to the Believers' other basic ideas,"[90] then the monks of Salmān would surely figure into such a movement and perhaps provide an additional lens into the appreciation of monasticism by early Muslims. In the narrative of Salmān's conversion, these men serve as paradigms for an intermediary phase between the twilight of authentic Christianity and emerging Islam. Their uncompromising manner of asceticism, austerity, wisdom, and piety parallel the concerns of an early "believers" movement, unhindered by confessional allegiances. Bearing this contextual framework in mind, it should be quite reasonable from the standpoint of an early Muslim audience to accept that Christian monks, long seen as individual exemplars of righteousness, would ultimately reveal the spiritual path to Islam.

[90] Donner, "From Believers to Muslims," 11.

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