
Sidney H. Griffith's *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam*

by

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The title of Sidney Griffith's work, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* is revealing. The title itself points to the discussion of two major world religions, Christianity and Islam, and reveals that in this particular history Christianity will not be the dominating religion, Islam will be. Griffith's full title is expressed in his primary focus for the text which is, "to provide a succinct overview of the cultural and intellectual achievements, including the theological posture vis-à-vis Islam, of the Christians who spoke and wrote in Syriac and in Arabic and who lived in the world of Islam..." While this is his primary goal his ultimate hope is that by unearthing evidence of "an articulation of a new cultural expression of Christian doctrine [in Arabic]" and analyzing historical encounters between Muslims and Christians there might be "renewed Muslim/Christian dialogue."

The Church in the Shadow of the Mosques is divided into seven chapters with each chapter serving almost as an independent essay, focusing on a different aspect of Christian life in "the World of Islam". The chapters are connected by Griffith's thesis, which utilizes the languages of Syriac and specifically Arabic as the driving force behind his argument. Glancing at Griffith's table of contents and the varying titles for each chapter, it is clear that he has done extensive research and intends to provide a well-rounded overview of Christian/Muslim interactions. However, once the reader begins Griffith's work there are several confusing factors to the division of this work, the delivery of material, and the effectiveness of his argument.

The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque is an impressive work; it is extensively researched, exploring and engaging a plethora of captivating resources and Griffith has crafted an intriguing argument, one that hopes to reach beyond simply presenting his findings and encourage a revived dialogue between the Muslims and Christians of the world at present. Unfortunately, I believe Griffith failed to deliver. One finishes *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque* reeling from vast list of names Griffith cites as proof for his argument but never seems to properly engage, sources he never fully unpacks or analyzes, confusion with the

organization of the book, and bold sweeping statements that are not supported by his evidence. Overall, I believe the research is there, Griffith peaked my interest with his thesis and he had 180 pages to convince me of his argument—yet, I finished the book feeling only slightly convinced and quite confused. The author's engagement with the material and his overall writing hindered this work.

The first chapter of the book, “People of the Gospel', 'People of the Book': Christians and Christianity in the World of Islam” introduces a key question, “Who were the Christians in the Arabic-speaking milieu of Muhammad and the Qur'an, and what were their affiliations with Christian groups elsewhere?” This question broadens the discussion from simply the engagements between Christians and Muslims but points to the tensions and growing divisions between Christians in matters of theology and cultural diversity. While Griffith engages, somewhat, with this question he primarily provides an overview of the historical outline of the rise of Islam and chooses to focus the rest of the chapter on Christians under Muslim rule. The question posed at the beginning of the chapter is misleading for the direction he chooses to take the rest of the chapter. His first chapter is strong, a good beginning that held promise for the rest of the work. He piques the reader's interest by reiterating his thesis along with a statement as to why twenty-first century westerners should be interested in the Christian Arabic texts he is going to engage. He states, “...for a fuller picture of the growth and development of Islam in its early years, it is imperative to consider not only Islamic sources...but also to see it from the perspective of those non-Muslims who witnessed Islam's rise in the world and wrestled with its challenges...” He then reminds readers that it is important to learn this history from the perspectives of both Muslims and Christians so that we, in the present, can engage in dialogue with our Muslim “neighbors, friends, co-workers and co-believers in the one God, creator of all that is, with whom we are engaged on a daily basis both at home and abroad...” His first chapter serves almost as a second introduction. The chapter's strength held promise for the analysis to come in the following six chapters.

Chapters two through six provide the meat of Griffith's argument and analysis. His historical overview, scattered throughout these sections, is succinct and is not weighed down with an overwhelming amount of details, a problem found throughout his analysis. Griffith's transitions are not clear. For example, in chapter two, “Apocalypse and the Arabs: The Christian Responses to the Challenge of Islam” Griffith begins by supplying a clear historical timeline to set the stage. However, his historical overview is weakened by his abrupt shift into the analysis of Anastasios's *Hodēgos*. There is no clear transition between the end of the historical outline and the beginning of his analysis, the reader is suddenly thrust into the heart of his argument. Although, his analysis of Anastasios's *Hodēgos* is convincing he does his overall argument a disservice by swiftly shifting to Jacob of Edessa's works. Griffith's analysis is difficult to comprehend due to his tendency to abruptly shift his focus between sources. At times, he simply cites a work or an author as evidence to support his argument but never provides a full analysis.

Griffith's strongest sections are the ones that primarily focus on Christian theology, philosophy, and intellectual culture in Arabic. The strength of these sections has less to do with Griffith's analysis and more to do with the sources he mentions. These sections utilize lesser known sources to provide evidence that Christians under Islamic rule "shaped their enduring ecclesial identities, both culturally and intellectually, within the context of several local determining circumstances: their encounter with the Muslims, their adoption of the Arabic language, and their isolation from other Christian communities." Although, these sections cite numerous valuable sources as evidence, Griffith's engagement falls short. Yet again, his analysis is not consistent and he tends to simply list off books, names, and pieces of work without properly introducing them or discussing them.

It is clear that Griffith has done extensive research on this topic and has worked with numerous primary sources. Griffith has done the preparatory work for this project and there are times when he cites a source and provides a strong and clear analysis, strengthening his argument. However, the times he does this are too few and far between. For the most part, the reader is left to slug through Griffith's seemingly random citations. The citations serve a point, however, there is an assumption that the reader will know who or what he is referring to. This assumption goes against his early expression that the texts he is working with are not particularly well known. Overall, Griffith's engagement with his rich research is disappointing.

In the final chapter, "Between the Crescent and the Cross: Convivencia, the Clash of Theologies and Interreligious Dialogue" Griffith introduces new material with examples that would have been better suited had they come earlier in the book. The final chapter does not serve as a conclusion and the book closes with a call for westerners to learn from the experiences of "Christians who lived in the world of Islam for centuries." Throughout Griffith's work one gets the impression that much of Christian/Muslim interaction was a back and forth between the two religions attempting to express who was more right than the other. Since this was evidenced throughout his work I am left wondering what he hopes present day Muslim/Christian conversations will discuss?

The lack of a proper conclusion further hinders Griffith's work. *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque* is a work that engages a vast number of sources and covers a significant amount of material in 180 pages. This work would have benefitted from a concise conclusion that tied up loose ends, summarized Griffith's findings, and reiterated his thesis. Overall, Griffith's work held promise, however, his execution was weak and left me as a reader unconvinced by his overall argument.

Works Cited

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