Sidney Griffith opens the last section of his work *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, with a pointed observation:

Western Christian thinkers engaged in interreligious dialogue with Muslims in the modern world, and those who have in recent times been concerned with comparative theology in the study of Christianity and Islam, have seldom if ever taken any useful cognizance of the intellectual history of the Christians who lived for centuries in the world of Islam and who wrote Christian philosophy and theology in Syriac and Arabic. (176)

It is, indeed, the general neglect of the Syriac and Arabic Christian literary corpus, even when compared to the numerically more modest Arabic Jewish corpus (2-3, 69), that prompted Professor Griffith to write *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*. In so doing, he has produced a work without precedent or parallel: a clear and eloquent introduction, perfectly suitable for undergraduate instruction, to Christianity in the Islamic Near East. Meanwhile, Griffith’s work, which includes detailed footnotes and a thirty-one page bibliography (four pages of which are taken up by his own publications) will also serve the specialist as a resource for further research. It seems to me that only a scholar such as Griffith—who along with Samir Khalil Samir has trained a generation of scholars in the field—could write such a work, which calls at once for detailed knowledge of published literature and the ability clearly to present the complicated legacy of Near Eastern Christianity.

Griffith organizes *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque* in seven chapters. Chapter One is a general introduction to church history in the Islamic Near East; Chapter Two is a presentation of the earliest Christian references (which pre-date the Muslim sources themselves) to the rise of Islam; Chapter Three is a description of the earliest Arabic Christian theological works; Chapter Four is a systematic analysis of the genres of Christian Arabic theology. Chapter Five is a forceful argument for the contribution of Christians to the intellectual life of medieval Islamic culture. Chapter Six is a description of the elements (including sect and ethnicity) and social conditions of the Near Eastern Christian community and Chapter Seven is a reflection on the
importance of the Near Eastern Christian heritage for contemporary Muslim-Christian relations. These chapters were originally written as public lectures and occasionally show some repetition—e.g. on Theodore bar Kônî (43-44, 81); on Theodore Abū Qurrah (59-61, 90); on the Georgian liturgical calendar of Jerusalem (140, 171)—but this is no more than a minor distraction to the progress of the book. Indeed Griffith develops a coherent historical narrative. He begins with a description of the organic development of Syriac and Arabic Christian literature from the Greek heritage of the patristic period. Thereafter, he depicts the manner in which that literature was ultimately shaped by its Islamic context: “[T]he discourse of the Christian apologists in Arabic presents a conceptual profile that cannot easily be mistaken for Christian theology in any other community of Christian discourse.” (75)

Throughout the work, meanwhile, Griffith acknowledges the continuous demographic decline of Near Eastern Christianity and the impact to the Christian community of conversions to Islam. He might have added that the growth of the Islamic community through the importation of slaves, prisoners of war, and marriages to Christian women was a more significant factor in this demographic trend. Still Griffith responds clearly to the apologetic argument heard frequently today that the Islamic conquests actually improved conditions for the native Christians of the Near East. In fact, a few early Christian writings, such as a Syriac letter of the patriarch Isho'yahb III (d. 659), describe the rule of the Arabs (who are never called Muslims in early sources) as a relief from Byzantine oppression. Yet more often Christian writings, such as the Syriac apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius (ca. 691), portray the conquests as a terrible punishment from God. Griffith concludes:

[T]he Christians of all communities unanimously regarded the conquest as a disaster, and when they were not blaming it on their own sinfulness they were citing the sins of their Christian adversaries, whom they regarded as heretics, as the proximate cause of the conquest and of the death and destruction it brought in its wake. (28)

At the same time, Griffith explains that Christian Arabic literature owes its very existence to the Arab conquests. There is no evidence that any book, including the Bible, was written in Arabic before the rise of Islam, even though many Arabs had become Christians. (They knew the Bible in Syriac or, less frequently, Greek). Indeed, the Qur'an, it seems, was the first Arabic book, and early Arabic Christian literature was in large part written in response to its interpretation of Christianity. In fact,
the most prominent early Christian Arab authors, from all three principal denominations, wrote apologetic treatises in face of the Islamic challenge to Christianity, including Abū Qurra (d. ca. 830, Melkite); Abū Rā’ita (d. ca. 851, Jacobite); and ‘Ammār al-Basrī (fl. ca. 950, East Syrian/Nestorian). Their writings, moreover, were fundamentally shaped by Islam, which both set the “apologetic agenda” (92-93) and established certain meanings for Arabic theological terminology (94-95), something which rendered awkward the task of Christian theologians attempting to express their faith in a new language. Yet the Christian literary response to Islam was remarkably diverse and creative. Griffith notes that in addition to the systematic theological treatise, early Christian Arabic writers developed several other genres, which he names “The Monk in the Emir’s Majlis” (a dialogue, sometimes fictional, between a Christian monk and Muslim leader), “Questions and Answers” (a controversial theological discourse), and “The Epistolary Exchange” (a compilation, sometimes fictional, of letters between a Christian and a Muslim). In addition, Griffith rightly emphasizes the far-reaching and long-lasting influence of the Christian legend of Bahīrā, a narrative that reverses Muslim tradition by having a Christian monk as Muhammad’s teacher, and by blaming two perfidious Jews for falsifying his Christian doctrine and creating Islam. (38-39; 81-82)

Not all Christian writing on Islam, however, was polemical. At times, early Arab Christian treatises present Muhammad’s religion as the fulfillment of God’s blessing to Abraham’s child Ishmael. (Genesis 17:20) (104). Still Griffith adds, apparently with a view to present day theologians, “even the friendliest of Christian apologists” saw no sense in calling Muhammad a prophet or the Qur’ān divine revelation. (105) Again with an eye, it seems, on the politics of theology today, Griffith also points out that Abraham was never seen as some sort of a common ancestor; instead, he was a figure over whom Jews, Christians and Muslims competed. (162-163) Indeed, the Qur’ān itself (e.g. Q 2:135; 3:67) explicitly deprives Jews and Christians any claim to him. Thus, on religious issues, Muslim-Christian interaction was not marked by dialogue in any modern sense, but rather by Muslim polemic and the careful apologetical response of a subjugated Christian community.

In this regard, Griffith helpfully dedicates a section of The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque (129-155) to the nature and experience of the Christian community in the early Islamic world. In most Arabic sources, both Christian and Muslim, Christians are divided into three communities: Melkites (so named due to the perceived affiliation of Chalcedonian Christians with the king, Syr. malkā; Ar. malik),
“Jacobites” (so named due to the protection given by the Antiochene bishop Jacob Baradaeus (d. ca. 578) to monophysite Christians), and “Nestorians” (so named due to the accusation that East Syrian Christians looked to the heresiarch Nestorius as their founder). In addition to these three sects, however, minor Christian communities (notably the Maronites) persisted, as did ethnic groups (notably Armenians and Georgians) that kept separate ecclesiastical structures. Yet all Christian communities, Griffith emphasizes, found their social position grow increasingly precarious as their numbers decreased. Christians existed in the Islamic world as dhimmīs, protected or tolerated people. From the beginning this meant only second-class citizenship, with social restrictions applying to dress, housing, arms, speech, and religious expression. With the rise of stricter legal views associated with the Damascene Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328; today again a popular figure) in the period of the Turkish Mamluk Empire (1254-1517), Christians increasingly suffered from outbreaks of violence and systematic oppression.

On the other hand, there were periods of cooperation, notably the ninth and tenth century, when Christian scholars contributed to the scientific movement of Baghdad with their Muslim counterparts. This has long been recognized, but western scholars (most recently G. Endres and D. Gutas) often give the impression that the Christian contribution to this movement was limited to the translation of scientific works from Greek and Syriac into Arabic. Griffith counters that Christian philosophers, who had a tradition linked directly to the philosophical academy of Alexandria, were at its center. Among them was Yahyā b. ‘Adī (d. 974), a Jacobite theologian and philosopher who counted a large number of Muslims among his students. Griffith quotes Yahya on humanism: “Men are a single tribe (qabīl), related to one another; humanity unites them. The adornment of the divine power is in all of them and in each one of them, and it is the rational soul.” (125)

Thus it emerges that The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque is much more than a survey of Near Eastern Christianity. As Griffith introduces the reader to a neglected field he also develops arguments with serious scholarly implications. Two such arguments are particularly significant. First, if the medieval Islamic world was the context for the development of Arabic philosophy and science, Griffith maintains that Christian intellectuals were essential to this development. Second, the Christian theological tradition in Syriac and Arabic, even if it was later shaped by its Islamic context, emerged from the Greek tradition of the church fathers. Accordingly the Syriac and Arabic
theological corpus must be seen as an ancient, and indeed an apostolic, tradition, no less than the Latin corpus of the West. Thus *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque* challenges scholarship on both Islam and Christianity. For all of its clarity and simplicity, this is a work that should not be taken lightly.

*Gabriel Said Reynolds*