The present volume on Arabic Christianity is a welcome contribution to a rapidly growing field of Arabic Christian Studies. It focuses on several major Arabic Christian theologians and texts from the ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries: Theodore Abū Qurrah, the Epistle of al-Kindī, Abū Rā’iṭa al-Takrītī, ʿAmmār al-Baṣrī, Severus ibn al-Muqaffāʿ, Ibn Zurʿa, Būluṣ ibn Rajāʾ, Ibn al-Ṭayyib, and Elias of Nisibis. Despite their importance, these names are still largely unknown to western audiences—even to those interested and well-read in Christian theology and Middle Eastern history. In the eyes of many, even the notion of an “Arabic Christianity” still seems like a contradiction in terms, because Arabic is all too often instinctively, almost unconsciously equated with Islam. While it is true that Arabic is the language of the Muslim holy book, the Qurʾān, and as such has a special status to Muslims worldwide (Arabs and non-Arabs alike), we must not lose sight of the fact that countless non-Muslims (Christians, Jews, and others) have used—and still use—Arabic as their spoken, written, and (in the case of several Middle Eastern Christian groups) even liturgical language.

It is precisely Arabic’s double role as both the language of many of the Middle East’s Christians and the sacred language of Islam that makes Christianity’s articulation in Arabic so fascinating and unique. Christian authors who spoke and wrote Arabic had no choice but to engage with Islam and the complex realities of life—initially as a majority, later as a minority—under
Muslim rule. They had to express their theology in new ways, polemicize against the claims of a new religion, as well as defend their doctrines against Islam’s challenges. For example, the Qur’ān states emphatically that God is one and not a Trinity; that Jesus Christ is not the Son of God (even if, on one occasion, it is willing to call Jesus “God’s word and a spirit from Him”); that Jesus Christ was not crucified but it only “seemed” so to the observers; that Jesus, consequently, did not rise from the dead, but was taken by God alive to heaven. How were the Christians to defend their own teachings—a Trinitarian God, Jesus’ status as the Son of God and the Logos (Word of God), who became incarnate to save humankind, and Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection—from these challenges and to do so in the very language of the Qur’ān? This is the story of the present volume.

Additionally, the texts chosen for translation and analysis herein illustrate the confessional diversity of Middle Eastern Christianity. By the period under discussion, Middle Eastern Christians had split into three main groups. First, there were the “Chalcedonian” Christians—so called because they had accepted the Council of Chalcedon (451) and thought of Christ as having two natures (one divine and one human) anchored in the one person of the Logos. Because this group was in communion with the imperial Church of Byzantium, they came to be known as “Melkites” (literally, “the emperor’s people,” from the Syriac word malkā and Arabic malik, “king”). (Today, the term “Melkites” is reserved for that branch of this Christian community which in 1724 accepted the authority of the Pope of Rome and entered into union with the Roman Catholic Church—but this is a different story, well beyond the scope of this volume.)

Second, there were Christians who had rejected the Council of Chalcedon and held to the belief that Christ had one nature (which is at the same time divine and human). Their opponents called them “Jacobites” (after Jacob Baradaeus, the founder of a separate ecclesiastical hierarchy in Syria in the sixth century) and “Monophysites” (literally, “one-nature-ists”). In modern terminology, they are usually called “Miaphysites” (to distinguish their belief from that of the fifth-century heretic Eutyches, who believed that Christ had one divine-only nature). The Copts
in Egypt, the so-called “Syrian Orthodox” in Syria and Lebanon, the Armenians, and the Ethiopians all belong to this “Miaphysite” group.

Third, there were Christians who had rejected the Council of Ephesus (431) and had taken the side of the archbishop of Constantinople Nestorius condemned by that council. (In the eyes of the bishops gathered at Ephesus, Nestorius had overemphasized the “independence” of Christ’s humanity, assigned to it a separate subjecthood, and thus de-anchored it from the Logos.) Not surprisingly, these Christians were dubbed “Nestorians.” Because Nestorianism was banned in the Byzantine Empire, these Christians flourished mainly in lands further East. Their center was the Sasanian capital Ctesiphon in Iraq. After the Muslims founded Baghdad in 762, these Christians transferred the residence of their patriarch (historically called “catholicos”) to Baghdad. They often called themselves “Easterners” (in fact, their missionaries went as far East as Central Asia and even China) and are now referred to as the “Church of the East.”

All these Christian groups co-existed in the Islamicate commonwealth. All of them strove for recognition by, and good relations with, the Muslim authorities. All of them came to use Arabic as their spoken, written, and—to varying degrees—liturgical language alongside their ancestral tongues (Greek, Syriac, Coptic, and others). In addition to polemicizing against Islam, they also engaged in internal disputations on theological matters, which were also written primarily in Arabic. It is thus largely in Arabic that all these Christian groups negotiated their identity in dialogue with Muslims and with each other.

Arabic Christian theology certainly deserves to be better known—not in the least because it holds important lessons for us today. It teaches us about the earliest stages of Middle Eastern Christians’ creative engagement with Islam. Studying Arabic Christianity helps us become more attuned to the profound link between Christianity and the Middle East—Christianity’s place of origin. It allows us to re-envision Christianity as a religion deeply rooted in the Middle East—which has flourished there, despite all the challenges, for two millennia. Studying these authors and texts helps us rediscover the Middle East itself as the
religiously, ethnically, and culturally diverse place that it is and has always been.

Moreover, these Arabic-speaking Christians played a major role in the development of Arabic culture and served the Muslim rulers in various capacities—as courtiers, secretaries, physicians, and, significantly, translators. It is these Christians who translated hundreds of philosophical, medical, and scientific works from Greek and Syriac into Arabic, in a movement that revolutionized the intellectual life in the Middle East and beyond: it is owing to their translations of Plato and Aristotle, Hippocrates and Galen, Euclid and Ptolemy that Muslims had their Avicenna and Averroes, Jews their Ibn Gabirol and Maimonides, and, indeed, Latin-writing Christians in Western Europe their Thomas Aquinas and Albertus Magnus. In humankind’s intellectual history, everything is intertwined, and it is translators—and Arabic-speaking Christians prominently among them—who have forged indispensable links between cultures and have built bridges that connect antiquity and the Middle Ages.

Fast forward to 2022: now the editor of the present volume Professor Ayman S. Ibrahim and the team of translators who have collaborated with him—all top-notch experts in their field—have taken this cultural bridge-building one crucial step forward and have rearticulated these Arabic Christians’ legacy in English for the twenty-first century. This formidable task has been accomplished with skill and precision. For this, the readers of this volume will have every reason to be grateful.