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Shi'ite Rulers, Sunni Rivals, and Christians in Between

**Muslim-Christian Relations
in Fāṭimid Palestine and Egypt**

Steven M. Gertz

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*Dedicated to my beloved children:
Naomi, Josiah, Ethan, Miriam, and Selah*

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FOREWORD AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Not every research project need be inspired by personal experience or have a personal connection. Many a project has come simply from identifying gaps in research and pursuing them. This study, though, does indeed emerge from interpersonal relationships. I can pinpoint my interest in this topic to one meal in the spring of 2006, when my wife Lisa and I invited to dinner Sunnī and Shī'ite classmates of mine at the University of Edinburgh. A friend of ours had told us that not every Muslim is concerned with whether a meal is *ḥalāl* (permissible), and so we took a chance that my classmates would not be bothered that the meat we were preparing was not *ḥalāl*. They did worry, though, and I am glad that they did, because it led to a conversation that over a decade later has led to the work at hand.

When we mentioned to our friends that our meal was not *ḥalāl*, we received differing responses. My Sunnī classmate said that she would consent to eat with us, citing a Qur'anic verse (5:5) that gives believers permission to eat with People of the Book (typically understood to be Jews and Christians), while my Shī'ite classmate politely declined without giving us a reason. Not wishing to offend my Shī'ite classmate, my wife and I quickly adjusted our plans and prepared a vegetarian meal instead. The exchange mystified me, though, especially because I personally felt closer to my Shī'ite classmate than I did to my Sunnī one. Years later, I came across a passage in Ignaz Goldziher's *Introduction to Islamic Theology* that seemed to shed some light on this encounter, in which he writes that “despite the explicit permission given in the Qur'an (5:5), Shi'i law regards food prepared by Christians and Jews as forbidden meat, and the meat

of animals slaughtered by them as forbidden meat (216).” This discovery in turn led me to the more recent work of David Freidenreich, which I have highlighted in my research here.

This said, jurisprudence should not be the scholar's only consideration, and ought to be balanced with the study of other factors that influence people's actions. Prior to beginning my doctoral program at Georgetown University, I studied classical Arabic at a Sunnī institute in which one of my classmates revealed to me surreptitiously that he was Shī'ite. In what was very much an act of *taqiyya* (dissimulation), he pretended to be Sunnī so as to access some of the curriculum at the school that he could not otherwise do as a professed Shī'ite. What he would not tell his teachers and classmates, though, he confided in me as an 'outsider' who was Christian and who had no stake in preventing him from accessing the full curriculum of the school. When it came to our interaction, then, as Muslim and Christian, the *context* was just as important as the rules that ostensibly governed our relationship. This awareness and sensitivity to the incidentals, to the conditions and personalities driving behavior, has played an important part in shaping my research project, as I have tried to give equal (and indeed greater) attention to history as I have to legal theory.

A brief word of clarification is needed regarding my approach to transliteration of Arabic words in this book. I am in general following the transliteration table and rules of the third edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*. While I am using diacritics and italics for most transliterations, I have chosen not to do so for certain words (such as when I refer to one of the twelve Imams, or to the Qur'an and Hadith, that is, when I am referring to the latter as a corpus rather than as a single tradition), and where I thought diacritics and italics would obstruct the flow of reading. However, even for words where I do not use diacritics or italics, I am still using the transliteration symbols for the *hamza* and *ʿayn*. I have also chosen to use Anglicized words for Arabic titles and names now common in English (such as caliph or Medina).

Every work of significance has been built on the shoulders of others, and this project is no different in that respect. I would first like to thank my dissertation supervisor, Daniel Madigan, S.J.,

who patiently guided me through the different stages of my project. His encouragement early on not to rush my research (despite various pressures on me to do so) kept me from pursuing questions leading to dead ends, and I am grateful for his many helpful suggestions, as well as his facilitating connections with scholars, none the least David Freidenreich. I would also like to thank the readers on my dissertation committee: Shainool Jiwa at The Institute of Ismaili Studies in London, and Alexander (Sasha) Treiger at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, for their indefatigable help and expertise at various stages of my research and writing. Both of them have brought deep knowledge of their fields to my topic (Ismāʿīlī and Melkite studies, respectively), and I am also especially grateful to Sasha for his careful copy-editing and checking of my translation and transliteration of Arabic.

I am also thankful to the Tantur Ecumenical Institute and to Fr. Russ McDougall, its rector at the time, who through the support of the University of Notre Dame gave me an academic year's fellowship in Jerusalem. Not only did this fellowship give me the space and time to research and write, but it put me in proximity to the places that are important for this project, especially the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The fellowship also gave me access to scholars in Israel/Palestine working in fields and on projects similar to my own, as well as to libraries where I could conduct manuscript research. I am especially grateful to Archbishop Aristarchos and his remarkable assistant Anna Koulouris for giving me access to the Greek Patriarchate Library in Jerusalem, to Khader Salameh at the Khalidi Library in Jerusalem, and to Fr. Justin at St. Catherine's monastery in the Sinai. I am also thankful for a research grant in 2018 from the Association of the Study of the Middle East and Africa, which helped support my work in Jerusalem and my visit to St. Catherine's.

In addition, I wish to express my gratitude for the years of mentoring I received from Ida Glaser and Martin Whittingham, now based at the Centre for Muslim-Christian Studies in Oxford, and for the model of Muslim-Christian dialogue they practiced, exemplified in an early motto of the center, "Building Respect, Seeking Truth." I aspire to and have tried to practice these virtues

in my work and relationships with Muslims. Moreover, it was their encouragement during my master's program at the University of Edinburgh that started me down this path of the academic study of Muslim-Christian relations, and I have greatly appreciated their support and friendship over the past decade and more.

As with any acknowledgement, there are others whom I could name who have helped in some way with this project, and I must apologize to those whom I may neglect to mention. Nevertheless, my thanks go to the following: Omar Abedrabo (a scholar working on the Fatimids at Bethlehem University), Matthew Anderson, Halla Attallah, the Israeli archaeologist Dan Bahat, Kaveh Farrokh, David Freidenreich, Robert Gleave (under whom I began this project at the University of Exeter before I transferred to Georgetown), Sidney Griffith, Yaacov Lev, Milka Levy-Rubin, Christian Sahner, Uriel Simonsohn, Shawqi N. Talia, and Kevin van Bladel. I am also grateful for the assistance of Faisal Matadar of the Qasid Institute and to members of the Palestinian staff of Tantur in helping me with my translations at various points in this work.

Finally, I wish to express my thanks to my family who stood by me through the many, many hours of study and research that occupied more than a decade of my life, and which took us to Edinburgh, Oxford, 'Amman, Jerusalem, and Washington, D.C. I also would like to express my gratitude to my parents (Greg and Jeanette) and to my sister Genelle, who at various points in my study encouraged me to keep going, despite the difficulties and hardships involved. It does indeed take a village to raise a scholar.

CHAPTER 1.

INTRODUCTION

In the field of Islamic Studies (and Religious Studies more generally), scholars are giving increased attention to the process and components of religious identity formation, studying how Muslims are negotiating sociological, political, and ethnic differences with the societies in which they live. What some are finding is that there exists not one but multiple Muslim identities, and that identity is often formed in conversation with or in response to non-Muslims.¹ This book wishes to bring to the table a case study of Fāṭimid Ismāʿīlī Shīʿite religious identity formation

¹ See, for example, Derya Iner and Salih Yucel, *Muslim Identity Formation in Religiously Diverse Societies* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), viii–xiii. Much of the current literature, while exploring Muslim identity formation, is focused on the context of Muslims living in majority non-Muslim societies and thus has limited utility for this study. For more on Muslims’ religious identity formation in contexts where they are a demographic and political minority, and sometimes living with disadvantaged means or in hostile environments, see Synnøve Bendixsen, *The Religious Identity of Young Muslim Women in Berlin: An Ethnographic Study* (Leiden: Brill, 2013); Majdouline Aziz, Randy Lowell, Kelsey Granger, and Katy Self, “Measuring Muslim Religious Identity Formation: Instrument Assessment with a Sample of Muslim-American Students,” *Journal of Islamic and Muslim Studies* 3.1 (May 2018), 58–85; and Jonas R. Kunst, Hajra Tajamal, and David L. Sam, “Coping with Islamophobia: The effects of religious stigma on Muslim minorities’ identity formation,” *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 36.4 (July 2012), 518–32.

occurring in a sectarian milieu. Jerusalem during the fifth/eleventh century offers us an especially interesting study of Muslim and Christian sectarianism, for though the Fāṭimid Ismā'īlī Shī'a ruled Palestine at that time, their predecessors had been Sunnī (as were their rivals), and Jerusalem still had a large and diverse Christian population, along with a smaller Jewish one. This study will consider, then, how sectarian tensions affected and arguably influenced the decisions of Fāṭimid caliphs in roughly the fifth/eleventh century when it came to their relations with Christian subjects in Jerusalem and Palestine more generally (and indeed Egypt as well, since Palestine was directly connected with the Fāṭimid caliphate in Cairo). It will also consider how Christians responded to these decisions. Further, it will examine what impact (if any) Fāṭimid legal thinking had on such exchanges. In the process of doing so, we will learn more about the nature of the formation of Fāṭimid religious identity, and how religious principles (ascertained through the study of law) and politics (ascertained through the study of history) interact in a sectarian milieu.

First, though, we must be careful to define our terms. What exactly do we mean by the phrase 'religious identity formation'? In this study, we are concerned primarily with *communal* identity (rather than with individual identity), and particularly with the question as to how that which is 'other' (or outside the community) affects that identity. David Freidenreich has written on this notion in his exploration of the roles non-Muslims have played in the identity formation of sects within Islam as evidenced in Islamic law. He first identifies two different kinds of law, the first being "reflexive" food laws (that is, laws that Muslims impose on their own community regarding foreign food), while the second are laws "imposed" on *dhimmīs* (usually understood to be Jews or Christians living under Muslim rule) in order to demonstrate Muslim supremacy. Then, after analyzing Imāmī Shī'ite "reflexive law" in the early fifth/eleventh century, he argues that Imāmīs began to identify Jews and Christians as being completely 'other', that is, intrinsically impure on the basis of their unbelief. This is in contrast to Sunnīs, who on the basis of *Sūrat al-Mā'ida* 5:5, which assures believers that "the food of

those who were given the Book is permitted to you,” elevated People of the Book above other non-Muslims. Freidenreich argues that Imāmīs adopted their uncompromising views toward Christians because they wished to demonstrate how morally lax Sunnis had become, as evidenced by their permissive attitudes toward Jews and Christians. Shī‘ites, by contrast, saw themselves as retaining a superior measure of moral and religious rigor by following the Imams.² Religious identity for Imāmī Shī‘ites, then, developed in relation both to fellow Muslims and to non-Muslims, as jurists worked to determine what Imāmīs were *not* as much as what they were.

In order to reflect on religious identity formation among the Fātimids, it is important to first recognize the political and theological differences between the Imāmīs and the Ismā‘īlis, particularly during the period under consideration. While both groups shared a strong loyalty to ‘Alī and to his progeny as far as the sixth Imam Ja‘far al-Šādiq (d. 148/765), the Imāmīs formed in the midst of Sunnī ‘Abbāsid power, and, following the practice of *taqiyya* (dissimulation or caution), they adopted a quietist approach toward authorities, especially after the *ghayba* (occultation or disappearance) of the twelfth Imam, Muḥammad al-Mahdī, in the late third/ninth century.³ Though they also

² See David M. Freidenreich, “Christians in early and classical Shī‘i law”, in *Christian-Muslim Relations 600–1500*. General Editor David Thomas. See <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1877-8054_cmri_COM_24872>. See also David M. Freidenreich, “The Implications of Unbelief: Tracing the Emergence of Distinctively Shī‘i notions Regarding the Food and Impurity of Non-Muslims.” *Islamic Law and Society* 18 (2011), 53–84. Another Qur’anic passage that addresses food laws is *Sūrat al-An‘ām* 6:136–47, where the Qur’an permits believers to eat any food except pork and dead animals with blood spilled out, and states that Jewish dietary laws were God’s punishment for the Israelites’ injustice (*baghy*). For more on this, see Mehdy Shaddel, “Food, Identity, and ‘Third-Way’ Groups in Late Antiquity and at the Origins of the Qur’an,” *Mizan Project*, December 21, 2015, <http://mizanproject.org/food-identity-and-third-way-groups-in-late-antiquity-and-at-the-origins-of-the-quran/>.

³ Farhad Daftary has described the Imāmiyya as “the common heritage of the Ismailis and the Ithnā‘asharis, or Twelvers...” This would imply

formed inside the 'Abbāsīd empire near Kūfa, the Ismā'īlīs (known as the 'Seveners', since in the second/eighth century, when they broke from other Shī'a, they acknowledged only seven Imams), took on an apocalyptic and activist character. In the late third/ninth century, the Ismā'īlī leadership sent out *dā'īs* (missionaries) across Muslim lands as far east as Rayy near the Caspian Sea and as far west as present-day Algeria. Crucially, their aim was to overthrow the 'Abbāsīd caliphate in Baghdād. When the *dā'ī* Abū 'Abdallāh al-Shī'ī conquered Qayrawān in what is modern-day Tunisia in 296/909, he proclaimed a state that would become known as the Fāṭimid caliphate (named after Fāṭima, the wife of 'Alī and daughter of the Prophet Muḥammad). Over the course of the fourth/tenth and fifth/eleventh centuries, the Fāṭimids would become the great political enemy of the 'Abbāsīds.⁴

that the term 'Imāmī' is more inclusive than how it is used by Freidenreich. I have chosen, nonetheless, to retain Freidenreich's usage, as the last Twelver Imam, al-Mahdī, is not believed to have gone into the greater occultation (*al-ghayba al-kūbra*) until 329/941. Moreover, Etan Kohlberg has observed that while the anti-Shī'ite writer 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī (d. 429/1037) uses the term "Ithnā'ashariyya" to refer to a subset of the Imāmiyya, the term does not appear in the *Fihrist* of the Imāmī Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 380/990). Kohlberg, then, concludes that the term was probably first used around the year 390/1000. As we are focused here on the contemporary period of Fāṭimid formation (the fourth/tenth century), it seems premature to speak of the 'Ithnā'asharis' as such. See Farhad Daftary, "The Early Ismaili Imamate: Background to the Establishment of the Fatimid Caliphate" in Farhad Daftary and Shainool Jiwa, *The Fatimid Caliphate: Diversity of Traditions* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018), 11. See also Heinz Halm, *Shi'ism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 32–6; and Etan Kohlberg, "From Imāmiyya to Ithnā'ashariyya," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 39:3 (1976), 521–34.

⁴ For relatively concise descriptions of the formation of and significant features of the Ismā'īlī movement and Fāṭimid caliphate, see Halm, 160–201, and Shainool Jiwa, *Towards a Shi'i Mediterranean Empire: Fatimid Egypt and the Founding of Cairo* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 2–11. The most comprehensive work on the Ismā'īlīs, though, is Farhad Daftary,

What has not been studied (and what this book, in part, intends to explore) is whether this more activist and indeed militant orientation of the Ismā'īlīs also translated into the kind of perceptions of the 'other' that Freidenreich describes in his research on Imāmī jurists. Put differently, was the *ḥukm* (juristic categorization) Imāmīs employed regarding non-Muslims also drawn in Fāṭimid *fiqh*, or do we see some significant divergences in thought between the two schools? We know that, at least in some areas of law, the Ismā'īlīs were more permissive than were the Imāmīs. In a survey he conducted of Muslim juristic attitudes over dietary laws, Michael Cook found that Sunnīs were generally more generous in what they permitted Muslims to eat (the Mālikīs the most so, allowing even the consumption of serpents and other creeping things). By contrast, the Imāmīs were generally the most restrictive, prohibiting the eating of the hare, eel, lizard, and hedgehog, whereas most Sunnīs permitted it. Cook also found that Ismā'īlīs, while more restrictive than Sunnīs, were slightly less restrictive than were Imāmīs, permitting the eating of the hare and only discouraging (not prohibiting) the eating of eel, lizard, and hedgehog.⁵ Such analysis does not mean, of course, that the Fāṭimids were likewise more forbearing in their *fiqh* and policy toward *dhimmīs* than were the Imāmīs. However, Cook's study is nonetheless instructive for our thinking about the similarities and differences between the Imāmīs and Ismā'īlīs.

Another important clarification is needed here regarding our study of Islamic religious identity formation, and that is that we need to specify *whose* identity formation we are studying here. In brief, we are interested in the religious identity formation of the *elite*, that is, of the caliph and of those in his court and government bureaucracy, and not necessarily of those in the lower echelons of society. This decision to limit the study has been necessary in large part because of the sources we will be

The Ismā'īlīs: Their History and Doctrines (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁵ See Michael Cook, "Early Islamic Dietary Law." *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 7 (1986), 218–77. Cook provides a table of school doctrines on page 259 that is especially helpful.

consulting: *ḥadīths*, *fiqh*, and caliphal history are products of the literate elite and not of the commoner. Fāṭimid caliphs and their policies did, of course, influence the general population, but this study is not a social history of the lower classes, and it does not presume to make broad claims about Islamic religious identity as it relates to all Muslims across time. Rather, it has a more modest ambition, focusing instead on the influences on and building blocks of the religious identity of the Fāṭimid *caliphs* vis-à-vis Sunni counterparts and Christian and Jewish *dhimmīs* (many of whom themselves were elites in their own communities).

Before turning to our next term needing definition, it will be helpful here to consider the work of Shahab Ahmed as it concerns Islamic religious identity formation. One point of debate in the study of Islam is the question as to whether Islam is so diverse that one should think of Muslims as belonging to different 'islams' rather than to one Islam. Ahmed has observed that Muslims do not agree with one another on many points of doctrine and practice because their hermeneutical engagement with the Revelation given to Muhammad leads them to different conclusions. He suggests that we conceptualize Islam "as engagement by an actor or agent with a source or object of (potential) meaning in a way that ultimately produces meaning for the actor by way of the source."⁶ In Ahmed's conception, Islam is a *human* and historical phenomenon in which Muslims are engaged (that is, involving and committing themselves) in a meaning-making venture.

This raises the question, though: with *what* do Muslims engage? Muslims engage with the Revelation to Muhammad in what was sent down from the World-of-the-Unseen, issuing in a Relevatory Product in the World-of-the-Seen. This is what Ahmed calls the "Text," principally the Qur'an and Hadith. Yet the Text is not co-extensive with the full reality of Revelation to Muhammad. Inherent in the logic of the structure of the Revelatory act is the "Pre-Text," that is, the Revelatory Premise or the source of the Revelation of the Text. It is the Unseen

⁶ See Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 345.

Reality or the Truth of the Unseen God. The term “Pre-Text” should not be taken to indicate just that it is chronologically prior to the Text. Rather, it lies beyond and behind the Text, is ontologically and alethically prior to the Text, and is that upon which the Text is contingent. The Pre-Text is continuously present at all times and in all places “as the domain of higher and prior Truth.” Ahmed writes that “The Truth of the Text of the Revelation is only the Revelatory Product; as such, it is but an expression in the here-and-now of this world of the Truth of the Pre-Text of the Revelation.”⁷

Ahmed goes on to say (and this is important for this study’s reflection on sectarianism in Islam) that disagreement among Muslims has formed over the questions as to whether, in what degree, and by what mechanism the Truth of Pre-Text may be accessed. Muslims have engaged with the Text in multiple ways, with some saying that Truth can only be accessed *in* the Text, others saying *via* the Text, and others still saying it may be accessed *without* the Text.⁸ Thus, Muslim philosophers engage Revelation through what they take to be Reason itself as found in “the cosmos or God’s Rational Creation”; and, indeed, Ahmed says that the Text is “a rationally and semantically inferior instantiation” of that Pre-Text. For the philosopher, then, Reason is Revelation.⁹ For their part, Sufis engage Revelation through personal experience of God’s Existence (the Real Truth of the Pre-Text, or *ḥaqīqa*), and they hold that the Prophet himself was a Sufi who accessed the Real-Truth of the Pre-Text through his Visionary Imagination. Thus, Sufi exegesis of the Qur’an conceives of the language of the Text as “pointers” (*ishārāt*) to the higher Unseen Truth of the Pre-Text.¹⁰

At the opposite end of the spectrum, the *fuqahā’*, while they use Reason to construct Islamic law, constrain it in relation to the Text. The discourse of Islamic law holds either that the Truth of the Pre-Text cannot be directly accessed, or that if it is accessed,

⁷ Ahmed, 346–7.

⁸ Ahmed, 347.

⁹ Ahmed, 348–50.

¹⁰ Ahmed, 351–2.

it cannot be acted upon publicly or socially but is Truth that is entirely private and subjective. Rather, the *fuqahā'* accept only those Truths from the Pre-Text that are plainly and transparently available in the Text. Ahmed contrasts this approach with that of the philosophers when he writes that while the "rational business of philosophy is the business of the Pre-Text, ... the rational business of Islamic law is the business of the Text."¹¹ For their part, *kalām* scholars are in the middle, seeking Truth about the Pre-Text (that is, about God and the Unseen), but they constrain themselves to engagement with the Text, concerning themselves with the question of when to read the Text literally and when to read it metaphorically. *Kalām* theologians accept that statements of the Text about the Unseen God are "limited expressions" of the Truth of the Pre-Text, but they caution that we cannot know anything more about the Pre-Text than what has been put into the words of the Text of Revelation.¹²

Ahmed goes on to say that these different kinds of engagements with Revelation in turn lead Muslims to the "Con-Text" of Revelation. The Con-Text is "the entire accumulated lexicon of means and meanings of Islam that has been historically generated and recorded up to any given moment; it is the full historical vocabulary of Islam at any given moment."¹³ Ahmed says further that "when a Muslim seeks to make meaning in terms of Islam, he necessarily does so in engagement with and in use of the existing terms of engagement—that is, in engagement with and by use of the existing vocabulary of Islam."¹⁴ Con-Text is "the full historical vocabulary of Islam at any given moment," a "built environment of meaning ... which Muslims inhabit," and is indeed "the centuries-old city of Islam, a great and sprawling city consisting of various edifices erected for the various purposes of living by Muslims of bygone and present times."¹⁵ Con-Text, then, incorporates not only all the discourse that has been generated

¹¹ Ahmed, 353–4.

¹² Ahmed, 354–5.

¹³ Ahmed, 357.

¹⁴ Ahmed, 357.

¹⁵ Ahmed, 358.