

**ABRAHAM OR ARISTOTLE?**  
FIRST MILLENNIUM EMPIRES AND EXEGETICAL  
TRADITIONS



Judaism, Christianity and Islam – the three scriptural monotheisms, still often studied separately – are here intertwined within a historical frame. The approach outlined in this lecture pivots around the Qur’ān as it emerged in seventh-century Arabia on the peripheries of the two world-empires of Iran and Rome, and variously refracts rabbinic Judaism and patristic – especially Syriac – Christianity. The formation and exegesis of scriptural canons helps define the major religious communities and identities both before and after Muḥammad. The latter part of the lecture concentrates on the interaction of these communities, and especially their scholars, in the Abbasid Baghdad of the ninth and tenth centuries, and on the theological and philosophical debates that flourished there. The lecture interrogates the newly fashionable concept of ‘Abrahamic’ religion, and proposes a fresh historical periodization inclusive of both late antiquity and Islam, namely the First Millennium.

**GARTH FOWDEN** was educated at Merton College, Oxford, and spent most of his career at the National Research Foundation in Athens, before taking up the Sultan Qaboos Chair of Abrahamic Faiths at Cambridge in 2013. His main interest is in the history of late Antiquity and early Islam.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-46241-0 — Abraham or Aristotle? First Millennium Empires and  
Exegetical Traditions

Garth Fowden

Excerpt

[More Information](#)

---

GARTH FOWDEN



**ABRAHAM OR ARISTOTLE?  
FIRST MILLENNIUM  
EMPIRES AND  
EXEGETICAL TRADITIONS**



An Inaugural Lecture by the Sultan Qaboos  
Professor of Abrahamic Faiths given in the  
University of Cambridge  
4 December 2013



**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-46241-0 — Abraham or Aristotle? First Millennium Empires and  
Exegetical Traditions  
Garth Fowden  
Excerpt  
[More Information](#)

---

## CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi - 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of  
education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781107462410](http://www.cambridge.org/9781107462410)

© Garth Fowden 2015

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception  
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,  
no reproduction of any part may take place without the written  
permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2015

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

ISBN 978-1-107-46241-0 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or  
accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in  
this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is,  
or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

# ABRAHAM OR ARISTOTLE? FIRST MILLENNIUM EMPIRES AND EXEGETICAL TRADITIONS

An Inaugural Lecture by the Sultan Qaboos  
Professor of Abrahamic Faiths given in the  
University of Cambridge  
4 December 2013



Your Excellency the Ambassador of the Sultanate of Oman,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

## *Sultan Qaboos in England*

His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said of Oman I have not yet had the honour of meeting in person. When at the age of twenty he was an officer cadet at Sandhurst, I as a boy was haunting the woods and lakes of the Royal Military Academy – I lived a mile away. My first book, published when I was thirteen, was a history of St Michael’s parish church, Sandhurst – a pamphlet, largely plagiarized. During his stay in England, from 1958 onward, the Sultan-to-be also learnt to play the ecclesiastical organ, and remains an enthusiast for this instrument. When, aged seventeen, I went to work for a year at St George’s

School in Jerusalem, I used to play the Anglican cathedral organ for school services – a wheezy old instrument that had never quite recovered from being hit by a shell in 1948. I flatter myself that when we do meet, the Sultan and I will discover a few common threads in our lives connected to youthful travels in search of wider horizons, he in England and Europe and I in the Arab world. It was during a year's sojourn in Jerusalem in 1970 to 1971, in the churches of the Old City and the monasteries of the Judean wilderness, during long afternoons spent wandering on the Ḥaram al-Sharīf or sipping tea with yeshiva students, that I began to learn about Eastern Christianity, Islam and Judaism; and through the Sultan's vision and munificence I am now permitted to share my experiences and thoughts with you.

### *Sultan Qaboos and the 'Abrahamic faiths'*

Sultan Qaboos is renowned for his cultural and intellectual broadmindedness, so I doubt he will take it amiss if I engage a little with the title of the Chair of Abrahamic Faiths and Shared Values we are today inaugurating. My colleague David Ford, the Regius Professor of Divinity, tells me that its formulation was much debated prior to His Majesty's benefaction, but it is still liable to misinterpretation. At a recent Mansion House fundraising dinner given by the Lord Mayor of London, I was disconcerted to find myself listed as the Sultan Qaboos Professor of Shares Values. Nevertheless, the title reflects Sultan Qaboos's preoccupations, given his small country's diverse population, wide international alliances and situation between

Iran and Saudi Arabia, next to one of the most economically and strategically sensitive sea routes on the planet. One can see why a ruler in this situation might prefer reconciliation to dogmatism.

*The Faculty of Divinity, Cambridge, and the  
'Abrahamic faiths'*

As for the Faculty of Divinity in the University of Cambridge, something similar could be said. This is a more diverse university environment than when I first arrived in Cambridge thirty-five years ago as a research fellow at Peterhouse, though my subsequent year at Darwin College did allow me a brief reality check even in those days. It is not exactly surprising that the Divinity Faculty has chosen, through the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme of which I am now Academic Director, to foster public awareness of what Judaism, Christianity and Islam in particular hold in common. These are the 'Abrahamic' faiths evoked in the title of my chair. There is a problem, though, to which I shall return, in that some perceive 'Abrahamism' to be an emollient by-product of the interfaith agenda, with little foundation in history – to which, nevertheless, it makes appeal.

*Cambridge divines and historians*

I have no predecessors in this chair, so no pretext for the panegyric or subtle malice that occasionally enlivens the inaugural genre. Instead I shall evoke three Cambridge men I knew, historians and men of faith who moulded me and illustrate the

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-46241-0 — Abraham or Aristotle? First Millennium Empires and Exegetical Traditions

Garth Fowden

Excerpt

[More Information](#)

wide horizons we may discover when traversing the territory in between positivist history and ahistorical concepts.

### 1: David Knowles

Dom David Knowles was a studious young Benedictine monk at Downside who during the 1930s became increasingly disturbed by what he saw as the subordination of monastic life to the growing demands of the school, and of mission. He led a group of monks who proposed to establish a more contemplative community at a safe distance. After a period of tension and anxiety, this project was disallowed by Rome. Knowles left the monastery to live what he called that ‘monasticism of the soul [which] once attained . . . may be retained *ubique terrarum*.’<sup>1</sup> He eventually found his way to Cambridge, a fellowship at Peterhouse and the Regius Chair of History from 1954 to 1963. His great works of history and literature, on the *Monastic Order in England* and the *Religious Houses of Medieval England*, I borrowed from the local library as a teenager, and they nourished my interest in the medieval Church not only as an institution but as a crucible of spiritual experience. As President of the Stubbs Historical Society, I persuaded Fr David to speak in Oxford one last time just before he died in 1974. I remember him as the alarmingly frail and almost embarrassingly abstinent centrepiece of a

<sup>1</sup> D. Knowles, *The Benedictines* (London, 1929), 78. For a brief account of Knowles’s life, and bibliography, see C. N. L. Brooke, ‘Knowles, Michael Clive (1896–1974)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), [www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/31322](http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/31322).



private dinner at All Souls just before his lecture, in which he kept a large audience straining for his every word.

## 2: Philip Sherrard

Among the ironies and tensions that abounded in Knowles's life was his embarking on a Cambridge career after departing from Downside because of what he saw as an emphasis on education rather than the life of prayer. A similar tension, differently sequenced, pervaded the life of another Petrean historian, Philip Sherrard, whose time at the college (1940–2) fell just before Knowles's arrival in 1944 and was cut short by the war.<sup>2</sup> Philip found an academic vocation, but also the faith scorned in his childhood Bloomsbury environment, in post-war Greece thanks, among others, to his own maid of Athens, to George Seferis, and to visiting the monasteries of Mount Athos. He returned to England and taught at King's College, London. He did not fit in naturally to English academic life, even in the relatively relaxed seventies. He had already found his vocation and a congenial, almost Athonite way of life in his own quiet and remote corner of Greece on the island of Euboea, and there worked away on his famous translations of Seferis and Cavafy, as well as a sequence of books on Byzantine history and Orthodox theology, until his death in 1995.

<sup>2</sup> See my obituary, 'Philip Sherrard (1922–1995)', *The Anglo-Hellenic Review* 12 (1995), 17; and J. Chryssavgis, 'A Tribute to Philip Sherrard (1922–1995)', *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 14 (1996), 345–54.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-46241-0 — Abraham or Aristotle? First Millennium Empires and

Exegetical Traditions

Garth Fowden

Excerpt

[More Information](#)

What Philip gave me was more than just a solution to where to live: a sort of Bloomsbury-on-Sea with a view of Parnassus. It was also an awareness of the intense, indeed transformative exemplarity that may flow from a life lived far from the public stage, and devoted not to negotiating public doctrine let alone community relations, but to internalizing and living out the core values of the great spiritual traditions.

### 3: Henry Chadwick

Third and last comes Henry Chadwick, Regius Professor of Divinity in this university as well as previously at Oxford, and latterly Master of Peterhouse.<sup>3</sup> Henry supervised my doctoral thesis with one fifty-five minute meeting per term at the Christ Church Deanery just before evensong, and the occasional *Lesefrüchte* postcard alerting me to something in – say – one of Jerome's commentaries I might just have missed during my researches on late Platonism, from which he had tried to dissuade me in favour of Arius. During a later walk in the garden of Magdalene he warned me (self-deprecatingly but a trifle disingenuously, I thought) that history departments of the sort I hoped to find a job in might be underwhelmed by a letter of recommendation from a cleric. I remember thinking that he might just have been right after all as I was summoned into this very lecture theatre last year to give my Divinity Faculty

<sup>3</sup> R. Williams, 'Henry Chadwick 1920–2008', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 166 – *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows*, 9 (2011).

job-talk – and there was Henry smiling mischievously at me from the photo by the door.

### *Interfaith discussion and historical scholarship*

Henry Chadwick strove mightily to open patristics up to a non-clerical audience. Thereby he contributed to the blossoming of late antique studies in 1970s Oxford, from which I benefited as both undergraduate and D.Phil. student. He made it seem obvious that patrists should talk to both classicists and historians. He was also a theologian and an ecumenist. He did not take an antiquarian approach to patristics. For him, the Church Fathers fed directly into contemporary thought. I frankly do not know to what extent the ecumenist efforts, to which he gave so much of his time, have translated into the interfaith concerns of the present day. I live, and for the last twenty-eight years have worked too, in Greece, where priorities are different. Once, during a discussion in an Athonite monastery about why the inauspiciously named Oecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople had been seen embracing the pope on TV, my monkish interlocutor whipped a kitchen knife out of his cassock pocket and told me to keep my confused and ignorant ideas to myself. But Henry Chadwick was above all a scholar, a student of Christian intellectual history in its widest context, and that is what I took from him – also an awareness that a life enmeshed in prayer and liturgy, whether or not overtly ascetic, may still be uncompromisingly scholarly. I learnt from Henry that, however imaginative and infused with love for mankind

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-46241-0 — Abraham or Aristotle? First Millennium Empires and Exegetical Traditions

Garth Fowden

Excerpt

[More Information](#)

our appreciation of religious traditions may be, they are still traditions, that is to say ‘things handed down’, which we too will pass on with our own stamp, but which cannot be understood and enlivened until we learn how they became what they are – which is the historian’s job not the theologian’s. I would add it is the modern as well as the ancient and medieval historian’s job. For much that is said and done now in the guise of religion, especially so-called fundamentalist religion, has its roots in the very recent past, especially in the later stages of the eighteenth- to twentieth-century European expansion, whose legacy we have hardly yet faced up to.

### Varieties of Abrahamism

Likewise – and here I come to the subject matter of the new Sultan Qaboos Chair – it was only after the Second World War, and more definitely from the 1990s, that Abraham came into focus in the interfaith world as the common father of Jews, Christians and Muslims.<sup>4</sup> And only now is his attraction beginning to be

<sup>4</sup> G. G. Stroumsa, ‘From Abraham’s Religion to the Abrahamic Religions’, *Historia Religionum* 3 (2011), 11–22; A. W. Hughes, *Abrahamic Religions: On the Uses and Abuses of History* (New York, 2012); J. D. Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton, 2012); see also the criticisms by M. Silk, ‘The Abrahamic Religions as a Modern Concept’, in A. Silverstein and G. G. Stroumsa (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of the Abrahamic Religions* (forthcoming). Pope Gregory VII’s often-quoted letter of 1076 (3.21, tr. H. E. J. Cowdrey, *The Register of Pope Gregory VII, 1073–1085: An English Translation* (Oxford, 2002), 204–5) to al-Nāṣir the ruler of eastern Algeria

felt by historians too, as they track what united rather than divided the three faiths, especially at certain supposedly auspicious moments and places such as tenth- to eleventh-century Andalusia. Given other historians' legitimate worries about the grossly essentializing character of labels like Judaism, Christianity and Islam, it is bemusing to see their colleagues adopting still more meaningless categories dreamed up in Divinity Schools.<sup>5</sup> Even odder: from time immemorial until the 1990s Abraham had been embraced as 'mine' not 'ours'. Jews claimed exclusive not inclusive descent, from just one of the patriarch's eight sons (Genesis 25); for Christians the relationship was more spiritual than genealogical, and the almost-sacrifice of Isaac prefigured that of Christ; for Muslims, Abraham was the prototype of their pure monotheism as well as the father of their ancestor Ishmael and the founder of the Ka'ba at Mecca. The Qur'ān states:

(cf. J. Conant, *Staying Roman: Conquest and Identity in Africa and the Mediterranean*, 439–700 (Cambridge, 2012), 362) expresses the wish, surprising in a medieval Christian (cf. R. George Tvrtkovic, *The Ambivalence of Interreligious Experience: Riccoldo Da Monte Croce's Theology of Islam* (Ph.D. diss., Notre Dame, Indiana, 2007) 105–8), that God may bring him on his death into Abraham's bosom. This may not necessarily imply conversion, but can hardly be taken as recognition of Islam either: Gregory is here at his most diplomatic.

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. the powerful arguments deployed by Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham*, 173–214, on the lack of sensitivity to the particularity of the three religions in claims that Abraham is the universal father of mankind, and esp. 176–81 on the absurdity in Jewish and Muslim eyes of the Christian claim to be a monotheistic religion derived from Abraham's (assumed) monotheism.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-46241-0 — Abraham or Aristotle? First Millennium Empires and Exegetical Traditions

Garth Fowden

Excerpt

[More Information](#)

No, Ibrahīm in truth was neither Jew nor Christian, but he was a Muslim and one pure of faith (ḥanīf); certainly he was never one of those who associate something else with God (mushrikūn). Surely the people standing closest to Ibrahīm are those who followed him, and this Prophet, and those who believe.<sup>6</sup>

In retaliation, John of Damascus (d. 740s) asked Muslims:

‘How is it, then, that you rub yourselves against a stone in your Ka ‘ba and kiss and embrace it?’ Some of them say [reports John] that Abraham copulated with Hagar upon it [the stone], but others say that he tied the camel to it, when he was going to sacrifice Isaac . . . We say: ‘Let it be Abraham’s, as you so foolishly say. Then, just because Abraham copulated with a woman on it or tied a camel to it, you are not ashamed to kiss it, yet you blame us for venerating the cross of Christ by which the power of the demons and the deceit of the Devil was destroyed.’<sup>7</sup>

In our own days, in 1994, it was Abraham’s tomb in Hebron that a Brooklyn Jew, Baruch Goldstein, chose in order to celebrate the coincidence of Purim and Ramadan by shooting twenty-nine Muslim worshippers in the back and wounding 125, for which some in Israel hailed him as a saint, martyr and hero.

No committed Jew, Christian or Muslim ever believed that all three so-called ‘Abrahamic’ faiths are equally legitimate and deserving of consideration.<sup>8</sup> It would be hard to find

<sup>6</sup> Qur’ān 3.67–8, translation adapted from A. J. Arberry.

<sup>7</sup> John of Damascus, *De Haeresibus* [ed. B. Kotter, *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos* 4 (Berlin, 1981), 1–67] 100, p. 64.

<sup>8</sup> Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham*, both makes this point (207–14) and exemplifies it through his grossly disproportionate treatment of Judaism compared with Islam.