



# Explaining the Trinity to Muslims and Jews in Medieval Christian Mission: Lessons from the “Life of Cyril”

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## Abstract

Cyril (ca. 826–69) is remembered in Christian and mission history for the celebrated Slavic mission. What is less emphasized, however, and the focus of this article, is Cyril's prior mission work among Arab Muslims in Samarra (modern Iraq) and among the Khazars (in present-day southern Russia), which included both Jews and Muslims. In this article, I analyze how Cyril the philosopher presented the Gospel, Christ, and the Trinity and responded to the queries of these medieval Muslim and Jewish thinkers. What characterized Cyril's approach to mission? Finally, what principles might be recovered for presenting historic Christian doctrine in mission today, particularly in Muslim contexts?

## Keywords

Cyril and Methodius, Trinity, medieval mission, mission to Muslims, mission to Jews

The best source for studying the life and work of Cyril is the anonymous ninth-century sacred biography *Vita Cyrilli*, “Life of Cyril,” which was written within a couple decades after his death.<sup>1</sup> Like other saints' lives (i.e., sacred biographies) of the medieval period, it does not stand up to the scrutiny of modern historiography, but it does show concrete models of faith and also defends the validity of Slavic Christianity. That said,

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the “Life” is an authentic work written for a ninth-century Slavic audience and, despite some embellishments that we will overlook, offers the modern reader a window into Cyril’s medieval world and approach to mission.<sup>2</sup>

Cyril was born in Thessalonica into a wealthy family, and his father, Leo, was a Greek military leader. Because of the family’s privileged position, Cyril and his brother Methodius were educated from their youth by private tutors, studying grammar, poetry, and rhetoric, as well as theology. Because of Thessalonica’s place as the second leading city in the Eastern Roman Empire behind Constantinople, this learning environment was also quite rich. Spiritually, Cyril and Methodius were influenced by scholarly bishops such as Leo, the city’s metropolitan bishop, and a number of monastic communities in the area.<sup>3</sup>

As a youth, Cyril showed great academic promise and was already well versed in the writings of the Cappadocian father Gregory of Nazianzus (329–90). At the age of fifteen, he received a special imperial invitation to study in Constantinople, where he received a thorough education in grammar, poetry, math, rhetoric, and, most notably, philosophy. Upon completion of his studies, he was given the title “the philosopher,” which stayed with him for the rest of his life. His biographer introduced the “Life of Cyril” by calling him “the Philosopher, our teacher and enlightener” (2–3).<sup>4</sup>

Resisting opportunities that came with his family’s connections, Cyril rejected the opportunity for a prominent marriage and made the pursuit of wisdom his first priority. He was, however, ordained as a deacon in the church and initially was given an administrative role in the church at Constantinople. This post was short-lived, as Cyril, clearly more interested in scholarship than administration, retired to a monastery on the Bosphorus, where he continued to study. After six months, he returned to Constantinople, where he taught philosophy in a school that probably operated under the auspices of the church (3–4).<sup>5</sup>

## **Mission to the Arabs**

Around 851, the Arab-Muslim Caliph al-Mutawakkil advanced his armies toward Byzantine territory, and the Byzantine emperor responded by sending a delegation to Samarra to renegotiate a treaty with the Arabs. In addition to political business, the Arabs invited the Byzantine envoy to dialogue about the meaning of the Christian Trinity.<sup>6</sup> According to Cyril’s biographer, they asked: “How is it that you Christians, worshipping a single God, triple Him by claiming that there is Father, a Son, and a Spirit? If you have an explanation to this, send unto us men who can talk of these things and convince us.” For this portion of the mission, the twenty-four-year-old philosopher Cyril was handpicked by the Byzantine emperor and told, “You, being a servant and disciple of the Holy Trinity, must go forth and oppose them.” Cyril accepted the mission, replying, “I will gladly go forth for our Christian creed. For is there anything in the world sweeter to me than to live and die for the Holy Trinity?” (6). The Christian missionary element of the mission was thus framed in Trinitarian language, and Cyril’s task was to clarify misunderstandings of the Christian Godhead in a hypermonotheistic Muslim context. Put another way, for Cyril to proclaim the

Gospel—the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ—was to proclaim a Trinitarian God.

At the outset of the dialogue, which was rather polemical in tone, the Arab hosts charged that, unlike Muslims, Christians followed their law only in an inconsistent and haphazard manner. In his reply, Cyril chose the unlikely text of Isaiah 53:8, which describes the Suffering Servant, and he argued for the greatness of God and the mystery of his ways—“Our God is like the depths of the sea” (6). Turning the conversation away from mere law-keeping, Cyril focused on the majesty of God and the imperative to worship him. In turn, he criticized Muslim practice and thought for being overly simplistic.

Continuing the exchange, Cyril described the redeeming and transforming work of Christ in believers: “He uplifts them from beneath what is burdensome, and instructs men by faith and godly virtue.” For Cyril, the saving and transformative work of Christ was built on Christ being also the Creator—a central element of Cappadocian theology hammered out in the fourth-century battles with the Arians. Alluding to Psalm 8, Cyril added, “Being the creator of all, He created man to be between the angels and the beasts, having marked him from the beasts by speech and reason.” Later in the dialogue, Cyril rebuked his Arab hosts, who were boasting about the wealth and abundance of their empire, by again appealing to the greatness of the Creator: “Praise should be given unto God who created it all and gave it to people to enjoy” (6).

As the discussion moved toward the meaning of the Trinity, Cyril’s biographer records the Arab thinkers posing the following question in a rather mocking manner: “Since there is a single god . . . [why do] you praise him as three deities? . . . Why do you call him Father, Son, and Holy Ghost?” Cyril responded strongly:

We have been well taught by the prophets and the fathers and teachers of the church to praise the Holy Trinity: the father, the Word, and the Spirit—three persons within a single being. The Word becomes flesh in a virgin, and was born for the sake of our salvation, as your prophet Muhammad himself witnesses, writing, “We sent our spirit unto a maiden and willed that she delivered a child” (Surah 19:17). Here, you see, I am explaining the Holy Trinity by the Quran. (6)

Cyril’s rebuttal was simultaneously dogmatic and contextual. He appealed to the prophets of the Old Testament, whom he regarded as worshippers and servants of a Trinitarian God. He also referred to the historic teaching of the church in the language of Christian theology—“three persons within a single being.” His references to the Word becoming flesh, the Virgin Mary, and the incarnation of Christ for the purpose of salvation all reflect the familiar language of the Nicene Creed. On the one hand, Cyril was inviting Muslims to come and see the Gospel in Christian terms. On the other hand, he displayed an apparent understanding of the Quran to the point that he used this verse from surah 19 as a bridge to Christian ideas and as a means of making his point on the validity of the Trinity. Dvornik notes that, in Byzantium, Christian theologians were becoming increasingly familiar with the Quran, and other theologians, such as Theodore Abu Qurrah (ca. 750–ca. 825), also used this quranic passage to



Saints Cyril and Methodius in Rome fresco in Basilica of San Clemente al Laterano, Rome. Photo from: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saints\\_Cyril\\_and\\_Methodius#/media/File:San\\_clemente\\_fresco.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saints_Cyril_and_Methodius#/media/File:San_clemente_fresco.jpg)

make a case for the Trinity.<sup>7</sup> In sum, for Cyril, the mystery and majesty of the Christian Godhead offered greater satisfaction than the Islamic notion of god, which to him was overly simple.

### **Mission to the Khazars (Jews and Muslims)**

Following his mission to the Arabs and after a number of years of living in the monastery at Mount Olympus, Cyril and his brother Methodius were summoned by Emperor Michael III for mission work to the Khazar people. A Turkic nomadic people living in the Caucasus region of Russia, the Khazars had followed traditional pagan religions. At this point in their history, however, they were becoming increasingly influenced by Judaism and Islam. Since 750, the Muslim Abbasid Caliphate had been based at nearby Baghdad, which accounted for the Muslim influence. Interestingly, though, because of the presence of zealous proselytizing Jewish merchants in the region, Judaism's influence was actually stronger than that of Islam. Following this turn of events, the Khazar khan reached out to the Byzantine emperor, with whom he had enjoyed good diplomatic relations, and inquired about a third faith alternative—Christianity (8).<sup>8</sup>

Given the brothers' previous diplomatic work and Cyril's reputation as a teacher, Michael III set them apart to go to Khazara in response to the khan's request. Cyril's biographer recorded the emperor challenging Cyril and framing the mission in these terms: "Go forth, philosopher, to these people, speak to them and explain to them the Holy Trinity" (8). Though Cyril was the younger of the two brothers, both men's biographies indicate that Cyril was the mission leader and that Methodius was happy with that arrangement.<sup>9</sup>

Cyril and Methodius's work among the Khazars involved a variety of approaches. First, it appears that they were committed to language learning, for they managed to learn both Khazar and Russian in the course of their ministry. Second, they were

probably involved in preaching and communicating biblical ideas. Though Cyril's recorded discourse was quite philosophically oriented, it is interesting to note that one Khazar philosopher criticized him for referring to the Bible too often in their discussions (8–9).<sup>10</sup> Finally, the brothers' work was characterized by much open dialogue with both Jewish and Muslim contacts, as we will explore further. Apparently, the mission was fruitful, since some 200 Khazars embraced the Gospel. In the khan's letter to Michael III, which is preserved in the "Life of Cyril," the Khazar leader communicated both gratitude to the missionaries and tolerance—to those who accepted Christianity and to those who did not: "You sent us, Lord, a holy man who has shown us the Christian faith by words and deeds. Having established that this is the true faith, we have ordered those who so wish should be baptized, in hope that we too shall follow suit" (8).<sup>11</sup> The work was also successful on the diplomatic side, for Cyril successfully intervened against a Khazar attack on a Christian town and was also able to negotiate the release of some 200 Greek prisoners (8).<sup>12</sup>

### *Dialogue with Jewish Khazars*

In his dialogues with the Khazar leaders, Cyril responded to initial queries about his rank and identity by referring to himself as "Adam's grandson"—a rather contextual response that made creation and humanity elements of common ground in the conversation (9). Though the recorded dialogue with Jewish thinkers touched on a number of subjects—including the antiquity of the Jewish law, the Jews being descendants of Noah via Shem, and the value of circumcision—our focus will be on Cyril's arguments for the Christian doctrine of God.

First, Cyril emphasized that the God of Scripture is both Creator and triune. As the khan raised his glass to acknowledge the creator God, Cyril responded by citing a portion of Psalm 33:6 and clarifying the essence of a Trinitarian Creator: "the one and only God who by His Word created every living thing and made the heavens, and the life-giving spirit through who their whole host holds." Cyril's biographer has the khan countering: "We speak of all things in the same way, but think differently on one point only. You praise a Trinity, and we a single God, keeping to the Scriptures." To this point, Cyril also appealed to the Old Testament Scriptures and argued that "the Scriptures preach both the Word and the Spirit." The philosopher then attempted to support that claim by making a human analogy and posing this query: "If anyone shows you respect but does not honor your word and your spirit, while another one honors all three—yourself, your word and your spirit, which of the two will show you the greater respect?" Cyril then summarized the argument by circling back to Scripture and quoting Isaiah 48:12, 16: "Hear me Jacob, and Israel whom I called: I am He, I am the first, I am everlasting; and now the Lord and His Spirit sent me forth" (9).

Second, Cyril aimed to further explain the Christian Godhead by defending the virgin birth of Christ. Responding to the Jewish philosophers' inquiry into how God could be born of a woman, Cyril began with an analogy: if the host of a household cannot show hospitality to a king in his or her home, then the host could have a servant show the king hospitality. Then, appealing to Scripture, he postulated that, if God can appear in a burning bush, a cloud, a storm, or in smoke (Exod. 3:2; 19:16–18; 34:5; Job 38:1;

40:1), then God could certainly inhabit a human, including a lowly woman. In short, God is capable of inhabiting physical space. Cyril then invited his audience to consider the purpose of the incarnation as the Creator's way of healing sick souls. In this response we hear traces of Gregory of Nazianzus's recapitulation theory of the incarnation and atonement—what has not been assumed (Christ taking on flesh) has not been healed. Finally, Cyril appealed liberally to the Jewish Scriptures to argue that Christ is truly the promised Messiah and the means by which the Creator brings healing (9–10).

### *Dialogue with Muslim Khazars*

Though the majority of Cyril's recorded dialogues are with the Jews of Khazara, the philosopher did interact with some Muslims as well. The Muslim thinkers began not by posing Trinitarian questions but rather by asking Cyril's opinion about the prophet Muhammad, who revered Jesus as a great prophet, born of a virgin, and as one who healed the sick and raised the dead (from surah 19:29; 3:40; 3:43). Perhaps they recognized that Cyril had some knowledge of the Quran and wanted to probe his understanding of Christ in the Quran. For whatever reason, Cyril did not bite and, contrary to his approach among the Arabs in Samarra, chose not to make any arguments based on the Muslim holy book. Instead, he answered the original query about Muhammad by referring to the prophet Daniel in the Old Testament. Citing Daniel 9:24, which indicated that vision and prophecy would be sealed up with the Messiah's coming, Cyril questioned how revelation in Islam could be regarded as valid. Specifically, he wondered whether there could be prophets at all after Christ, including Muhammad (9).<sup>13</sup>

### **Summary**

Given this brief survey of the missions to both the Arab Muslims at Samarra and the Jews and Muslims in Khazara, what characterized Cyril's approach to mission? First, the tone of the recorded dialogues is frank and quite polemical. Certainly, the bias of Cyril's biographer comes out here, as he presented Cyril in a heroic manner to his ninth-century Slavic readers. But Cyril's boldness could also be because he felt safe enough to express himself as a result of the promised protection offered by his Muslim and Jewish hosts and the respect accorded the Byzantine emperor who sent Cyril on this mission.

Second, Cyril worked from the assumption that Scripture is true and made liberal use of it to support his ideas. Related, he employed Christian language, especially that which emerges directly from the Nicene Creed. Furthermore, he unapologetically presented a divine Christ who is Creator and Redeemer—the Suffering Messiah, crucified, buried, and risen from the dead—and therefore worthy of all praise. He also clarified the meaning and tension of God as three persons in one being by using creedal language.

Third, in addition to appealing to historic Christian teaching, he demonstrated the ability to be contextual. Among Muslims at Samarra, he made a Christian argument

for the Trinity by appealing to the Quran. Among the Khazar Jews, he employed analogical reasoning and philosophical arguments. Finally, his references to the Creator also provided common ground in dialogues with Muslims and Jews. For every contextual argument he made, Cyril routinely returned to Scripture and the creed to summarize his thoughts.

Finally, as a missionary theologian, Cyril pointed his dialogue partners to the heart of the Christian faith. For his audience at Samarra, he emphasized the mystery and majesty of God and the virtue of being a worshipper over the mere duty of keeping religious law. To the Khazar Jews, he highlighted the purpose behind the incarnation— healing from sin offered by the Creator through the Messiah. In sum, Cyril's mission was a Trinitarian mission, and his message of the Gospel unpacked the work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in redemption.

What principles might be gleaned from Cyril, especially as they pertain to Christian engagement with Muslims today? I would like to list five elements that are commendable and one that should not be continued or emulated. First, much can be learned from the philosopher from his presupposition that Scripture was authoritative and that historic Christian doctrine as articulated in the creeds was true. Cyril made no apologies for these commitments, and he invited Muslim hearers to come and see the Gospel on its own terms. In this sense, he was a faithful messenger of a message that he had no right to hedge or make more palatable.

Second, and quite related, Cyril argued almost entirely from the Old Testament Scriptures in his conversations in Samarra and Khazara. This focus made much sense for his Jewish audience, as he was approaching them from a shared text. However, it was relevant for his Muslim listeners as well because Islam arguably bears more resemblance to Judaism than Christianity, and Cyril was wise to make much of the Old Testament ideas of creation, law, and the prophets in his dialogues.

Third, Cyril and other medieval Christians did show themselves to be students of the Quran on some level. While he did not view the Muslim holy book as authentic revelation necessarily, he did see it as a bridge to communicate ideas about God. In addition to studying the religion of the Arabs and Khazars, Cyril also proved to be a student of local language and culture so that he could effectively connect with his audience.

Fourth, Cyril established significant common ground with his audiences by proclaiming a creator God. In one sense, his arguments are prescriptural and predoctrinal. Initiating Gospel conversations by focusing on the maker of heaven and earth is a meaningful approach not only among Muslims and Jews but also with other religious peoples, such as animists.

Fifth, aside from Cyril's specific dialogues about the Trinity, let us consider the overall diplomatic nature of the mission. Though we live in a post-Christendom world today in which emperors no longer send missionaries, is there a place for missionary Christians to participate in diplomatic missions with a missional angle? While I would caution that such initiatives ought to be completely separate from the aims of a particular government, I can imagine a number of constructive scenarios where diplomacy and Christian mission are compatible today:

- when a Christian serving as a political envoy or in a diplomatic post witnesses to Christ through personal relationships cultivated with members of other governments;
- when believing soldiers serving on peacekeeping missions have a witness for Christ, while tangibly protecting and serving the local population;
- when nongovernmental international business leaders witness for Christ through building relationships as they develop new business outlets;
- when nongovernmental leaders, including clergy and business leaders, reach out to global political leaders regarding human rights and religious liberties and have a natural, relational witness during those encounters;
- when qualified Christian peacemakers and mediators live out the Gospel in word and deed as they mediate in global religious, political, or ethnic conflicts.

I am aware of some followers of Christ already at work in such scenarios. There seems to be space for such missional diplomacy, and this possibility merits further reflection.

Finally, one thing that should probably not be recovered from Cyril's practice is his use of polemics. This approach, shared by other Byzantine thinkers such as Theodore Abu Qurrah, John of Damascus (676–749), and Nicetas of Byzantium (842–912), presupposes a level of political protection in a Christendom context.<sup>14</sup> Also, these theologians seemed free to express themselves as they did because they wrote about Muslims from a safe distance. Although Cyril employed polemics, he was distinct from these Byzantine apologists because he actually connected with Muslims on a personal level.

Christian engagement with Muslims today ought to be highly relational and free from the expectation of or dependence on political power. Though an appropriate boldness and winsomeness in Gospel proclamation should be celebrated, mission today among Muslims ought to be a witness from below—from a place of vulnerability, service, and relationships.<sup>15</sup> In sum, the post-Christendom, globalized twenty-first century may actually provide the best environment for Christian-Muslim relations and an authentic Christian witness.

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## **Notes**

1. Cyril's given name was Constantine (also spelled Konstantin); he took the name Cyril when he officially became a monk, toward the end of his life. In this article we refer to him as Cyril.
2. Anthony-Emil N. Tachioas, *Cyril and Methodius of Thessalonica: The Acculturation of the Slavs* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), 146; Francis Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions among the Slavs: SS. Constantine-Cyril and Methodius* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1970), 53, 183; A. P. Vlasto, *The Entry of the Slavs*



- into Christendom: An Introduction to the Medieval History of the Slavs (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1970), 29–32.
3. Tachioas, Cyril and Methodius, 5–9; Robert L. Wilken, *The First Thousand Years: A Global History of Christianity* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2012), 344.
  4. Numbers in parentheses in the text refer to sections in “Life of Cyril.” The English translation is from “Life and Acts of Konstantin,” in *Kiril and Methodius: Founders of Slavonic Writing*, ed. Ivan Duichev, trans. Spass Nikolov (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1985). See also Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions*, 56–60; Tachioas, *Cyril and Methodius*, 23–25, 28.
  5. Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions*, 54–55; Tachioas, *Cyril and Methodius*, 28–29.
  6. Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions*, 62–64; Tachioas, *Cyril and Methodius*, 30–32.
  7. Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions*, 287; see John Meyendorff, “Byzantine Views of Islam,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 18 (1964): 131.
  8. Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions*, 50–53; Tachioas, *Cyril and Methodius*, 39.
  9. Tachioas, *Cyril and Methodius*, 41.
  10. *Ibid.*, 50–51.
  11. Cited in Tachioas, *Cyril and Methodius*, 48.
  12. Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions*, 67–69; Tachioas, *Cyril and Methodius*, 46–48.
  13. Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions*, 69.
  14. See Meyendorff, “Byzantine Views of Islam,” 116–32.
  15. See Samuel Escobar, *The New Global Mission: The Gospel from Everywhere to Everyone* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 19–20.

### Author biography



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