Many reasons were given for studying Arabic in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Since most practitioners were theologians, theological arguments for learning the language of the Qur’ān tended to prevail. One of these was the presence of the Arabic-speaking Christians: Greek Orthodox, Copts, Jacobites, Armenians, Maronites and Nestorians. Under Ottoman rule, they were regarded in the west as the victims of persecution who should in some way be assisted and possibly even liberated. Certain distinctions were made between these eastern Churches.

The one which aroused the greatest interest and the greatest sympathy was the Greek Orthodox Church. With a little good will on either side its doctrine was considered reconcilable with western Christianity. Just as the Greek Church had gradually drifted away from the west over the centuries so, it was believed, the two forms of Christianity might again drift together. The main doctrinal point of disagreement, the so-called dual procession of the Holy Ghost from the Father and the Son which the Greeks rejected, could surely one day be surmounted. Where the other eastern Churches were concerned matters were different. The Nestorians, with their distinction of the two persons in Christ, and the traditionally monophysite Churches of the Copts, the Jacobites and the Armenians who believed in the single, divine nature of Christ, were associated with the great heresies of the fifth century. Even the Maronites, officially in communion with Rome since the twelfth century, remained strongly tinged by the seventh-century heresy of monothelitism which admitted a single will in Christ. For the west to accept these other Churches on their own terms was by no means easy—yet Christians they remained. The western attitude was consequently marked by a combination of attraction and repugnance which increased with closer knowledge.
THE ENGLISH INTEREST IN THE ARABIC-SPEAKING CHRISTIANS

Roman Catholic and Protestant Attitudes

The Church of Rome had long striven for a reunion with the eastern Churches. At the time of the Crusades union had been achieved with the Maronites but even that was tenuous and the more general effect of the crusading armies in the Levant had been to make western Christianity detestable. Nevertheless, over the centuries sporadic overtures continued to be made by Rome. The results were seldom enduring. Gibbon described the representatives of the eastern Churches on whom union was briefly imposed after the Council of Florence in 1445 as 'unknown in the countries which they presumed to represent' and, even if not always entirely accurate, such a description gives an idea of Rome's relationship with isolated groups or individuals who failed to have the Pope's conditions accepted by a majority of their co-religionists. Yet, as from the late sixteenth century and thanks to the commitment of Gregory XIII and his successors, the Church of Rome multiplied its efforts and its triumphs. In 1576 Gregory founded a Greek college in Rome and in 1584 a Maronite one. At the second synod of Brest-Litovsk in 1596 a union was concluded with the Ruthenian Churches and, unsuccessful though it was in the long run, the new Uniate Church was regarded as a threat to the other eastern Churches. Missionaries, above all Capuchins and Jesuits, were dispatched to the oriental communities and their proselytism was often remarkably effective.

The Protestant approach differed fundamentally from that of the Catholics, for what the Protestants admired most about the Christians of the east was their sustained independence of Rome. Even if Luther was in two minds about the Greeks, Melanchthon retained the greatest interest in them. One after the other, German scholars visited the Levant and returned with reports about the Greeks and their Christian neighbours. The works of Martin Crusius, David Chytraeus, Stephan Gerlach and Salomon Schweigger testify to the ecumenical aims of the Lutheran theologians in the sixteenth century and, particularly the writings of Schweigger, to the failure of the dream of a union between the non-Roman Churches. Although the Lutherans, like so many Protestants who visited the eastern Christians, became aware that the Greek Orthodox Church practised ceremonies and held beliefs which were far closer to Roman Catholicism than to Protestantism, their interest in the Christianity of the east continued. Throughout the seventeenth century, German princes encouraged expeditions to the Levant and members of the eastern Churches were made as welcome in Germany as in other parts of Europe.

A number of practices and beliefs continued to recommend the oriental Churches to the Protestants. Besides the rejection of Papal supremacy there was the marriage of priests, the denial of purgatory, the rejection of auricular