

**FACULTY OF ASIAN &
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Dear Colleagues,

Academic recommendation for Kelli Bryant Gibson

I am delighted to have been asked to write a letter of academic recommendation in support of the tenure application of Kelli Bryant Gibson. I have known Kelli since October 2009 when she came to Oxford to study with me for the Master of Philosophy degree in Eastern Christian Studies, specialising in Syriac (Christian Aramaic) and Greek texts and theology, and I subsequently supervised her doctoral thesis (awarded in 2015). Since her return to the United States we have met occasionally at international conferences, and I have read all of her published work, as well as advanced drafts of works to be published soon. I believe, therefore, that I am in a strong position to write this letter.

When Kelli first came to Oxford from Abilene it was already clear that she was a student of exceptional ability and intellectual attainment, and this was amply confirmed by her performance in graduate classes here, and in her final examinations and thesis. Her biblical and patristic Greek was outstanding, and she translated lengthy unseen Greek passages under exam conditions with ease. She also acquired a fluent reading knowledge of Syriac in all three major scripts, which enabled her to tackle unpublished Syriac texts coming from all three major Christological traditions. The examiners were particularly impressed by her 30,000 word masters thesis on the Christology of a twelfth-century Syrian Orthodox writer, Dionysius bar Salibi, in his lengthy treatise countering the claims of Islam. Her work showed much insightful analysis, revealing the ways in which this author (and his contemporaries) sought to refute contemporary Islamic beliefs about Jesus. The net result was a fascinating, original, and tightly argued thesis.

The faculty therefore had no hesitation about admitting her to our doctoral studies program. As part of her outstanding commitment to her research Kelli spent much of her first year acquiring a strong reading knowledge of classical Arabic by participating in the faculty's intensive graduate Arabic training program. Thereafter she worked her way through key Syriac, Greek, and Arabic sources, many of them unpublished and only accessible in manuscripts, as well as the voluminous secondary literature relating to her research topic: 'Festal Apologetics: Syriac Treatises on the Feast of the Discovery of the Cross'. At a time when Islamic State forces were tearing down crosses, destroying churches, and killing Christians in Iraq, this was a remarkably timely work, and it remains research of great importance.

Kelli produced the 99,000 word thesis within four years, and its seven chapters investigated the significance of the physical cross of Christ in eastern Christian thought and

worship from the earliest centuries until the medieval period. It began with an investigation of Christian attitudes towards the cross in the period before the emergence of the legends which asserted that it had been rediscovered by the emperor Constantine's mother, Helena. It then moved on to the reception of these legends among Syriac-speaking Christians; the incorporation of these traditions into liturgy and worship before Islam; then several chapters addressing the key role that the cross played in early Islamic criticisms of Christian faith, and in Christian refutations of Islam and Judaism. The final chapters investigated the unpublished treatises related to the cross produced by two major ninth-century Syriac Orthodox writers, John of Dara and Moshe bar Kepha. This was doctoral research of the very highest quality, as was noted by its examiners. It presented materials and data that were entirely unknown to previous scholars, and contextualised them in such a way that they presented an exciting and stimulating account of eastern Christian thought about the key symbol of the cross. The engagement with Islamic sources (not only the Qur'ān but also later Islamic apologists and philosophers) also put Kelli very much in the vanguard of modern Syriac studies, in which researchers have moved away from an obsessive focus on the first five centuries of Christianity, and have begun to investigate medieval and early-modern Christian texts and theologians in their own cultural context. This is a shift of great importance, and Kelli plays an important international role in this work.

Kelli's publications have largely (but not exclusively) built upon the foundations of her thesis research. She has a major forthcoming edition and translation of John of Dara's discourses on the *Feast of the Discovery of the Cross* and *On the Divine Economy* which are keenly awaited by colleagues in Syriac and early Islamic studies. Editorial work of this kind is always slow and painstaking, but it can transform our knowledge and understanding if done well, and Kelli is adept at producing such work to the highest standards. In 2020 Kelli published an important article on a treatise on the cross by a fifth-century Syriac writer named Narsai who was a theologian in the Sasanian empire of Iran, and an edition and translation of this text will follow shortly. In these pieces (both published by major European publishing houses) Kelli built upon her doctoral research, but extended it into new and interesting directions, and showed how this early writer was already employing apologetic strategies that would later be adapted in the Islamic and Byzantine eras. This same area of research also led Kelli to discover a previously unknown fragment of Muslim-Christian dialogue, and I heard Kelli lecture on this recently in Paris. It is a fascinating text, and it belongs to a genre that is currently attracting great scholarly attention for obvious real-world reasons. The draft article that I heard will immediately find a keen audience once published.

In addition to studies of the ideology of the cross and of Christian-Muslim relations, Kelli also has the breadth of interest and reading to publish on other topics. I am personally particularly looking forward to her translation of the homilies of Jacob of Sarug (d. 521) on the apostle Addai (the legendary apostle of Edessa and northern Mesopotamia) and the conversion of king Abgar of Edessa, figures who continue to be of great religious relevance to Christians of Syriac origin in the USA, Europe, and the Middle East. These texts were only made known to scholars in 2017 through an edition published in Damascus, Syria, and so it is excellent to see that Kelli immediately recognised their importance and invested the time and care necessary to make them accessible to a far wider readership. I heard her speak on this topic in 2021 (part of an international online series of lectures), when she presented a highly skilful analysis of the texts and their relevance, and so I also look forward to the published form of this paper that will appear separately next year.

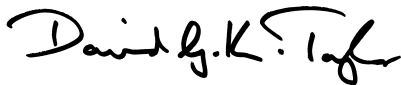
Another example of her broader research contributions is her 2014 article on dietary metaphors in a key fourth-century Syriac text called the *Liber Graduum* (or *Book of Steps*).

This important text was published early in the twentieth century, but was then largely ignored until the appearance of the ground-breaking book in which her chapter was published. The author of the text is particularly concerned with the ways in which Christian communities are composed of individuals at different stages of spiritual growth, and who should therefore attempt to live according to religious standards, rules, and practices that are conformed to their degree of spiritual development. This makes Pauline food imagery – ‘vegetables for the sick’, ‘milk for children’ (Rom 14, 1 Cor 3, and Heb 5) – of special interest to him, and he creatively adapts these themes to his own theology and community. Kelli was the first person to analyse and explore these themes, and her article is an excellent example of engaged critical reading that I now recommend to all my graduate students.

I presume that you will yourselves assess Kelli’s other contributions to your university, such as her teaching and university service. I can only add here that I have seen Kelli teach graduate students at Oxford University, and I have heard her lecture at conferences on numerous occasions, and in my judgement she is one of the most gifted natural teachers that I have encountered among the many doctoral students I have helped train over a period of thirty years. She is always perfectly prepared and on top of her material, she structures and presents her materials so as to make them intelligible and relevant, and she is always engaging and challenging. This is a formidable set of skills that any faculty would be delighted to see in a professor.

In short, Kelli Bryant Gibson is an exceptional young scholar of eastern Christian theology and of Christian-Muslim relations, and she is one of the leading figures in these fields in the United States and internationally. Her published work meets the highest international standards, and the draft texts I have read of major works due to be published later this year and next are enthusiastically awaited by scholars and Europe and the Middle East, as well as at home in north America. I would be delighted to have Kelli as a tenured colleague here in Oxford, and so I am delighted to be able to recommend her application to you in the most enthusiastic terms, and with no reservations.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David G.K. Taylor". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

David G.K. Taylor
Associate Professor of Aramaic and Syriac