

Louis Cheikho and the Christianization of Pre-Islamic and Early Islamic Ascetic Poetry

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Abstract

Using the Jesuit scholar Louis Cheikho's (1859–1927) work on pre-Islamic and early Islamic ascetic poetry as a focal point, this article examines two strategies which contemporary and later scholars accused Cheikho of using to falsify the Arabic literary heritage. Cheikho de-Islamized Arabic language texts through editorial interventions, as evinced by his edition of the *Dīwān* of the Abbasid ascetic poet Abū al-ʿAtāhiya. Furthermore, he overtly laid claim to the past by Christianizing pre-Islamic poetry. In his work *al-Naṣṣrāniyya wa-ādābuhā bayna ʿarab al-jāhiliyya*, Cheikho tried to establish the “origins” of Arabic cultural and literary production in Christianity. He did so in response to Arab and European intellectuals who challenged the Christian contribution to Arabic. Above all, he rejected racist ideas embedded in nineteenth-century European philology, notably the denigration of Semitic languages and their speakers based on the “Aryan”/“Semite” binary in Ernest Renan's (1823–1892) work.

Keywords

Louis Cheikho – Abū al-ʿAtāhiya – pre-Islamic poetry – Ernest Renan – Orientalism – asceticism

Introduction

Arabic poetry played a pivotal role in the philological work of the Jesuit Orientalist Louis Cheikho (1859–1927). For a long time, scholars studying pre-Islamic poetry, classical Arabic poetry, and Arabic literature more generally

referred to the numerous editions and studies Cheikho published throughout his career. These works were not only intended as a contribution to the cultivation of the Arabic classical tradition. They also served as didactic tools in education and as vehicles for Cheikho's confessional agenda. Though unprecedented in scale, Cheikho's "poetic project" was in fact a continuation of processes that had started as early as the seventeenth century. The Maronite monk and later bishop Jirmānūs Jibrīl (or Jibrā'īl) Farḥāt (1670–1732), whom *nahḍa* scholars later elevated to the rank of a pioneer of the *nahḍa* in what they perceived as an age of "decline," composed pious Christian poetry, analyzed poetic figures of speech, and used verse to teach Arabic grammar.¹ What started as a rapprochement between Christians and Arabic in Farḥāt's work turned into a veritable appropriation in Cheikho's scholarship: Farḥāt strove to give Christian readers access to the poetic and grammatical tradition, for example by composing pious "quotation poems" based on classical Arabic poetry, or by introducing examples from the Christian tradition in his grammatical work *Baḥṭh al-maṭālib* ("The Pursuit of the Questions"). Cheikho went further by putting the Arabic poetic tradition entirely at the service of his Christian readerships in the Levant and in Europe. This resulted in a recoding: in his scholarship, Arabic poetry became a crucial reference frame for Christian literary expression and self-affirmation. Taking Cheikho's works relating to pre-Islamic poetry and early Islamic ascetic poetry as a point of departure, this article examines his endeavors to promote Christian Arabic literature and Arabic-speaking Christianity through his engagement with Arabic literary culture and the early history of the Arabs.

Louis Cheikho was born Rizq Allāh Shaykhū on 5 February 1859 in Mardin to a Chaldean Catholic father, Yūsuf, and an Armenian mother, Ilīṣābāt.² The family was wealthy, the father being a respected merchant. As a child, Rizq Allāh went to the Capuchin school in Mardin. Under the influence of Jesuit missionaries in Mardin, his older brother 'Abd al-Masīḥ entered the Ghazīr Seminary (in Kisrawān, Lebanon). The nine-year-old Rizq Allāh soon followed

1 On Jirmānūs Jibrīl Farḥāt and his works, see Kristen Brustad, "Jirmānūs Jibrīl Farḥāt (20 November 1670–10 July 1732)," in *Essays in Arabic Literary Biography 1350–1850*, eds. Joseph E. Lowry and Devin J. Stewart (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009), 242–51.

2 For Louis Cheikho's biography, see Camille Hechaïmé, *Louis Cheikho et son livre "Le Christianisme et la littérature chrétienne en Arabie avant l'Islam"* (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq, 1967), 33–41; Henri Jalabert, *Jésuites au Proche-Orient: Notices biographiques* (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq, 1987), 168–69; Henri Lammens, *Le Père Louis Cheikho 1859–1927* (Lyon: Imprimerie L. Bascou, 1929); Gabriel Levenq, "Le Père Louis Cheikho," *Relations d'Orient* 2 (1928): 130–41; Buṭrus Sāra, "al-Ṭayyib al-athar al-ab Luwīs Shaykhū al-yasū'ī," *al-Mashriq* 51 (1957): 641–56. Sāra's article is based on information provided by Cheikho's nephew, the Jesuit Rufā'īl Cheikho [Shaykhū].

him, distinguishing himself as an excellent student. In 1874, he started his novitiate in the Jesuit Seminary of Lons-le-Saunier in France, where he received an education with a strong focus on languages and literature. When Cheikho returned to Lebanon at the end of the year 1877, he taught Arabic literature at the Jesuit College (later Université Saint-Joseph) which had meanwhile been transferred from Ghazir to Beirut. After several years of philosophical and theological studies in Beirut, Cheikho spent four years in England (1888–1892) and two further years in Vienna and Paris. During this time, Cheikho conducted research in European libraries and studied the works and methods of European Orientalists, with many of whom he continued to correspond later in life.³ Following their model, he founded the *Bibliothèque Orientale*, editing and publishing manuscripts he had gathered in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and India.⁴ Thanks to Cheikho's activities, the modest *Imprimerie Catholique*, which had been created in 1848, developed considerably at the end of the century. In 1898, Cheikho founded the journal *al-Mashriq*, to which he contributed numerous articles until his death on 7 December 1927.⁵

In his vast scholarly and philological output, Louis Cheikho focused on Arabic literature authored by Christians and on Arabic texts about Christians, Christian history, and Christian religious and literary culture. Some therefore celebrate him as one of the pioneers of Christian Arabic Studies. Because of the strong and expansive Christocentrism underlying his publications, these often border on defensive polemics or aggressive apologetics, leading others to see Cheikho as a biased Catholic zealot and as a falsifier of the literary heritage. Muslim as well as Christian contemporaries accused the Jesuits and Cheikho in particular of Christianizing the Arabic language and literature, something even Cheikho's eulogists were forced to admit.⁶ In this article, I aim to historicize his

3 A selection of letters Cheikho received from European Orientalists is published in Camille Hechaïmé [Kamil Ḥushaymah], "Min rasā'il al-udabā' wa-l-mustashriqīn ilā al-ab Luwīs Shaykhū," *al-Mashriq* 64 (1970): 421–64. For Cheikho's correspondence with Louis Massignon (1883–1962), see idem, "Rasā'il Luwīs Massīnyūn ilā al-ab Luwīs Shaykhū," *al-Mashriq* 64 (1970): 729–54, and idem, "Fi al-dhikrā al-thalāthīn li-wafāt Luwīs Shaykhū (1962–1992): Ba'd rasā'il Luwīs Shaykhū ilayhi," *al-Mashriq* 67 (1993): 169–76.

4 For a study of the provenance of the manuscripts Cheikho acquired, see Antoine Saliba, *Voyages d'un érudit: Identification de la provenance des manuscrits rapportés par le père Louis Cheikho à la Bibliothèque Orientale* (Beirut: Les Éditions de l'Université Antonine, 2017).

5 On the founding of the journal *al-Mashriq*, see Camille Hechaïmé, "La Revue 'Al-Machriq' et l'Orient Chrétien," in *L'Université Saint-Joseph et l'Orientalisme* (Beirut: Centre de Documentation et de Recherches Arabes Chrétiennes, 2008), 49–65.

6 Levenq, "Le Père," 137: "Ce qu'ont dit quelques musulmans de Beirout relativement aux productions expurgées de la littérature arabe de l'Imprimerie Catholique 'les Jésuites ont christianisé l'arabe' s'applique dans un autre sens à l'œuvre tout entière du P. Cheikho."

work and not merely scrutinize it for its blatant shortcomings. Cheikho altered the Arabic poetic tradition and his analyses are deeply biased, but he did so because of certain intellectual and religious commitments. Like other modern Arab thinkers, Cheikho knew European thought and literature well and intervened in philologists' debates for his readership at home and in Europe. While it is easy to dismiss his scholarship as a confessionally motivated "bastion of dated philological studies," I show that his work can help us "rethink literary, philosophical, and theoretical canons,"⁷ particularly where the engagement with the past is concerned.

In order to shed light on Cheikho's motives, I examine two different strategies he used to claim the Arabic literary heritage for Christians past and present. Cheikho de-Islamized classical Arabic literature more or less subtly through editorial interventions in editions. Ascetic *zuhdiyya* poetry is a prominent example. By resorting to this strategy, Cheikho intervened in debates about the relation between literary self-expression and faith among Arabic-speaking intellectuals and litterateurs. Above all, the strategy also served a pedagogical purpose among Orientalists in Europe, whom Cheikho wanted to acquire Arabic language skills based on Christian or sapiential texts.

Cheikho's second strategy reached even further: he explicitly Christianized pre-Islamic poetry and argued that Arabic cultural and literary production on the Arabian Peninsula before the advent of Islam received its first impulses from Christians. Cheikho's monumental work *al-Naṣrāniyya wa-ādābuhā bayna 'arab al-jāhiliyya* ("Christianity and Christian Cultural Production among the Arabs of the *jāhiliyya*"; French title: *Le Christianisme et la littérature chrétienne en Arabie avant l'Islam*), published beginning in 1910, gives the impression of an overwhelmingly Christian pre-Islamic past through his selection and arrangement of the material. Cheikho's quest to establish the "origins" of Arabic culture and of Islam in Christianity, I will argue, is above all a reaction to the burgeoning racist discourses of European philologists, notably Ernest Renan (1823–1892).

***Zuhdiyya* Poetry, its Interconfessional Appeal, and its Appropriation**

Early in his career, Louis Cheikho edited and printed the *Dīwān* of Ismā'īl b. al-Qāsim, nicknamed Abū al-'Atāhiya (748–825 or 826). A pot-seller without

7 See Orit Bashkin, "The Colonized Semites and the Infectious Disease: Theorizing and Narrativizing Anti-Semitism in the Levant, 1870–1914," *Critical Inquiry* 47 (2021): 193.

a formal education, the poet initially succeeded in making a name for himself at Baghdad's court by declaiming praise poetry and love poetry. Later in life, he suddenly shifted to *zuhdiyyāt*, a new genre of pious poetry to which he devoted himself exclusively for the remainder of his life.⁸ The poet became famous in ninth-century Baghdad mainly because his poetic creations, ostensibly composed for the "common people," satisfied the literary tastes of Abbasid courtly elites who enjoyed morose expressions of asceticism.⁹ The *zuhdiyyāt* have roots in wisdom literature, elegiac poetry, and sermon material, and are broadly devoted to the transitory nature of everything worldly.

Two editions of the *zuhdiyyāt* have appeared in print. The first was Cheikho's *al-Anwār al-zāhiya* ("The Shining Lights"). The title page (Fig. 1) attributes this 1886 edition, printed by the Jesuit Press in Beirut, to "a Jesuit Father" (*aḥad al-ābā' al-yasū'īyyīn*).¹⁰ We know from catalogues of the *Imprimerie Catholique*, which were distributed to potential clients in the Levant and in Europe who purchased the Jesuits' publications, that Louis Cheikho was in fact the editor of this edition.¹¹ The second edition, *Abū al-'Atāhiya: Ash'āruhū wa-akhbāruhū* ("Abū al-'Atāhiya: His Poems and Reports about Him") was published by the Damascene scholar Shukrī Fayṣal in 1965.¹² Fayṣal felt compelled to prepare a new edition of the *Dīwān* for two main reasons: during a stay in Germany, he had discovered an unknown manuscript copy of the *Dīwān* in the Tübingen Library. This manuscript complemented the one in the Zāhiriyya Library in Damascus which, he believed, Cheikho had already used.¹³ More important than this discovery was his second reason: Fayṣal's desire to reprove Cheikho

8 For a biography of Abū al-'Atāhiya, see Everett K. Rowson, "Abu al-'Atahiyah (748–16 September 825?)," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography: Arabic Literary Culture*, 500–925, eds. Michael Cooperson and Shawkat M. Toorawa (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005), 12–20.

9 See Nora K. Schmid, "Abū l-'Atāhiya and the Versification of Disenchantment," in *The Place to Go: Contexts of Learning in Baghdād, 750–1000 C. E.*, eds. Jens Scheiner and Damien Janos (Princeton: Darwin Press, 2014), 131–66.

10 [Cheikho, Louis, ed.,] *al-Anwār al-zāhiya fī Dīwān Abī al-'Atāhiya* (Beirut: Maṭba'at al-Ābā' al-Yasū'īyyīn, 1886).

11 See *Catalogue de l'Imprimerie Catholique des PP. Missionnaires de la Compagnie de Jésus en Syrie* (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1888), 26, and *Catalogue Spécial et Spécimens des Caractères de l'Imprimerie Catholique Beyrouth (Syrie)* (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1890), 26, no. 284.

12 See Shukrī Fayṣal, ed., *Abū al-'Atāhiya: Ash'āruhū wa-akhbāruhū* (Damascus: Maṭba'at Jāmi'at Dimashq, 1965 [1384 AH]).

13 See Fayṣal, ed., *Abū al-'Atāhiya*, 10. The manuscript to which Fayṣal refers is probably Zāhiriyya Library, Damascus, Ms. 3320. Cheikho mentions "two manuscript copies" (*nuskhatayn*) in the introduction to his *Dīwān*, without providing further details. We know that Cheikho acquired a copy of the *Dīwān* for the Bibliothèque Orientale from the Dallāl family in Aleppo, since this copy bears the stamp of 'Abdallāh Dallāl. But he

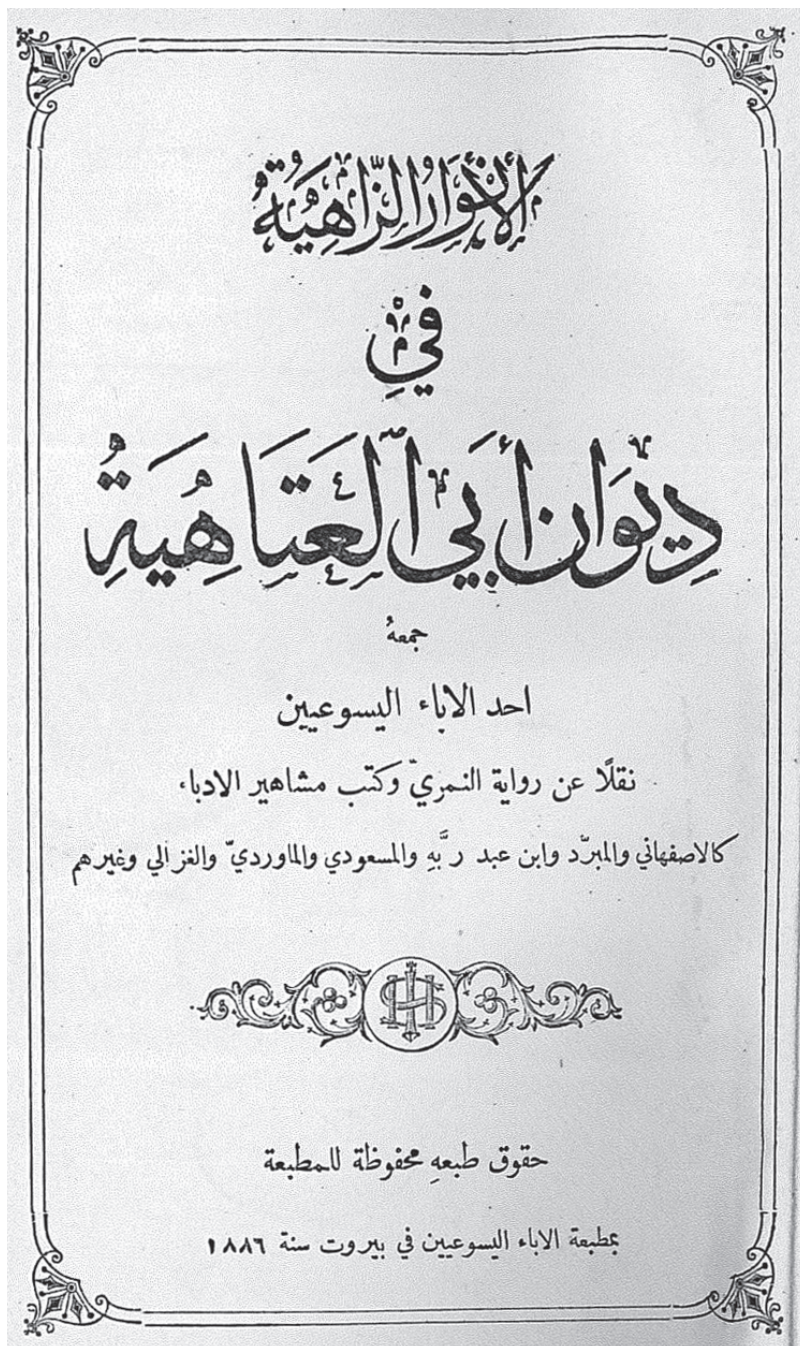


FIGURE 1 First edition of *al-Anwār al-zāhiya* ("The Shining Lights"), the *Dīwān* of the Abbasid poet Abū al-ʿAtāhiya, published by Louis Cheikho in 1886 and printed by the Jesuit Press in Beirut.

for a number of grave editorial interventions. Over several pages of his introduction to the *Dīwān*, Fayṣal sharply criticizes the alterations, modifications, and deletions he found when comparing Cheikho's edition to the manuscript evidence.¹⁴ In some instances the name of the Prophet Muḥammad was deleted or replaced, as in the following poem:

١ اصْبِرْ لِكُلِّ مُصِيبَةٍ وَتَجَلَدْ وَاعْلَمْ بِأَنَّ الْمَرْءَ غَيْرُ مُخَلَّدٍ
 ٢ أَوْ مَا تَرَى أَنَّ الْمَصَائِبَ جَمَّةٌ وَتَرَى الْمَنِيَّةَ لِلْعِبَادِ بِمَرَصَدٍ
 ٣ مَنْ لَمْ يُصَبِّ مِمَّنْ تَرَى بِمُصِيبَةٍ هَذَا سَبِيلُ لَسْتُ فِيهِ بِأَوْحَدٍ
 ٤ وَإِذَا ذَكَرْتَ مُحَمَّدًا وَمُصَابَهُ فَادْكُرْ مُصَابَكَ بِالنَّبِيِّ مُحَمَّدٍ
 (الكامل)

- 1 Calmly bear every calamity and persevere. You shall know that man is not immortal.
- 2 Or do you not see that calamities come aplenty, and do you not see that fate (*al-maniyya*) lies in wait for [God's] servants?
- 3 Who among those you see has not been afflicted by a calamity? This is a path on which you are not alone.
- 4 When you remember Muḥammad and what befell him, consider what has befallen you in comparison with the Prophet Muḥammad.¹⁵

Cheikho's *Dīwān* has a different fourth verse in the same metre, in which Muḥammad is not mentioned:

٤ وَإِذَا ذَكَرْتَ الْعَابِدِينَ وَذُلَّهُمْ فَاجْعَلْ مَلَاذِكَ بِالْإِلَهِ الْأَوْحَدِ
 (الكامل)

- 4 When you remember the worshippers and their humility, seek refuge with the one God.¹⁶

did so only after the publication of the *Dīwān*. For this copy of the *Dīwān*, see Université Saint-Joseph, Bibliothèque Orientale, Ms. (2) 912, and Saliba, *Voyages*, 77.

14 See Fayṣal, ed., *Abū al-ʿĀtāhiya*, 11–13, for all the following examples.

15 Fayṣal, ed., *Abū al-ʿĀtāhiya*, 110–11, no. 111. English translations here and in the following are my own.

16 Cheikho, ed., *al-Anwār*, 74–75.

In other poems, Cheikho replaced religious formulas, or, where this proved impossible, omitted them altogether, as in the following example:

١١ الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ حَيْثُمَا زَرَعَ الْ حَيْرَ امْرُؤٍ طَابَ زَرْعُهُ وَزَكَ
 ١٢ لَا تَجْتَنِي الطَّيِّبَاتِ يَوْمًا مِنْ الْغَرْسِ يَدُكَ كَانَ غَرْسُهَا الْحَسَا
 ١٣ إِنْ الْمَنَآيَا لَتَخِطْنَ فَلَا بُقَيْنَ لَا سُوقَهُ وَلَا مَلِكَا
 ١٤ الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ لَا شَرِيكَ لَهُ حَاشَا لَهُ أَنْ يَكُونَ مُشْتَرَكَا
 ١٥ الْحَمْدُ لِلْخَالِقِ الَّذِي حَرَّكَ السَّاكِنِ مِنَّا وَسَكَنَ الْحَرَكَا
 (المنسرح)

- 11 Praise be to God! Wherever man sows good deeds, his harvest is good and grows.
 12 The hand does not harvest good things from what it has one day planted, if it has planted thorns.
 13 When fate (*al-manāyā*) strikes, it leaves neither a commoner be nor a king.
 14 Praise to God, who has no partner! God forbid that He be associated with others!
 15 Praise to the Creator who moves the one at rest and puts at rest the one in motion.¹⁷

Cheikho simply dropped the fourteenth verse in the section of the poem quoted here.¹⁸ The verse asserts that God has no partners—a powerful allusion to a Qur'anic verse, the final verse of Q al-Isrā' 17:

١١١ وَقُلِ الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ الَّذِي لَمْ يَخْذَ وَلَدًا وَلَمْ يَكُنْ لَهُ شَرِيكٌ فِي الْمُلْكِ وَلَمْ يَكُنْ لَهُ وَلِيٌّ
 مِنَ الدَّلِّ وَكَبَّرَهُ تَكْبِيرًا

- 111 And say, "Praise to God, who has not taken a son, has no partner in sovereignty, nor any protector against humility." Magnify him abundantly.

17 Fayṣal, ed., *Abū al-ʿAtāhiya*, 260–61, no. 273.

18 Cheikho, ed., *al-Anwār*, 181.

The Qur'anic verse explicitly rejects the trinity, a polemical statement aimed against the Christians in the Qur'anic milieu. The integration of this verse into a *zuhdiyya* is an example of Qur'anic literary quotation (*iqtibās al-qur'ān*), a stylistic feature that occurs frequently in *zuhdiyyāt*.

Louis Cheikho printed what he perceived to be a "sanitized" version of Abū al-'Atāhiya's poetry, carefully deleting and rephrasing words, sentences, and verses that reveal the religion of the author. The question is: why this not-so-subtle "de-Islamization" of Abū al-'Atāhiya's poetry? What purpose did it serve? Why this garbing of an Islamic poet in a seemingly ecumenical moralistic dress? At no point did Cheikho alter the facts of Abū al-'Atāhiya's biography. The court poet of asceticism remained the Muslim poet that he was: Cheikho's introduction to the 1886 *al-Anwār al-zāhiya* faithfully presents biographical accounts of the poet's career and these reports in no way disguise the poet's religious commitments.¹⁹

One of the reasons why Cheikho edited the *Dīwān* was the widespread inter-communal appeal of ascetic poetry. Abū al-'Atāhiya's poems, and *zuhdiyyāt* in general, were popular among Cheikho's Christian contemporaries in the Levant. A widely known poetic anthology, Ilyās Faraj Bāsīl's (d. 1910) *Kitāb Majmū'at azhār min rubā al-ash'ār* ("Collection of Flowers from the Heights of Poetry"), was printed by the Franciscan Press in Jerusalem in 1866,²⁰ and became so popular that two more editions appeared in 1874 and 1879.²¹ Abū al-'Atāhiya is quoted twenty-six times in the anthology.²² Approximately 6,000 printed copies were in circulation.²³ Islamic ascetic poetry, especially *zuhdiyya*-poetry, clearly held an appeal for Eastern Christians, and this was not a recent development: *zuhdiyyāt* are also prominent in Mikirdij (Mkrtič) al-Kasīh's (b. 1666) anthology *Rayḥānat al-arwāḥ wa-sullam al-adab wa-l-ṣalāḥ* ("The Myrtle of Fragrances and the Ladder of Cultivation and Piety"), dating to the beginning of the eighteenth century.²⁴ He was a contemporary and friend of Jirmānūs Farḥāt, whose *Dīwān* also included devotional and paraenetic poems

19 Cheikho, ed., *al-Anwār*, 5–14.

20 Ilyās Faraj Bāsīl al-Kisrawānī, *Kitāb Majmū'at azhār min rubā al-ash'ār* (Jerusalem: Dayr al-Ruhbān al-Fransīskāniyyīn, 1866). On Ilyās Faraj Bāsīl and his anthology, see Carsten Walbiner, "Ilyās Faraj Bāsīl: A Lebanese Protagonist of the *Nahḍa* in 19th century Jerusalem," *ARAM* 25, no. 1 and 2 (2013): 321–27.

21 See Walbiner, "Ilyās Faraj Bāsīl," 325.

22 Bāsīl, *Kitāb Majmū'at azhār*, 44, 68, 74, 138–39 (three quotations), 140 (two quotations), 142, 143–44 (five quotations), 145–46 (two quotations), 150 (three quotations), 151, 154 (five quotations), 156.

23 See Walbiner, "Ilyās Faraj Bāsīl," 326.

24 For al-Kasīh's anthology, see Georg Graf, *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur*, 5 vols. (Vatican: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1944–1953), 4:84–85.

of a similar nature.²⁵ Al-Kasīḥ's anthology is preserved in numerous copies, which point to its exceptional popularity and its afterlives.²⁶ Ascetic poetry, irrespective of the poet's confession, spoke to Christian literary and religious sensibilities. Cheikho could not oust Abū al-'Atāhiya, but through his editorial interventions he was able to turn the ascetic poet, if not into a Christian, at least into a trans-religious sapiential figure.

The de-Islamization of Abū al-'Atāhiya's poetry is emblematic of an era of confessionalism and sectarian violence. In the second half of the nineteenth century, language was used to express and reinforce religious difference and sectarian discourse imprinted itself on all fields of intellectual, literary, and cultural production in a variety of ways. As one of Cheikho's eulogists put it in his obituary, Cheikho lived in "a land where the language itself was Muslim" and he was driven by the desire "to recover the Christian part in the splendors of Arabic-Islamic civilization and literature."²⁷ By erasing traces of Abū al-'Atāhiya's religious identity, Cheikho in a way reclaimed the language for his own religious community. Arabic-speaking intellectuals and men of letters quarreled over the possibility of eloquent self-expression by Christians in Arabic, a debate crystallizing in the assertion *inna l-'arabiyya lā tatanaṣṣar*, "Arabic cannot be Christian." This controversy found an early and vigorous expression in a literary dispute about poetry, more precisely a poem by Buṭrus Karāma (1774–1851), a Christian scribe and poet.²⁸ The dispute started in 1844: Buṭrus composed a poem designed to illustrate the twenty-six different meanings of the word *khāl*. He proudly submitted his *Khālīyya* to the former governor of Baghdad, Dāwūd Pasha (ca. 1767–1851), a man immersed in learning and literary culture, who then resided in Istanbul. Dāwūd in turn sent the *Khālīyya* to other poets and literati in Baghdad. While most critics admired the poem, the Muslim poet Ṣāliḥ al-Tamīmī (1762–1845) rejected it, attacking Karāma for his faith. In his answer, a poem rhyming in *rā'*, he asked the governor's forgiveness for his "refutation of Christianized poetry" (*'an raddi shi'rin tanaṣṣarā*).

25 See Brustad, "Jirmānūs Jibrīl Farḥāt," 248.

26 Graf, *Geschichte*, 4:84–85, provides concrete information for no less than eight copies of Mikirdij al-Kasīḥ's anthology. A search in the Virtual Hill Museum & Manuscript Library yielded thirteen manuscript copies, which overlapped only partially with the copies mentioned by Graf.

27 Levenq, "Le Père," 137: "un pays où la langue même était musulmane"; "retrouver, dans les fastes de la civilisation et littérature arabo-musulmane, la part chrétienne."

28 On the debate, see Rifaat Y. Ebied and M. J. L. Young, "The 'Khaliyyah' Ode of Butrus Karamah: A Nineteenth-Century Literary Dispute," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 22, no. 1 (1977): 69–80; and Hilary Kilpatrick, "The *Khālīyya* Affair: Poetic Networks and Confessional Identity," forthcoming. I thank Hilary Kilpatrick for sharing an unpublished draft of her article with me.

He continues, “Can we count any eloquent Christian when poetry ripens and bears fruit?”²⁹ Using Qur’anic diction, he accused Karāma of being “barren in the field of eloquence” (*narāhu bi-maydāni l-balāghati abtarā*).³⁰ The controversy did not end with this poetic confrontation; a number of Muslim poets attacked al-Tamīmī and defended Karāma’s composition. Although al-Tamīmī was by and large on his own with his confessional criticism, his rejection was symptomatic of an intellectual climate in which Christian and Muslim men of letters negotiated the relation of literature and confessional identity.³¹ Poetry was the central field in which these confessional struggles were fought out in Cheikhō’s case and in the case of the Khāliyya dispute.

The importance of the Khāliyya controversy should not be overstated. Though emblematic, it was long since concluded when Cheikhō engaged with Abū al-‘Atāhiya’s poetry. But it is illustrative of the role poetry could potentially play in religious identity formation during the long nineteenth century. Moreover, the challenge posed by the assertion *inna l-‘arabiyya lā tatanaṣṣar* was apparently not completely forgotten, especially in the circle of Jesuit scholars that later formed around the journal *al-Mashriq*. The phrase makes a surprising reappearance in a review of Georg Graf’s *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur* by the Jesuit scholar Ferdinand Taoutel (1887–1977). Commenting on the Christian literary tradition that Graf had meticulously described, Taoutel wrote as late as 1952:

It is the heritage of our Christian forefathers, of which we are proud and with which we respond to those who say ‘Arabic resisted becoming Christian’ (*abat al-‘arabiyya an tatanaṣṣar*). It was Christian before the advent of Islam and it still is.³²

29 See Ebied and Young, “The ‘Khaliyyah’ Ode,” 73.

30 See Q al-Kawthar 108:3, and, for the observation, Kilpatrick, “The Khāliyya Affair.”

31 A prominent example for a denouncement of sectarianism and for the literary nexus of language and religious identity is Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq’s work *al-Sāq ‘alā al-sāq fī mā huwa al-Fāriyāq* (“Leg Over Leg: Or, The Turtle in the Tree, Concerning the Fariyaq, What Manner of Creature Might He Be”), published in 1855. Shidyāq attacked the Maronite and the Catholic Churches. See Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq, *al-Sāq ‘alā al-sāq*, 4 vols., ed. Humphrey Davies (New York: New York University Press, 2013–2014), and the translation idem, *Leg over Leg*, 2 vols., transl. Humphrey Davies (New York: New York University Press, 2015). Interestingly, asceticism surfaces in the work repeatedly as a conceptual counterpoint. On Shidyāq’s engagement with asceticism, see Christian Junge, *Die Entblößung der Wörter: aṣ-Ṣidyāqs literarische Listen als Kultur- und Gesellschaftskritik im 19. Jahrhundert* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2019), 177–80; 205–6; 244–46, and passim.

32 Ferdinand Taoutel [Ferdinand Tawtal], “Maṭbū‘āt sharqiyya: tārikh al-ādāb al-masīhiyya al-‘arabiyya,” *al-Mashriq* 46 (1952): 128.

Christians cultivated the Arabic poetic tradition and this engagement took on many different forms. Because of the appeal of classical poetry and its function as a frame of reference for poetic creativity and eloquence in Arabic, Cheikho transformed the Abbasid ascetic poet Abū al-ʿAtāhiya into a spokesperson for Christianity as much as for Islam. He accomplished this by creating a space for Christian truths in a genre of classical poetry that had interconfessional appeal. Through a subtle play of deletions, omissions, and modifications, he de-Islamized Abū al-ʿAtāhiya so that his poetry could speak to Christian sensibilities.

Study Tools for European Scholars

Arab intellectuals and litterateurs were not the only readership Cheikho had in mind when he edited and printed the *zuhdiyyāt*. The catalogues of the *Imprimerie Catholique* shed light on another group of intended readers. The 1888 *Catalogue de l'Imprimerie Catholique des PP. Missionnaires de la Compagnie de Jésus en Syrie* and the 1890 *Catalogue spécial et spécimens des caractères de l'Imprimerie Catholique Beyrouth (Syrie)* list the first and second edition of the *Dīwān* and include a revealing statement:

Abū'l ʿAtāhiya exercised his talent in a variety of different poetic genres, and he excelled above all in moral poetry. His verses are simple, easily comprehensible; he seems to be crystal clear. We believe that his poetry can serve all those who want to acquire a more profound knowledge of Arabic poetry for preliminary study. [...] The work closes with a small glossary; one can thus dispense with the large dictionaries.³³

The work was intended to be used in higher language education and to initiate readers to Arabic poetry. With its simple language and its vocabulary list, it was meant to serve as an *instrumentum studiorum* for Orientalists. And the latter did indeed translate the *Dīwān*. In 1928, Oskar Rescher's (1883–1972) German translation of Abū al-ʿAtāhiya's ascetic poetry appeared, based on the 1909 edition of *al-Anwār al-zāhiya*. Rescher commented in his preface on the characteristics of the *zuhdiyyāt*:

33 *Catalogue spécial*, 26, no. 284; English translation mine. Cf. the nearly identical statement in the slightly earlier *Catalogue de l'Imprimerie Catholique*, 26.

All in all, A. 'A's language is quite simple; the poet deliberately avoids difficult expressions and far-fetched words, as well as plays on words and other forms of artifice, which the other Arab poets of his era did not usually renounce. As he himself states, his poems are not for the elite but for the common people and the pious.—*What is striking about the "zuhdiyyāt" is A. 'A's apparent Christian mentality (die stark christlich anmutende Mentalität), which emerges far more clearly from his poetry than from any other Arab poet.* [...] Without any doubt, a great effort went into the edition of the *Dīwān* [Beirut 1909], but it clearly falls short of the standard of a modern textual edition.³⁴ [emphasis mine]

Rescher found the "Christian character" of the *zuhdiyyāt* striking without making the connection between this surprising fact and the edition he criticized for falling short of the recognized methodological standards to which he refers.

Cheikho's edition of Abū al-'Atāhiya's *Dīwān* is part of a larger project to create *instrumenta studiorum* for Arabic language and literature that did not present Arabic primarily as the language of Islamic religious expression. And editions and anthologies were particularly important study tools. A six-volume anthology of classical Arabic literature entitled *Majānī al-Adab* ("Selections [lit. Harvests] of Arabic Literature"), which appeared between 1882 and 1888—during the same early stage in Cheikho's career when he produced the edition of Abū al-'Atāhiya's *Dīwān*—became the target of criticism because of the same issues encountered in the *zuhdiyyāt*. One of the most prolific Sufi writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Yūsuf al-Nabhānī (1850–1932), fiercely criticized Cheikho's anthology. Al-Nabhānī was an ardent opponent of modernity and of *iṣlāḥ*, or reform. He continually warned his fellow Muslims of an external attack on Islam. In the treatise *Kitāb Irshād al-ḥayārā fī taḥdhīr al-muslimīn min madāris al-naṣārā* ("Guiding the Lost: Warning the Muslims about Christian Missionary Schools"), published in 1901, he discusses the harmful impact of Christian missionary schools on the education of Muslims. In a chapter entitled *Fī taḥdhīr al-muslimīn min maṭbū'āt al-yasū'īyyīn* ("Warning the Muslims about the Jesuits' Printed Works"), al-Nabhānī makes a number of noteworthy accusations:

In Beirut, there is a printing press that belongs to the Jesuit monks, where they have printed many books and literary anthologies that they compiled from books by Muslims. However, because they lack trustworthiness as transmitters, they removed from the books from which they

34 Rescher, *Der Dīwān*, "Vorbemerkung," no pagination; English translation mine.

transmitted verses that championed the religion of Islam and in which the Prophet of God, our Master Muḥammad, praise and peace be upon him, was extolled. [...] I therefore warn all Muslims regarding the books printed by the Jesuit Press in Beirut, even books and works by Muslims, as well as the anthologies they compiled and printed, for example the anthology they titled *Majānī al-adab*, in several volumes. They lack trustworthiness as transmitters; they adulterate the sense of words; they mix the harmful with the useful; they poison rich fare; and they replace health with sickness. Woe to you, Muslim, should you buy any of their books! I only tell you what is based on truth and certainty, and not on speculation and assumption.³⁵

Al-Nabhānī's acerbic accusations demonstrate that the *Majānī* volumes were much in use, even among Muslims. When Cheikho's coreligionist, the Jesuit Henri Lammens (1862–1937), who himself became a renowned historian of the Orient, wrote about the success of the work, this sounded somewhat different. Lammens proudly wrote that Muslim as well as Christian schools eagerly adopted the *Majānī* and that the work contributed to Cheikho's fame "all the way to the Holy City of Mecca."³⁶ As different as they are in tone, both statements point to the same phenomenon: Cheikho's editions and compilations were readily available study tools and in wide use. Some of the volumes of the

35 Yūsuf b. Ismā'īl al-Nabhānī, *Kitāb Irshād al-ḥayārā fī taḥdhīr al-muslimīn min madāris al-naṣārā* (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Ḥamīdiyya al-Miṣriyya, 1904/05 [1322 AH]), 51–52; English translation mine.

يوجد في بيروت مطبعة للرهبان اليسوعيين طبعوا فيها كثيراً من الكتب والمجاميع الأدبية التي جمعوها من كتب المسلمين ولكنهم لعدم أمانتهم في النقل أزالوا من الكتب التي نقلوا منها العبارات التي فيها تأييد لدين الإسلام وتعظيم لرسول الله سيدنا محمد عليه الصلاة والسلام. (. . .) فأنا أحذر جميع المسلمين من الكتب المطبوعة في المطبعة اليسوعية في بيروت ولو كانت من كتب وتأليف المسلمين فضلاً عن مجاميعهم التي جمعوها وطبعوها مثل المجموع الذي سموه مجاني الأدب في عدة أجزاء فإنهم لا أمانة لهم في النقل يحرفون الكلم عن مواضعه ويمزجون مضاره بمنافعه ويضعون السم في الدسم ويدلون الصحة بالسقم. فإياك أيها المسلم أن تشتري شيئاً من كتبهم فإني والله ما أخبرتك إلا عن علم ويقين لا عن ظن وتخمين.

36 Lammens, *Le Père*, 5–6. For a similar assessment of the importance of Cheikho's *Majānī*, see Levenq, "Le Père," 134, fn. 1, and Fu'ād Afrām al-Bustānī, "Ta'thīr al-ab Shaykhū fī tārikh al-ādāb al-'arabiyya," *al-Mashriq* 26 (1928): 84–91:

ولا نبالغ إذا قلنا أن تاريخ الأدب العربي لم يعرف أوسع إنتشاراً وأوفر فائدة من "المجاني".

Majānī were reissued thirty times.³⁷ But al-Nabhānī and some Muslim contemporaries perceived the *Majānī* and other works issuing from the Jesuit Press as a philological encroachment by the Jesuits on the Arabic literary heritage, in particular because of the editorial interventions in the texts. Al-Nabhānī speaks in rather traditional terms, as befits an ardent defender of Islamic tradition, of “a lack of trustworthiness in transmission (*naql*).”

Editions such as Abū al-‘Atāhiya’s *Dīwān* and the *Majānī* were only the beginning of Cheikho’s endeavour to create study tools that gave significant room to Christianity, in one way or another. The grammar and chrestomathy *Elementa Grammaticae Arabicae cum Chrestomathia, Lexico Variisque Notis* (“Elements of Arabic Grammar, with a Chrestomathy, Lexicon, and Various Notes”) which Cheikho co-authored with the Orientalist Auguste Durand (1830–1909), demonstrates that the creation of such tools still occupied Cheikho much later in life.³⁸ The chrestomathy of the work, which was published in 1896, begins with a section entitled “Religiosa et Biblica.”³⁹ This section presents biblical texts and covers twenty-four pages. The subsequent section on “Coranica” is only eight pages long.⁴⁰ It is followed by extensive sections presenting “Proverbia” (twenty-five pages), “Moralia” (twenty-nine pages), “Philosophica et Theologica” (twenty-two pages), as well as texts and excerpts from other literary fields.⁴¹ Cheikho integrated so much Christian material into the chrestomathy that the Jesuit scholar and Orientalist Enrico (Henricus) Gismondi (1850–1912), an expert on Syriac and the Church of the East, reminded Cheikho in a letter that the *Elementa Grammaticae Arabicae* “is for Europe; there ought be no Christian Arabic in it” (“il n’y faut pas de l’arabe chrétien”), adding dismissively “*al-‘arabiyya lam tatanaṣṣar*.”⁴²

The giant against whom Cheikho tilted was no windmill. No matter how important the role of Christian texts such as the Lord’s Prayer or the Psalms in Arabic language instruction, Europe’s Orientalists thought of Arabic as the language of the Qur’ān and of Islam.⁴³ Arabic poetry was also widely used for

37 Sāra, “al-Ṭayyib al-athar,” 647.

38 Auguste Durand and Louis Cheikho, *Elementa Grammaticae Arabicae cum Chrestomathia, Lexico Variisque Notis* (Beirut: Typographia Patrum Societatis Jesu, 1896).

39 See Durand and Cheikho, *Elementa Grammaticae Arabicae*, 185–208.

40 See Durand and Cheikho, *Elementa Grammaticae Arabicae*, 209–16.

41 See Durand and Cheikho, *Elementa Grammaticae Arabicae*, 217–41; 242–70; 271–92.

42 Gismondi to Cheikho, July 11, 1896: “est pour l’Europe; il n’y faut pas de l’arabe chrétien. *Al-‘arabiyya lam tatanaṣṣar*.” Quoted by Hechaïmé, *Louis Cheikho*, 46.

43 On the use of the Qur’anic text in early modern chrestomathies, see Alastair Hamilton, “The Qur’an as Chrestomathy in Early Modern Europe,” in *The Teaching and Learning of Arabic in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Jan Loop et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 213–29.

teaching purposes by early modern European Orientalists, especially poems articulating “a sententious morality.”⁴⁴ Through his philological interventions, Cheikho turned Abū al-‘Atāhiya into a supraconfessional instance of this kind of sententious morality.

Christian “Origins” of Arabic Literary and Cultural Production

Besides creating a space for Christianity in the past through the more-or-less subtle de-Islamization of Islamic literary compositions that lent themselves to such a refashioning, Cheikho also endeavored to read Christianity into the “origins” of literary and cultural production on the Arabian Peninsula on the eve of Islam. This second line of scholarly efforts is best studied on the basis of his monumental work *al-Naṣrāniyya wa-ādābuhā bayna ‘arab al-jāhiliyya* (“Christianity and Christian Cultural Production among the Arabs of the *jāhiliyya*”).⁴⁵ The work first appeared as a series of articles in the journal *al-Mashriq*, starting with the October issue of 1910,⁴⁶ but Cheikho had previously written about the topic.⁴⁷ The contributions to *al-Mashriq* were later published in independent volumes between 1912 and 1923 (part 1: 1912; part 2: 1919; part 3: 1923).⁴⁸

In contrast to the edition of Abū al-‘Atāhiya’s *Dīwān*, Cheikho did not resort to editorial interventions in *al-Naṣrāniyya wa-ādābuhā* when laying claim to the past. He claimed it explicitly and emphatically in the framework of a sustained literary and historical discussion by advancing the hypothesis that Christianity was firmly established on the Arabian Peninsula before the advent of Islam and, more importantly, that many pre-Islamic poets were in fact Christians. Christianity was accordingly at the “origin” of Arabic cultural

44 Jan Loop, “Arabic Poetry as Teaching Material in Early Modern Grammars and Textbooks,” in *The Teaching and Learning of Arabic in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Jan Loop et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 234.

45 When using the term *ādāb* in the title of his work, Cheikho had a far broader concept in mind than just “Christian literature,” in contrast to what the French title he himself chose suggests. Cheikho’s study addresses a broad spectrum of vestiges of Christian practices, from coins, to architecture, to writing—virtually the entirety of cultural production in Arabia.

46 *Al-Mashriq* 13, no. 10 (1910), 781–90 etc.

47 Louis Cheikho [Luwīs Shaykhū], “al-Aḥdāth al-kitābiyya fī shu‘arā’ al-jāhiliyya,” *al-Mashriq* 7 (1904): 530–39.

48 See Hechaimé, *Louis Cheikho*, 47. The edition quoted here is Louis Cheikho [Luwīs Shaykhū], *al-Naṣrāniyya wa-ādābuhā bayna ‘arab al-jāhiliyya*, 2 vols (Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq, 1989).

and literary production. The first part of *al-Naṣrānīyya wa-ādābuhā*, entitled *Fī tārikh al-naṣrānīyya wa-qabā'ilihā fī 'ahd al-jāhiliyya* ("On the History of Christianity and its Tribes in the *jāhiliyya*"), discusses the historical presence of Christianity region by region (first chapter) and tribe by tribe (second chapter). The idea that Christianity had taken root in Arabia was *per se* not novel; Orientalists broadly agreed on this. Cheikho accordingly quotes European scholarship extensively in this part. The second part, *Fī al-ādāb al-naṣrānīyya fī 'ahd al-jāhiliyya* ("On Christian Literature in the *jāhiliyya*"), which turns to language and literary production, contains the innovative argument. This part addresses the crucial issue to be discussed in the remainder of this article, namely that the first written and oral articulations in Arabic were Christian and that Christianity was therefore at the "origins" of Arabic cultural production. The part is divided into five chapters, which deal with writing (first chapter), words and expressions (second chapter), personal names (third chapter), mentions of historical events (fourth chapter), and proverbs (fifth chapter), which, Cheikho claims, shed light on the Christian confessional identity of the pre-Islamic Arabs. I shall concentrate on the first two chapters.

Cheikho starts the first chapter of the second part by demonstrating that "the first service" (*awwal khidma*) the Christian Arabs rendered to their people was to teach them to write.⁴⁹ He discusses traditional Islamic reports transmitted by al-Suyūfī, Ibn 'Abd Rabbihi, and al-Balādhurī about the first among the Arabs to use the Arabic script, or to transfer it to al-Ḥīra and to Mecca. Cheikho argues that the Arabs "took" their script from Nabataean Christians living close to the Ḥijāz and from monks (*ruhbān*) of Madyan and Wādī al-Qurā.⁵⁰ The evidence that he produces for the diffusion of the Arabic script at the hands of Christians includes pre-Islamic poetry, anticipating the following analysis. He quotes verses that refer to writing, notably in monastic settings, such as the opening verses of a poem by Imru' al-Qays (d. 544):

فَقَا نَبَكْ مِنْ ذِكْرِي حَيِّبٍ وَعَرْفَانِ وَرَسَمٍ عَفَتْ آيَاتُهُ مُنْذُ أَرْمَانَ
أَتَتْ حَجَّجٌ بَعْدِي عَلَيْهِ فَأَصْبَحَتْ حَكَّطَ زُبُورٍ فِي مَصَاحِفِ رُهْبَانِ
(الطويل)

49 Cheikho, *al-Naṣrānīyya wa-ādābuhā*, 2:152–57, quotation, 152.

50 Cheikho, *al-Naṣrānīyya wa-ādābuhā*, 2:154.

Let us halt and weep in memory of the beloved and in acknowledgement of her, since the signs of any vestiges have long since been obliterated.

Years have passed over them after me, and they became like the script of the psalter in the monks' codices.⁵¹

Cheikho also supports his claims with epigraphic evidence, notably two Christian inscriptions in Arabic. First, he discusses the trilingual Zabad inscription, which he dates to 512 CE. It was written in Greek, Syriac, and Arabic, and it commemorates Saint Sergius. Cheikho then dwells on the Ḥarrān inscription, which he dates to 568 CE. Written in Greek and Arabic, it was created for a martyrion for Saint John the Baptist at the request of a certain Shuraḥbīl.⁵² Cheikho further mentions a Nabataean inscription and the script of a Qur'an codex, thereby implying the similarity of the scripts. "All this evidence and this clear proof," he concludes, "prompted Orientalists to link the Arabic script, or at least its diffusion among the Arabs, to the Christians."⁵³

Having demonstrated that Christianity was at the "origin" of the use of the Arabic script, Cheikho turns to the spoken word in the second chapter of the second part of his work.⁵⁴ His agenda is outlined in the opening of the chapter:

In our youth, we often heard that Arabic is the language of the Qur'ān and that it is entirely Islamic. We have read this in some books by Europeans who have no knowledge of the issue and wrote thoughtlessly. Perhaps they said it because the Qur'ān was the first book the Arabs wrote on parchment, leather, garments, or flat bones. But, as is well known, the Arabic language predates Islam. Different tribes used it orally, among them Christian tribes whose belief in the religion of Christ we have brought to light.⁵⁵

51 Cheikho, *al-Naṣrānīyya wa-ādābuhā*, 2155.

52 See Cheikho, *al-Naṣrānīyya wa-ādābuhā*, 2156. The discussion of Cheikho's epigraphic evidence in Hechaïmé, *Louis Cheikho*, 54–57, is outdated.

53 Cheikho, *al-Naṣrānīyya wa-ādābuhā*, 2156; English translations here and in the following are mine:

فكل هذه الحجيح والبيانات دعت بالعلماء المستشرقين إلى أن ينسبوا الكتابة العربية أو على الأقل إنتشارها بين العرب إلى النصارى (. . .).

54 See Cheikho, *al-Naṣrānīyya wa-ādābuhā*, 2157–226.

55 Cheikho, *al-Naṣrānīyya wa-ādābuhā*, 2157–58:

كثيراً ما كنا نسمع في حداثة سننا بأن اللغة العربية لغة القرآن وأنها كلها إسلامية وقد قرأنا ذلك في بعض كُتب الأوروبيين الذين لم يفقهوا الأمر ورموا الكلام على عواهنه ولعلمهم قالوا

The claim *inna l-ʿarabiyya lā tatanaṣṣar* “Arabic cannot be Christian” echoes in this scornful statement. Cheikho gathers a vast amount of poetic material to reject the claim and to shed light on “the influence (*taʿthīr*) of Christianity on the language of the people in the *jāhiliyya*.”⁵⁶ What follows is a tour de force, through a literary landscape shaped by the presence of Christianity, as Cheikho does not tire of telling his readers. He identifies expressions (*alfāḥ*) and individual words (*mufradāt*) which arguably point to the influence of Christians in pre-Islamic times. Asceticism plays a pivotal role in this second chapter, especially when Cheikho discusses places of worship (section 3), Christian leaders and monks (section 5), dwelling places of monks (section 7), Christian garments (section 9), and writing instruments (section 10). For example, he adduces a verse from Imruʿ al-Qays’ “Suspended Ode” (*muʿallaqa*), in which the poet compares the luminous complexion of the beloved to the light in a monk’s cell:

تُضِيءُ الظَّلَامَ بِالْعِشَاءِ كَأَنَّهَا مَنَارَةٌ تُنْسِي رَاهِبٍ مُبْتَلِلٍ
(الطويل)

She lights up the darkness in the evening as if she were the light in the cell of a reclusive monk.⁵⁷

Cheikho’s verse collection includes numerous other pre-Islamic poets. Al-Aswad b. Yaʿfur refers to the “lamp of the monk” (*nibrās al-nuhāmī*).⁵⁸ The *mukhaḍram* poet Tamīm b. Ubayy b. Muqbil (whom Cheikho erroneously identifies as Tamīm b. Muqbil) reminisces about the “sound of the clappers” (*ṣawt al-nawāqīs*) in “the hands of the monks” (*aydī al-julādhi*).⁵⁹ Outward ascetic practices are at the basis of the imagery used in these verses. Cheikho always quotes individual verses in atomistic fashion, without considering the context of the poems. More importantly, he includes in his collection verses by poets who were in fact not *jāhili* poets at all. Pre-Islamic poets appear alongside other poets who witnessed the emergence of Islam, known as *mukhaḍramūn*. Some

ذلك لأن القرآن أول كتاب دونه العرب على الرق أو الجلد أو البردي أو رقاق العظام. على
أن اللغة العربية سبقت الإسلام كما هو معروف ونطق بها قبائل شتى منها قبائل نصرانية
كشفنا القناع عن دينها المسيحي.

56 Cheikho, *al-Naṣrānīyya wa-ādābuhā*, 2:158.

57 Cheikho, *al-Naṣrānīyya wa-ādābuhā*, 2:196.

58 Cheikho, *al-Naṣrānīyya wa-ādābuhā*, 2:198.

59 Cheikho, *al-Naṣrānīyya wa-ādābuhā*, 2:198.

Christian poets whose poetry Cheikho quotes were clearly later poets, such as al-Akḥṭal, who flourished in the Umayyad era. Cheikho gathers whatever he can find, without any scruples about this conflation of chronology.

Even the verses ascribed to individuals who were *jāhili* poets that Cheikho uses to trace the impact of Christianity on pre-Islamic Arabia are not unproblematic. Their authenticity was debated by Cheikho's contemporaries. A case in point is Umayya b. Abī al-Ṣalt. The earliest scholarly publications dating to the beginning of the twentieth century promoted Umayya's poetry as "a new source of the Qur'ān,"⁶⁰ but scholarly skepticism quickly grew. The Jesuit Edmond Power (1878–1953) argued, for example, that many of the Qur'anic echoes in Umayya's poetry in fact amounted to later Qur'ān paraphrases.⁶¹ In June 1906, Power was among the first students to defend their dissertation at the Oriental Faculty in Beirut. Louis Cheikho was among the committee members in front of whom Power defended his work.⁶² An article based on Power's research appeared in the first issue of the *Mélanges de la Faculté Orientale* of the Université Saint-Joseph. Although Cheikho must therefore have had first-hand knowledge of the authenticity debate, he remained silent about the issue in *al-Naṣrāniyya wa-ādābuhā*.

In other instances, Cheikho Christianized Jewish poets, notably the semi-legendary Samaw'al b. 'Ādiyā', whose *Dīwān* he edited.⁶³ The Jewish Orientalist Israel Wolfensohn (1899–1980), a student of Ṭahā Ḥusayn's (1889–1973), criticized Cheikho for Christianizing Samaw'al and rejected his arguments in detail.⁶⁴ "[Cheikho] denied that Samaw'al was Jewish although no one has any doubt about his being Jewish," Wolfensohn objected. He added a veiled

60 Clément Huart, "Une Nouvelle Source du Qur'ān," *Journal Asiatique* (1904): 125–67.

61 Edmond Power, "Umayya Ibn Abi-s Salt," *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph* 1 (1906): 214: "The spuriousness of some of the poetry attributed to Umayya is proved by its frequent reproduction of Koranical expressions." Note, however, that Power questions only the authenticity of some poems ascribed to Umayya. See *ibid.*, 208: "Umayya, then, certainly treated of Koranical subjects. Did he treat of them before Muhammad? It seems most probable that he did, though we have no absolutely conclusive evidence in the matter."

62 See Hechāimé, *Louis Cheikho*, 100, and Rafael Herzstein, "The Oriental Library and the Catholic Press at Saint-Joseph University in Beirut," *Journal of Jesuit Studies* 2 (2015): 251. Herzstein confuses the poet Umayya b. abī al-Ṣalt with the Andalusian polymath Abū al-Ṣalt Umayya al-Andalusī (d. 1134).

63 Louis Cheikho [Luwis Shaykhū], ed., *Dīwān al-Samaw'al* (Beirut: al-Maṭba'a al-Kāthūlikiyya li-l-Abā' al-Yasū'īyyīn, 1920).

64 Israel Wolfensohn [Isrā'īl Wulfinsūn], *Tārīkh al-yahūd fī bilād al-'arab fī al-jāhiliyya wa-ṣadr al-islām* (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-I'timād, 1927 [1345 AH]), 26–32. I thank Islam Dayeh for drawing my attention to Wolfensohn's criticism of Cheikho's Samaw'al edition.

reference to *al-Naṣrāniyya wa-ādābuhā*: “No wonder he claims that all the poets whose poetry he collected in his book were exclusively Christians.”⁶⁵

The vast, undifferentiated collection of poetic fragments touching on outward aspects of monasticism and asceticism in *al-Naṣrāniyya wa-ādābuhā* is intended to create the impression that the *jāhiliyya* was truly the Golden Age of pre-Islamic Christianity. This helped Cheikho make an argument based on sheer volume, a strategy not unrelated to traditional modes of history-writing that privileged compilation and juxtaposition.⁶⁶

Cheikho's controversial hypotheses have often been dismissed as the odd ideas of an overly zealous Catholic, but they are in fact not the inevitable consequence of a nineteenth-century Jesuit worldview. We gather as much if we compare his ideas about pre-Islamic Arabic poetry to those of contemporary Jesuit scholars. Not long before Cheikho's work was published, in 1894, a Jesuit confrère from the Convent of Maria Laach in the German Eifel region reflected on the exact same issue in a contribution entitled “Die altarabische Dichtung und das Christenthum” (“Ancient Arabic Poetry and Christianity”). However, the German Jesuit poet and literary historian Alexander Baumgartner (1841–1910) came to an altogether different conclusion. Just like Cheikho, he emphasized the existence of Christianity on the Arabian Peninsula, but in contrast to Cheikho, he emphatically rejected the idea that Arab poets had become Christians:

Christianity did not only reach the Bedouins of Northern Arabia two hundred years before Islam; hundreds if not thousands of them were already converted by Simeon Stylites; the flourishing communities of Nedschrân [Najrân] triumphantly overcame the bloody persecutions at the beginning of the 6th century; from the middle of the century on, the Catholic faith reigned at the court of Hira; the most excellent Arab poets encountered Christians. [...] *How then did it happen that the most talented Arabs of the era, their heroes and poets, remained pagans and that the last of them turned to Islam?*⁶⁷ [emphasis mine]

65 Wolfensohn, *Tārikh al-yahūd*, 27; English translation mine.

ولكنه وقد أبى على السموءل أن يكون يهودياً بالرغم من أنه لم يشك أحد في يهودية السموءل فليس عجيباً منه أن يدعى أن جميع الشعراء الذين جمع شعرهم في سفره ليسوا إلا مسيحيين.

66 For Cheikho's argumentative strategy, see Hechaïmé, *Louis Cheikho*, 150–54.

67 Baumgartner, “Die altarabische Dichtung,” *Stimmen aus Maria-Laach: Katholische Blätter* 47 (1894): 344; English translation mine. On Baumgartner's work on Christianity and pre-Islamic poetry, see also Hechaïmé, *Louis Cheikho*, 25–26.

The answer Baumgartner gives to his own question is that “avarice, pride, and sensuality” (“Habsucht, Stolz und Sinnlichkeit”) became the main obstacles to the Arab poets’ conversion to Christianity. Oriental sensuality was one of the essentialist ideas about the Orient, alongside its “tendency to despotism, its aberrant mentality, its habits of inaccuracy, its backwardness,” which distilled to form the body of ideas, beliefs, and clichés Edward Said captured with the term “Orientalism.”⁶⁸ Unlike Baumgartner, Cheikho was convinced that pre-Islamic poets had indeed by and large converted to Christianity. Cheikho believed that they were at the “origins” of Arabic literary production.

An Engagement with the New European Science of Philology

Al-Naṣrāniyya wa-ādābuhā was not a timeless, placeless Jesuit manifesto. It was in fact the product of a conversation with the proponents of the new science of Philology institutionalized in nineteenth-century Europe. Cheikho’s interlocutors were European Orientalists and Philologists. During his stay abroad, in England, Austria, and France, Cheikho had been introduced to their works and methods. Many of the conversations and debates he had with contemporary Orientalists are reflected in his scholarly work. For example, Cheikho was in touch with Louis Massignon (1883–1962), who, at the time, was working on the mystic al-Ḥallāj (857–922)⁶⁹—a lens for thinking about the relationship between Christianity and Islam. Massignon’s work presents somewhat of a mirror image of Cheikho’s. Massignon, the “Catholic Muslim,” was attached to Islam because Islam mediated a deeply felt mystical experience that resulted in his reconversion to Catholicism. He attempted to renew Christian theology by “finding a space for Muslim belief within Catholic Christianity.”⁷⁰ For Massignon, Arabic was the liturgical language of Islam, the language of the Qur’ān.⁷¹ This idea was diametrically opposed to Cheikho’s.

The practitioners of the new science of Philology in Europe had invented the influential pair of concepts “Aryan” and “Semite.” This conceptual binary can be traced throughout the works of a number of intellectuals, Ernest

68 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 205.

69 For the correspondence, see notably Hechaïmé, “Rasā’il Luwīs Massīnyūn.”

70 Anthony O’Mahony, “Louis Massignon: A Catholic Encounter with Islam and the Middle East,” in *God’s Mirror: Renewal and Engagement in French Catholic Intellectual Culture in the Mid-Twentieth Century*, eds. Katherine Davies and Toby Garfitt (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 240.

71 See Paul Nwiya, “Massignon ou Une Certaine Vision de la Langue Arabe,” *Studia Islamica* 50 (1979): 130–36.

Renan (1823–1892) figuring prominently among them.⁷² Renan's works and ideas were widely known among modern Arab thinkers, who responded to European racial categorization in different ways.⁷³ They were also well known among Orientalists like Massignon and Cheikho. Cheikho engages explicitly with Renan's ideas in *al-Naṣrānīyya wa-ādābuhā*, and at a crucial juncture in the text.

Ernest Renan started forming these ideas about the Semites well before he participated in an archaeological expedition to Syria and Palestine from October 1860 to October 1861, but this journey had a significant impact on his racial discourse.⁷⁴ His sister Henriette, who accompanied him, died in September 1861. The journey not only ended in a personal tragedy for Renan but also led him into a world profoundly altered by recent outbursts of sectarian violence. This violence had culminated in summer 1860 in massacres of Christians in Lebanon and Damascus. Renan's *Vie de Jésus* ("The Life of Jesus"), which was written during the journey and which subsequently propelled its author to fame, is marked by a strong resentment against the Muslim presence in the Holy Land.⁷⁵ The work has been called "a romantic evocation of the landscape of Galilee [...] and a condemnation of the Semitic principle [Renan] saw embodied in theocratic Judaism and (for him) its Islamic heir."⁷⁶ Renan's Galilee was clad in a "mantle of barrenness and death with which the demon of Islam has covered it."⁷⁷ In his correspondence, he also repeatedly expressed his revulsion for the nineteenth-century Muslim settlements in the places he visited.⁷⁸ When reviewing Renan's work, the German Protestant theologian, biblical scholar, and Orientalist Heinrich Ewald (1803–1875) criticized Renan, suggesting laconically that "on his recent scholarly journey to Phoenicia and Palestine, he formed such sad convictions about the Orientals based on his

72 See especially Maurice Olender, *The Languages of Paradise: Race, Religion, and Philology in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge [MA]: Harvard University Press, 1992). Ernest Renan is discussed on pages 51–81.

73 See, for example, Bashkin, "The Colonized Semites," 196; 206–7.

74 On Ernest Renan's journey to Syria and Palestine and its intellectual impact, see Geoffrey Nash, "Death and Resurrection: the Renans in Syria (1860–61)," in *Knowledge is Light: Travellers in the Near East*, ed. Katherine Salahi (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2011), 69–77.

75 Ernest Renan, "Vie de Jésus," in *Œuvres Complètes de Ernest Renan*, 10 vols., ed. Henriette Psichari (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1949), 4:9–427; English translation: idem, *The Life of Jesus*, trans. Charles Edwin Wilbour (New York: Carleton, 1864).

76 Nash, "Death and Resurrection," 72.

77 Renan, "Vie de Jésus," 172; English translation: idem, *Life of Jesus*, 148.

78 See Nash, "Death and Resurrection," 74.

own experiences.”⁷⁹ Islam became Renan’s prime example of “the appalling simplicity of the Semitic spirit” (“l’épouvantable simplicité de l’esprit sémitique”), which he ardently criticized during his inaugural lecture “De la Part des Peuples Sémitiques dans l’Histoire de la Civilisation” (“The Role of the Semitic Peoples in the History of Civilization”) on 21 February 1862 at the Collège de France.⁸⁰

In his philological work, Renan subsequently used philology to justify the ascendance of European Christianity to the principal role in providential history. He transposed the divide between Indo-European and Semitic languages onto the peoples who spoke them: the Semitic peoples he declared passive and unchanging, the Aryans active and dynamic:

In polity, as in poetry, religion, and philosophy, it is the duty of the Indo-European peoples to seek nuance, the reconciliation of opposite things, the complexity so profoundly unknown among the Semitic peoples, whose organization has always been of a disheartening and fatal simplicity.⁸¹

Semitism thus became a trans-historical category, “an essentialism deriving from language extended to race and culture.”⁸² In Renan’s early work, “Aryan” and “Semitic” language groups amounted to “races;” linguistic families engendered these discrete races.⁸³

Louis Cheikho was clearly a proponent of Semitic Philology, which was at the basis of Renan’s ideas, and Cheikho often privileged this kind of Philology over dogma. He normalized, for example, the use of Hebrew in philological analysis.⁸⁴ But where did Renan’s overall rejection of the speakers of Semitic

79 Heinrich Ewald, [Review] “Vie de Jésus, par Ernest Renan membre de l’Institut. Paris, Michel Lévy frères, 1863. LIX u. 462 S. in Octav.” *Göttingische gelehrte Anzeigen* (15 August 1863): 1213; English translation of the quotation mine.

80 Ernest Renan, “De la Part des Peuples Sémitiques dans l’Histoire de la Civilisation,” in *Œuvres Complètes de Ernest Renan*, 10 vols., ed. Henriette Psichari (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1948), 2:317–35, quotation, 333; English translations of quotations from the work are my own.

81 Renan, “De la Part,” 325.

82 Geoffrey Nash, “Aryan and Semite in Ernest Renan and Matthew Arnold’s Quest for the Religion of Modernity,” *Religion & Literature* 46, no. 1 (2014): 29.

83 On the complex problem of Renan’s racial thought and the persisting divisions over this problem, see Robert D. Priest, “Ernest Renan’s Race Problem,” *The Historical Journal* 58, no. 1 (2015): 309–30.

84 See Bashkin, “The Colonized Semites,” 212–13.

languages as a race leave the Eastern Christian speakers of Arabic? How would an Arabic-speaking Catholic intellectual and scholar have reacted to a newly emerging science of Philology that reserved the providential role in history and the divine purpose exclusively for the dynamic speakers of Indo-European languages, thereby excluding speakers of Semitic languages? *Al-Naṣrānīyya wa-ādābuhā* is the response to this question. It is the product of Cheikho's life-long quest to prove to his readers the intellectual vibrancy of Arabic and its Christian speakers. The work achieves this by locating Christianity at the "beginning" of all cultural production in Arabic, and even at the "beginning" of the development of the Arabic language itself, in both written and spoken form. Cheikho was of course not the first to refute Renan's claims, for he was preceded by other Muslim and Arabic-speaking intellectuals, notably by Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (1838–1897), who responded to Renan's lecture "L'Islamisme et la Science" ("Islam and Science," Sorbonne, 29 March 1883).⁸⁵ The peculiarity of Cheikho's approach is his unwavering focus on Arabic-speaking Christianity in his engagement with Renan's thought.

We learn that Cheikho was well aware of the Aryan-Semite divide from the introduction of *al-Naṣrānīyya wa-ādābuhā*, in which he engages with what he calls a "curious claim" (*zaʿman gharīban*) by Ernest Renan:

The aforementioned [Ernest Renan] went so far as to say that Semitic peoples in general and the Arab people in particular accepted one God not out of a particular inspiration but out of a natural disposition, because, so he claimed, the Semitic mind is by nature inclined toward simplicity. The veneration of one God therefore agrees with the simplicity of the Semite's mind. Renan's aim in stating this was to deny the Israelites the inspiration of God's oneness. But the Arab traces [of the past] disproved

85 Ernest Renan, "L'Islamisme et la Science," in *Œuvres Complètes de Ernest Renan*, ed. Henriette Psichari, 10 vols. (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1947), 1:945–65; English translation as "Islam and Science," in *Ernest Renan: What Is a Nation? And Other Political Writings*, trans. M. F. N. Giglioli (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 264–80. The exchange between Ernest Renan and Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī has garnered significant scholarly interest. See, for example, Nikki R. Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism: Political and Religious Writings of Sayyid Jamāl al-Dīn 'al-Afghānī'* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968); Margaret Kohn, "Afghānī on Empire, Islam, and Civilization," *Political Theory* 37, no. 3 (2009): 398–422; York A. Norman, "Disputing the 'Iron Circle': Renan, Afghani, and Kemal on Islam, Science, and Modernity," *Journal of World History* 22, no. 4 (2011): 693–714.

the claim, and so did the discoveries about the other Semitic countries. The Arabs of the *jāhiliyya* lived in idolatry for many centuries.⁸⁶

This rebuttal of Renan's insistent categorization of religion by race is embedded by Cheikho in the very first pages of *al-Naṣrāniyya wa-ādābuhā* within a discussion of paganism and the deities venerated in Arabia *before* the advent of Christianity.⁸⁷ This opening discussion devoted to pagan idolatry is certainly an oddity, coming as it does from a scholar obsessed with proving the presence of Christianity and its impact on Arabic language, literature, and culture. However, its existence becomes easily understandable when read as a response to Renan's ideas.

In *Études d'histoire religieuse* ("Studies of Religious History"), first published in 1857, even before the momentous journey through the Levant, Renan claimed that the Semites, and the Arabs in particular, displayed no mythological creativity:

Now, the spirit furthest removed from pantheism is assuredly the Semitic spirit. Arabia, especially, had lost, perhaps never had, the gift of inventing the supernatural. In all the *moallakāt* [*mu'allaqāt*], and in the vast repository of ante-Islamic poetry, we hardly find a religious thought. This people had no sense for holy things [...].⁸⁸

Renan repeated this idea later on, for example in his 1883 lecture "Islam and Science," in which he claimed that "the nomadic Arab, the most literary of men, is the least mystical of men, the least inclined to reflection."⁸⁹

86 Cheikho, *al-Naṣrāniyya wa-ādābuhā*, 1:8:

ذهب المذكور إلى أن الشعوب السامية عموماً والعربية خصوصاً كانت تقول بالتوحيد لا عن وحي خاص بل عن غريزة لأن عقل الساميين على زعمه مطبوع من أصله على البساطة فيوافق توحيد الله بساطة عقله. وكانت غايته من ذلك أن ينكر الوحي بالاله الواحد إلى بني إسرائيل. فالآثار العربية قد كذبت هذا المرمم كما كذبت إكتشافات بقية البلاد السامية. فإن العرب في الجاهلية عاشوا في الشرك مدة قرون عديدة.

87 While this section of the introduction is titled in the main text itself "The Religions of the Arabs before Christianity," in the table of contents of the work it is titled "The Religions of the Arabs before the *jāhiliyya*."

88 Ernest Renan, "Études d'Histoire Religieuse," in *Œuvres Complètes de Ernest Renan*, 10 vols., ed. Henriette Psichari (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1955), 7:179. English translation: idem, *Studies of Religious History and Criticism* (New York, Carleton, 1864), 238.

89 Renan, "L'Islamisme et la Science," 948; English translation: idem, "Islam and Science," 266.

Maurice Olender has argued that, in Renan's thinking, the Semites were initially favored with monotheism, in contrast to the Aryans, who were lost in mythology and the adoration of a multiplicity of gods because of their intellectual dynamism. The privilege of being favored with monotheism, however, eventually became a "trap" for the Semites.⁹⁰ Semitic monotheism remained in a state of unchanging infancy. Accordingly, the Hebrews had no responsibility in adopting monotheism. It was not a fruit of the Semitic mind. The Aryans, in contrast, thanks to their ability to think "the multiple," to think polyvalence, transformed monotheism into what Renan calls a "monothéisme doux" ("moderate monotheism"). The former idolaters ultimately became the inventors of "science."⁹¹

Regarding the Arab "Semites" of pre-Islamic Arabia, Renan believed that "Mahomet only followed the religious movement of his time instead of leading it."⁹² In *Études d'histoire religieuse*, he implied that the Arabs were caught in the trap of monotheism, subtly blending language, religion, and race:

Monotheism, the worship of Allah the supreme (Allah taâla [*Allāh ta'ālā*]), seems to have been always the basis of the *Arab religion*. The *Semitic race* never conceived of the government of the universe, otherwise than as an absolute monarchy.⁹³ [emphasis mine]

Cheikho needed the pagans to counter Renan's claims and make his point about Christianity and Arabic literature. By conceptualizing paganism as a stage of pre-Islamic Arabian history mostly *preceding* Christianity, he was able to refute the idea that this Arab Christianity for whose recognition he was struggling was merely another expression of Semitic passivity, lazily tending towards simplicity. Only once he had established that Arabic pre-Islamic poetry was in fact a site of mythological inventiveness, could Cheikho proceed to create a Christian "counter-*jāhiliyya*" in his monumental work *al-Naṣrānīyya wa-ādābuhā*. Hence, Cheikho's *jāhiliyya* was a period of dynamic Christian cultural productivity centering on ascetic practices, which eclipsed paganism. Renan did, of course, not deny that pre-Islamic Arabs had come in touch with Christianity and Judaism, but he did not see poetry as a medium in which

⁹⁰ Olender, *Languages*, 65.

⁹¹ See Olender, *Languages*, 63–74.

⁹² Renan, "Études d'Histoire Religieuse," 203; English translation: idem, *Studies of Religious History*, 265.

⁹³ Renan, "Études d'Histoire Religieuse," 203; English translation: idem, *Studies of Religious History*, 265.

this encounter had left traces.⁹⁴ Pre-Islamic poetry was the site for considerable ingenuity, according to Renan, but it was free of religious thought. With Muḥammad and Islam, Arabic literary genius came to an end—an idea articulated in somewhat hidden form within a positive appraisal of the beauty of pre-Islamic poetry in *Études d'histoire religieuse*:

Now, it may be said that the Arab genius, far from beginning with Mahomet, finds in him its last expression. I know not in the whole history of civilization a picture more gracious, more attractive, more animated than that of Arab life before Islamism as it is exhibited to us in the *Moallakât* [*muʿallaqāt*] [...] Now this delicate flowering of Arab life ended precisely on the advent of Islamism.⁹⁵

According to Renan, Muḥammad “appeared in the midst of an exhausted literature.”⁹⁶ Cheikho’s Christianized *jāhiliyya* must be seen as an attempt to safeguard the Arabic cultural heritage by disconnecting it from Islam and reconnecting it most emphatically with an asceticized Eastern Christianity. *Al-Naṣrāniyya wa-ādābuhā* reinstates Arabic literature as a domain of Christian self-expression that was and never ceased to be vibrant, irrespective of the emergence of Islam. This implies that, despite all differences, Cheikho fundamentally agreed with Renan on one crucial point: both philologists conceptualized Islam as an “obstacle” to the cultural, literary, and intellectual productivity of the Arabs. Cheikho silently accepted anti-Islamic ideas embedded within the racist discourses of European philology about the Semites with which he took issue only in other matters. He worked around such ideas to emphasize the Christian contribution to Arabic literature, but his scholarship on pre-Islamic and early Islamic poetry is to some degree even premised on them.

94 See Renan, “Études d’Histoire Religieuse,” 203–208, notably 208; English translation: idem, *Studies of Religious History*, 265–70, notably 270: “Long before Islamism the Arabs had adopted the traditions of the Jews and Christians to explain their own origin.”

95 Renan, “Études d’Histoire Religieuse,” 202–203; English translation: idem, *Studies of Religious History*, 264. Renan, “Études d’Histoire Religieuse,” 215 (Engl. trans.: 279), speaks of “traces of fatigue” in the Arabic literary production at the beginning of the seventh century.

96 Renan, “Études d’Histoire Religieuse,” 216; English translation: idem, *Studies of Religious History*, 279.

Conclusion

This case study devoted to Louis Cheikho, his edition of Abū al-ʿAtāhiya's *zuḥdiyyāt*, and his monumental work *al-Naṣrāniyya wa-ādābuhā* has sought to shed light on the intellectual and confessional commitments of a nineteenth-century Jesuit scholar and the ways in which they translated into his philological approach to pre-Islamic and early Islamic ascetic poetry. The cultivation of Arabic poetry had long played an important role in Christian thought and identity; Cheikho appropriated the Arabic poetic heritage for his Christian readers, thereby reconfiguring, altering, and re-writing literary and cultural history in troubling ways.

In the 1870s, when Cheikho was still a Jesuit novice at Lons-le-Saunier in France, one of his teachers once commented in the margin of a written assignment that Cheikho had submitted: “more Christian than subtle; both would be required” (“plus chrétien que délicat; il fallait l'un et l'autre”).⁹⁷ It seems that Cheikho remained to some degree more Christian than subtle throughout his entire scholarly career, but it would be wrong to ignore his work because of this, irrespective of the fact that his publications do not fulfil scientific standards of accuracy and objectivity. Such standards, we should keep in mind, are not atemporal givens. When Cheikho produced his editions and studies, they were in the process of being elaborated. They remain conceptual utopias of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century positivism. A complex ideology nourished by the literary and intellectual self-affirmation of Levantine Christians and shaped by the discourses of European Orientalists led Cheikho to forgo accuracy and objectivity when this served his agenda. This agenda was not simply that of a Jesuit zealot who arbitrarily tinkered with the past. By carefully reconstructing and studying Cheikho's motives and intellectual commitments, we can better understand the ideas behind the editorial interventions and biased philological analyses with which subsequent generations of scholars had to come to terms.⁹⁸

97 Hechaïmé, *Louis Cheikho*, 38, fn. 1.

98 The comments of the editors of Ibn al-Marzubān's *Kitāb Faḍā'il al-kilāb 'alā kathīr mimman labisa al-thiyāb* are a case in point. In their 1978 edition, Gerald R. Smith and Muhammad A.S. Abdel Haleem criticized Cheikho's edition pointing to the “wilful expurgation” of the text as an example of “literary castration.” See Ibn al-Marzubān, *The Superiority of Dogs over Many of Those who Wear Clothes*, trans. and eds. Gerald R. Smith and Muhammad A.S. Abdel Haleem (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, Ltd., 1978), xx. I am grateful to Shawkat Toorawa for this reference.

In a thought world in which Indo-European languages were perceived as superior to Semitic languages, an idea that was extrapolated to race, Cheikho attempted a major realignment to safeguard literary and cultural production in Arabic for his Christian coreligionists. He did so by creating a space for Christianity by means of a sometimes not-so-subtle de-Islamization of the classical literary heritage in the scholarly study tools he developed. He consequently overstated the Christian contribution to the cultural production of the past, especially the literary production in Arabic before the emergence of Islam. He de-Islamized and Christianized, almost always to the detriment of the Muslim Arabic heritage and literature. Confessionalism is inextricably bound to Cheikho's scholarly work in a deeply unsettling way that casts a shadow over his scholarship. The Syrian historian and literary critic Muḥammad Kurd 'Alī (1876–1953), like many other Muslim scholars, intellectuals, and men of letters, was well aware of the damage Cheikho caused with his methods. In the context of a discussion of Cheikho's studies dealing with modern Arabic literature, in an appreciative but critical obituary which recognized Cheikho's enormous scholarly contribution, Kurd 'Alī accused him of having been "obsessed with the difference between Muslims and Christians."⁹⁹ Kurd 'Alī, in turn, laid claim to the Arabic language and literature by rejecting Cheikho's style of writing in Arabic as inferior. Cheikho, he writes, had no relation to Arabs other than writing about them.¹⁰⁰

In spite of, or perhaps because of, their tendentiousness, Cheikho's scholarly contributions remain relevant, because they shed light on different facets of the engagement with the past in the *nahḍa*. Cheikho's works may not be "reliable" tools for studying pre-Islamic and early Islamic ascetic poetry and the cultural environment that produced them. But they shed light on what was intellectually at stake for a nineteenth-century Jesuit scholar who engaged with the literary heritage and the history of the Arabs. After all, scholarship is always a phenomenon of intellectual history in and of itself. Most important, Cheikho's case can teach us much about the intellectual genealogies of modern and contemporary scholarship on literary and cultural production in Arabic before and after the proclamation of the Qur'ān. His editions and studies have significantly influenced the scholarly works of subsequent generations—we just need to think of Georg Graf's creation of the paradigm of "Christian Arabic

99 Muḥammad Kurd 'Alī, "Al-Ustādh al-ab Luwīs Shaykhū," *al-Majma' al-'ilmī al-'arabī* 8 (1926): 233; وهو مولى في التفرقة بين المسلمين والمسيحيين

Decades later, Kurd 'Alī still stood by his claims. See idem, "al-Ab Luwīs Shaykhū," *al-Majma' al-'ilmī al-'arabī* 27 (1952): 161–64.

100 Kurd 'Alī, "al-Ab Luwīs Shaykhū," 161–64.

literature” and his analysis of manuscript culture, Tor Andrae’s discussion of the “origins” of Islam, and Irfan Shahîd’s extensive work on Byzantium and the Arabs, to mention but three examples.¹⁰¹ Cheikho’s ideas live on, and they may even be tangible in much more indirect ways in twentieth-century study tools, but this warrants further research. My hope is that this article will contribute to the ongoing methodological self-reflection by scholars working on pre-Islamic Arabia, its literary lore, and early Islamic literature, especially where the search for religious “origins” and the engagement with cultural and religious differentiation processes are concerned. Contemporary scholarship is no less historically contingent than nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century scholarship, and in many ways its heir.

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101 See Graf, *Geschichte*, 5 vols.; Tor Andrae, *Der Ursprung des Islams und das Christentum* (Uppsala/Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1926), especially 32–58, a section devoted to poets and *ḥunafā’*. Andrae is critical of Cheikho but relies on his philological works on poetry. The same can be said of Irfan Shahîd. See Irfan Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fourth Century* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1984); idem, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1989); and idem, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, 4 vols. (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1995–2009). Shahîd cites *al-Naṣrāniyya wa-ādābuhā* in footnotes throughout the six volumes.

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