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The "correspondence" of Leo III and 'Umar II: traces of an early Christian Arabic apologetic work

Abstract: This article compares and revisits the corpus of texts pertaining to the so-called "correspondence" between the Byzantine emperor Leo III and the caliph 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Azīz. By adducing textual, philological and palaeographic arguments, I suggest that all the extant versions of the "correspondence" ultimately derive from an original Arabic Christian apologetic work, composed probably in mid-eighth century, in the monastic circles of Syria-Palestine. While acknowledging the importance of previous research on the subject, this article hopes to provide an original explanation that might finally account for both the similarities and the differences between the various extant versions of the "correspondence". Besides clarifying the origin and transmission history of this text, the results of this study have broader implications for the history of Muslim-Christian relations in the early Islamic period, for the creation of a Christian Arabic culture, and for the circulation of literary texts between the *Dār al-Islām* and Byzantium in the early Middle Ages.

The so-called "correspondence" of Leo III (r. 717–41) and 'Umar II (r. 717–720 CE/99–101 H)[1] is arguably one of the most interesting texts of the Christian-Muslim debate from the early Islamic period. Because of its singular transmission history, it is also a text that has lent itself to many misinterpretations. The dating of the "correspondence", its authorship, its audience and function, as well as its original language of composition, are all problematic issues. Several hypotheses have been formulated over the years, but none of them seems conclusive or thoroughly persuasive. This is partly a result of the reference to the emperor Leo, which has long sidetracked researchers, and partly it derives from the fact that very different versions of the "correspondence" exist, written in different languages and in different historical contexts. This linguistic barrier has often led to too specialized, narrow analyses that have prioritized one version over the others.

This paper will aim at combining the information provided by the various versions of this source, in order to suggest a new explanation of their origin, which may account for both their similarities and their variations. The most recent contributions to the study of the "correspondence" will be acknowledged, and the main hypotheses advanced by scholars recapitulated. At the same time, it is the hope of this paper to contribute to the discussion by radically shifting perspective and intro-

1 The *hijrī* date (H) will be given along with the year of the Common Era (CE) only with reference to Muslim leaders, or to historical figures who lived under the caliphate.

ducing a new interpretation, in a way that might enhance our understanding of this complex source. In general, scholarship has tended to emphasise either the Byzantine or, more recently, the Islamic nature and origin of the "correspondence"; it will be argued that, in both cases, this has led to a downplaying of relevant issues, and that either hypothesis is vulnerable to counter-arguments. Instead, I would like to put forward a new explanation concerning the nature of this source, the environment in which it was created, and its implications for the historical context.

1. Indirect references to the "correspondence"

The earliest mention of an epistolary exchange between the emperor Leo III and the caliph 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Azīz is found in the *Chronicle* of Theophanes (d. 818),[2] under the entry for *Anno Mundi* 6210 (717/18 CE):

> In the same year, a violent earthquake having hit Syria, 'Umar banned [the use of] wine from the cities, and forced Christians to become *Magaritai* (*magarizein*).[3] Those who became *Magaritai*, he made them exempt [from taxes?], while those who refused, he killed them. He caused many martyrs [to die]. He also decreed that the testimony of a Christian against a Saracen would not be accepted. And he composed (*epoiēse*) a letter about doctrine (*epistolēn dogmatikēn*) addressed to the emperor Leo, supposing to persuade him of Islam (*peisein auton tou magarisai*).[4]

'Umar's letter is thus included among a list of measures taken by the new "master of the Arabs" (*kratēsas tōn Arabōn*) in relation to the Christians.[5] It is noteworthy that 'Umar's epistle is characterised as *dogmatikē*, probably hinting at its religious mes-

2 Ed. Carl G. De Boor, *Theophanis Chronographia* (Leipzig: B.G. Teubneri, 1883–85). All following quotations of Theophanes' work will depend on this edition. See also Cyril Mango, Roger Scott, *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor: Byzantine and Near-Eastern history, A.D. 284–813* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); and Andreas Kaplony, *Konstantinopel und Damaskus. Gesandtschaften und Verträge zwischen Kaisern und Kalifen 639–750* (Berlin: K. Schwarz, 1996), p. 207.

3 By *magarizein*, Theophanes probably means conversions to Islam. It is not easy, however, to assess what "conversion" exactly implied at that time. The term probably referred to formal and informal practices of acculturation and, most importantly, social assimilation that would hardly be rendered by the modern "to convert". *Magaritai*, moreover, does not precisely correspond to "Muslim", as it reflects the author's polemical stance, as well as, probably, the Eastern origin of his source on these events. This name, in fact, is likely to reproduce the early adaptation in Greek of an original Arabic term (*muḥājirūn*). It appears in seventh- and eighth-century Greek documents, and it is attested also in a Syriac form (*mhggrāyē*). In other passages, Theophanes prefers the Greek *Sarakenoi* or *Hagarenoi*. See Robert G. Hoyland, "New Documentary Texts and the Early Islamic State", BSOAS 3 (2006), 395–416 (404–405); Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw it: a Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton NJ: Darwin Press, 1997), pp. 148–49, p. 180 and n. 25, pp. 547–48 and nn. 13–16; Patricia Crone, "The First-Century Concept of *Hiğra*", *Arabica* 41/3 (1994), 352–387 (355–364).

4 Theophanes, *Chron.*, p. 399. Cf. Mango's translation (cf. fn. 2), p. 550.

5 Theophanes, *Chron.* pp. 398–99.

sage, and that it was aimed at persuading Leo.[6] The last sentence may in fact mean that 'Umar was trying to convert the emperor, which is indeed how many translators rendered *magarizein*.[7] This reading is consistent with the iconophile topos of Leo's "philo-Islamic" behaviour, which can be found elsewhere in Theophanes, as well as in the canons of the Council of 787.[8] On the other hand, the meaning might also be that 'Umar was defending the act of *magarisai*, that is the doctrines and practices associated with Islam.[9] As it will be shown in what follows, the content of the "correspondence" seems to corroborate this second interpretation. Notably, Theophanes does not say explicitly that 'Umar *sent* a letter to the emperor, nor that Leo replied to it; this is a remarkable detail, as it is doubtful that any letter was ever actually sent.

Theophanes' reference to the "correspondence" is the only one that occurs in Greek literature, with the exception of George Kedrenos (mid-eleventh century), who, however, depends on the *Chronography* and cannot thus be considered an independent attestation.[10] Outside of Byzantium, a similar account was given by Mahbūb b. Qūṣṭānṭīn, bishop of Manbij (Mabbug), better known as Agapius (d. 941 or 942 CE/329 H).[11] Like Theophanes, Agapius mentions the earthquake and a series of

6 Cf. Kaplony (cf. fn. 2), p. 226.

7 Thus Mango (cf. fn. 2), p. 550; Hoyland 1997 (cf. fn. 3), p. 491; Arthur Jeffery, "Ghevond's Text of the Correspondence between 'Umar II and Leo III", HThR 37/4 (1944), 269 – 332 (270); Ilse Rochow, "Zu den diplomatischen Beziehungen zwischen Byzanz und dem Kalifat", in: Claudia Sode, Sarolta Takàcs (eds.), *Novum Millennium. Studies in Byzantine History and Culture. Dedicated to Paul Speck*. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), pp. 305 – 327 (309).

8 Theophanes, *Chron.*, p. 405; Giovan Domenico Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio* (Paris, Leipzig: Welter, 1901 – 27), vol. XIII , pp. 157E, 357D. This passage in the Acts of the Council of Nicaea, however, was possibly interpolated; see Stephen Gero, *Byzantine Iconoclasm during the Reign of Leo III* (Louvain: Corpussco, 1973), pp. 59 – 84 (esp. 61 – 62); John Haldon, Leslie Brubaker, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era (ca. 680 – 850). A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 116 and n. 149, based on Paul Speck, *Ich bin's nicht, Kaiser Konstantin ist es gewesen: Die Legenden vom Einfluss des Teufels, des Juden und des Moslem auf den Ikonoklasmus* (Bonn: Habelt, 1990).

9 This translation is implied by Gero's summary of the passage: "Theophanes merely notes that 'Umar wrote to Leo, to convince the emperor *of the truth of Islam* [italics added]", in: cf. fn. 8, p. 44.

10 Gero (cf. fn. 8), p. 44.

11 On this author, see Mark Swanson, "Mahbūb b. Qūṣṭānṭīn al-Manbijī", in: David Thomas, Alex Mallett (eds.), *Christian-Muslim Relations. A Bibliographical History. Volume 2* (900 – 1050) [henceforth CMR 2] (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2011), pp. 242 – 245; see also Kaplony (cf. fn. 2), p. 216; Alexander D. Beihammer, *Nachrichten zum byzantinischen Urkundenwesen in arabischen Quellen (565 – 811)* (Bonn: R. Habelt, 2000), pp. 390 – 91. Agapius' universal history survives in two manuscripts from the library of St Catherine at Sinai (Ar. 580 and Ar. 456, uncertain dating), containing the history of the world until the Incarnation, and in one manuscript preserved at the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana (Florence Or. 132, 1288). The latter is the only one that contains the second part of the work, edited by Alexandre Vasiliev in *Patrologia Orientalis* VIII (1912).

measures taken by ʻUmar II in the first year of his reign; unlike Theophanes, but in accordance with Islamic historiography,[12] he describes ʻUmar as a pious ruler:

> ʻUmar b. ʻAbd al-ʻAzīz manifested piety and devoutness (*al-nask wa-l-warʻ*). He expelled from his kingdom those who were corrupted, he forbade to the Muslims [...][13] and alcoholic beverages, and showed an exemplary manner of life. He also wrote a letter to the king Leo (*kataba ilā Lāwun al-malik kitāban*), in which he invited him to [embrace] Islam, and he questioned him concerning his faith (*jādala-hu fī dīni-hi*). Leo answered him with a reply in which he tore apart his argument and explained to him the perversion of his words; and he showed him the light of Christianity, adducing arguments from the revealed Scriptures, illuminating proofs from reasoning, and examples from the Qur'ān.[14]

Agapius claims, therefore, that both sides had been involved in the exchange. The description of the correspondence is here more detailed, which may indicate that Agapius was able to see the text.

In spite of their differences, the juxtaposed mention of the earthquake, the ban of wine and the letter suggests either that Agapius used Theophanes, or that the two authors shared a common source. The former hypothesis is less plausible, since Agapius shows to know more details about the "correspondence" than Theophanes; if Agapius did base this passage on the Greek Chronicle, then he also added some information that he had acquired independently. In the latter case, their common source was probably not Theophilus of Edessa, which would be the "most obvious" option.[15] In fact, the passage is absent from the other two sources that are thought to transmit materials from Theophilus, namely Michael the Syrian and the *Chronicle of 1234*, supposedly via Dionysius of Tel Maḥre.[16] It is likely that other Syriac sources circulated besides Theophilus; in fact, among the "materials" that – according to Theophanes' own preface – he received from the Syrian George Synkellos, there were probably a number of texts that are no longer extant or not easily identifiable. Be it as it may, the symmetry between Theophanes and Agapius confirms that the Byzantine chronicler was ultimately drawing the account of the "correspondence" from Eastern materials.[17] It seems therefore likely that Theophanes accessed a trans-

12 Cf. Hoyland 1997 (cf. fn. 3), pp. 441 – 42.

13 The missing word is probably '[the consumption of] wine', similarly to what stated by Theophanes.

14 Agapius, *History*, *PO* VIII, pp. 502 – 03. *Nawāzi' min al-Qur'ān*, literally "tendencies", "guidelines" from the Qur'ān.

15 Hoyland 1997 (cf. fn. 3), pp. 490 – 501 (490). Hoyland's article on the "correspondence" in *Seeing Islam* largely reproduces an earlier publication, "The Correspondence of Leo III (717 – 41) and ʻUmar II (717 – 20)", *Aram* 6 (1994), 165 – 177.

16 See especially Robert Hoyland, *Theophilus of Edessa's Chronicle and the circulation of historical knowledge in late antiquity and early Islam* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), pp. 1 – 41.

17 See Mango (cf. fn. 2), pp. lii–lxii, lxxiv–lxxxvi. On George Synkellos, see William Adler, Paul Tuffin, *The Chronography of George Synkellos: a Byzantine chronicle of universal history from the creation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Ihor Ševčenko, "The Search for the Past in Byzantium around the Year 800", DOB 46 (1992), 279 – 293.

lation or a Greek abridgement of this unknown Eastern source (or perhaps even a simple note left by George Synkellos?), and that the report of 'Umar's letter reached Constantinople in this way.

Lastly, the "correspondence" of Leo III and 'Umar II is mentioned in Armenian literature. In the *History* of Thomas Arcruni, probably written at the beginning of the tenth century, Leo is said to have written a letter to 'Umar, actually succeeding in converting the caliph, who accordingly began to give favourable treatment to his Christian subjects. No mention of a caliphal epistle is made:[18]

> Umar son of Abdlaziz ('Umar b. 'Abd al-'Azīz) [reigned] for three years. He was nobler than all [the other caliphs]. He wrote a letter concerning belief to Łewond [Leo], the emperor of the Greeks, and, having received the reply from the latter, he publicly rejected many things from their Qur'ān, [in particular] the excessive mythology, because he indeed recognized the force [of Leo's arguments].[19]

A later reference to this story, provided by Kirakos of Ganjak in the thirteenth century, is considered directly dependent on Thomas Arcruni.[20] It is possible that Thomas read of the correspondence in the chronicle of another Armenian author, pseudo-Łewond (or Ghewond), which is often dated to the late-eighth or early-ninth century.[21] As we shall see, this chronicle may in fact contain the earliest known reproduction of Leo's letter to 'Umar; in addition, pseudo-Łewond, like Thomas Arcruni, concluded his account with the conversion of 'Umar II to Christianity. On the other hand, the relationship between these two Armenian texts is a matter of debate. Stephen Gero has argued that the text of Leo's letter in pseudo-Łewond depended on Thomas' account, rather than vice versa, a point to which we shall return.[22] A further possibility is that Thomas and pseudo-Łewond acquired this information independently, from a common source. At all events, Thomas' attestation is most likely to be independent of that of Theophanes and Agapius, as the three accounts do not show common elements, apart from the names of the two rulers and the information that their correspondence had to do with religion. It is interesting, though, that Thomas, like Agapius, received and transmitted the *topos* of 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Azīz's piety, which is typical of Islamic Abbasid literature.[23]

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18 Gero (cf. fn. 8), p. 46.

19 Translation by Gero (cf. fn. 8), pp. 132–33. I am indebted to Nicholas Matheou for helping me go through the Armenian texts mentioned in this paper.

20 Gero (cf. fn. 8), p. 46.

21 Jeffery (cf. fn. 7), pp. 275–276; Hoyland 1997 (cf. fn. 3), p. 492; see also the article of Robert Bedrosian, "Ghewond History", published at http://rbedrosian.com/ghewint.htm (last accessed March 5, 2015).

22 Gero (cf. fn. 8), pp. 132–40; Kaplony (cf. fn. 2), p. 237.

23 Similarly in pseudo-Łewond, where 'Umar is defined "the most noble among the men of his race" and praised for the liberation of Christian captives: cf. Zaven Arzoumanian, *History of Lewond, the Eminent Vardapet of the Armenians* (Wynnewood, Penn.: St Sahag and St Mesrob Armenian Church, 1982), p. 70. Cf. Hoyland 1997 (cf. fn. 3), p. 491.

One might be tempted to add to this brief list of authors the many references found in Arabic Islamic sources that concern diplomatic exchanges between the Roman emperor and the Umayyad caliph.[24] Similar references, however, reflect the historical fact that actual missives were occasionally sent from one court to the other.[25] One should also consider that the dispatch of letters to non-Muslim rulers was a classical *topos* in Islamic literature. Letters are particularly recurrent in *futūḥ* works, where the conquest of cities and treaty arrangements are often accompanied by epistolary exchanges between Muslim generals and the caliph, Muslim authorities and Christian local leaders, or even Muslim authorities and the Romans.[26] The mention of a letter sent by ʻUmar b. ʻAbd al-ʻAzīz to Constantinople in relation to the siege of Laodicea, reported in the *Futūḥ al-Buldān* of Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā al-Balādhurī (d. 892 CE/297 H), is therefore no evidence that al-Balādhurī knew about the above-mentioned "doctrinal" correspondence.[27] In addition, the abundance of references to ʻUmar II's political and diplomatic activities should be related to the central role that this caliph came to play in the Islamic tradition. This confusion of different levels – the historicity of diplomatic missives, the *topos* of epistles in Islamic literature, and precise references to the ʻUmar-Leo debate on doctrine – seems to underlie traditional discussions on the authenticity of the "correspondence".[28]

On the other hand, it is true that historical facts and literary motifs overlapped in medieval sources: the Baṣran grammarian and student of literature Muḥammad b. Yazīd al-Mubarrad (d. 899 CE/286 H) was possibly the first to combine directly news of ʻUmar's diplomatic efforts with news of his letter on doctrine.[29] In his work on language and literature, he reports the story that ʻUmar b. ʻAbd al-ʻAzīz

24 Kaplony (cf. fn. 2), pp. 207 – 41; Beihammer (cf. fn. 11), pp. 391 – 92; Rochow (cf. fn. 7), pp. 306 – 12.

25 This is very different from saying that the text of such missives was preserved in literary sources, which is an interesting but difficult question to answer. On this subject, see Wadad al-Qadi, "Early Islamic State Letters: The Question of Authenticity", in Averil Cameron, Lawrence Conrad (eds.), *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East I. Problems in the Literary Source Material* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1992), pp. 215 – 275.

26 Something which scholars have occasionally misunderstood: cf. for example John Meyendorff, "Views of Islam", DOB 18 (1964), 113 – 132 (126). On this subject, see Albrecht Noth, Lawrence Conrad, *The early Abbasid historical tradition: a source-critical study* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1994); Fred Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins. The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1998), pp. 163, 174 – 82; Chase Robinson, *Empire and Elites after the Muslim Conquest. The Transformation of Northern Mesopotamia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 6 – 15.

27 Al-Balādhurī's "letter" is mentioned in Kaplony (cf. fn. 2), pp. 239 – 41; Rochow (cf. fn. 7), pp. 310 – 11. In a similar category should be included also Stephen of Taron's report of an exchange between the general Maslama b. ʻAbd al-Malik and Leo during the 717 siege of Constantinople: cf. Gero (cf. fn. 8), pp. 13 4 – 36.

28 Cf. Jeffery (cf. fn. 7), pp. 271 – 72; Rochow (cf. fn. 7), p. 311; Meyendorff (cf. fn. 26), p. 125, 127; Gero (cf. fn. 8), p. 46.

29 Kaplony (cf. fn. 2), pp. 223 – 24; Gero (cf. fn. 8), p. 45 and n. 6.

once sent to Leo (*Ilyūn*) two emissaries, who discussed religion with him.[30] In this account, one of the envoys tells Leo that 'Umar had sent them to invite him to embrace Islam (*yad'ū-ka ilā al-Islām*), and then enjoins the emperor to provide a written reply (*fa-ktub jawāb kitābi-nā*).[31] This might be sufficient to count al-Mubarrad among the authors who knew about the epistolary exchange on doctrine. Indeed, in the short dialogue between Leo and the two envoys there is a distant echo of those questions treated in the extant versions of the "correspondence". Dissimilarities notwithstanding, in fact, there is a striking consistency in the doctrinal points discussed in the various versions of this text.

2. The text of the "correspondence" in literary sources

2.1 Armenian

At least four versions of the "correspondence" are attested; this section will discuss them separately, while a fifth text will be added later. Probably the earliest of these attestations is preserved in the above-mentioned chronicle of pseudo-Łewond, which is considered an important source on early Islamic rule in Armenia.[32] Once again, this work introduces the "correspondence" after the mention of 'Umar's accession to the caliphate and a brief list of his notable deeds; in this case, however, they are focused on Armenia, and consist of the liberation of captives and the restoration of peace in the province. Interestingly, the exchange is started by 'Umar, because of his desire to understand better certain points of Christian doctrine: "The same 'Umar has written a letter to Leo, the emperor of the Greeks, with the purpose of learning about the power of our faith. [The letter] contains various questions that I shall summarize herewith."[33] Łewond's interest evidently was in the emperor Leo: while ample space was given to his response, the caliph's questions were merely "summarised". Such a summary, nonetheless, is rather detailed. 'Umar's letter might be outlined as follows:[34]

30 al-Mubarrad, *Al-Kāmil fī al-lugha wa-l-adab*, ed. Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr al-'Arabī, 1997), 2:84.

31 al-Mubarrad (cf. fn. 30), 2:84.

32 Ed. by K. Shahnazareants, *Patmut'iwn Ghewondeay* (Paris: E. Thunot & C., 1857); trans. by Arzoumanian (cf. fn. 23), pp. 70 – 106, and by Jeffery (cf. fn. 7), pp. 277 – 278, 281 – 330. All direct quotations of the Armenian text will be based primarily on Arzoumanian's translation. On the problems of the "correspondence" in pseudo-Łewond, see also Adel Théodore Khoury, *Les théologiens byzantins et l'Islam* (Paris – Louvain: Béatrice-Nauwelaerts, 1969), pp. 200 – 218.

33 And a few lines below: "I have often had the desire to know the teachings of the religion you profess": cf. Arzoumanian (cf. fn. 23), p. 70.

34 Cf. Shahnazareants (cf. fn. 32), p. 69 and ff.; Arzoumanian (cf. fn. 23), pp. 70 – 71; Jeffrey (cf. fn. 7), pp. 277 – 278.

a) Questions concerning the misinterpretation or alteration of Christian Scriptures. Besides claiming that the Bible has been falsified, 'Umar asks about a dubious saying, according to which Jesus would come "naked into this world" (a misquotation from the Book of Job), and about the coming of God's Paraclete, as predicted in the Gospel. He also asks why the Christians do not believe that Muḥammad "is equal and the like of Jesus", since both prophets were foretold by Isaiah. The evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are mentioned by name.

b) Questions concerning Jesus' divinity and his relationship with God. He alleges that Christians do not respect Jesus' own words, although he is "worthier of credence" and "nearer to God" (allusion to Q. 3:40) than any Christian theologian. Leo is also asked why Christians profess "three gods".

c) Concerning the alteration of Biblical laws, namely why Sabbath has been turned into Sunday, circumcision into baptism, and sacrifice into Eucharist.

Leo's letter is a detailed answer to these and many other questions. On more than one occasion, he seems to cite 'Umar's words, although there is no precise equivalence with the text of the above-mentioned summary. Leo hints at the fact that the letter is part of a larger correspondence between the two rulers ("we have written to you several times"), but he also says that they had never discussed religion before. His answer might be summed up according to the following sub-categories:[35]

a) Leo remarks on 'Umar's ignorance of the Scriptures, showing that his Biblical quotations are wrong, invented or misplaced. "It is this way", he accuses, "that you are accustomed to elude and mutilate the evidence of Holy Scriptures which you have not read and you still do not read. You are but merchants of the things of God and faith, who catch hold of some word in the Scriptures which appears favourable to your opinions."[36] Leo also explains that there is no contradiction between the Old and the New Testament, adducing several Old Testament passages about the Incarnation. In this regard, he alludes to 'Umar's questioning of a "second edition" of the Old Testament composed by Esdras.[37]

b) The deity of Jesus and his Sonhood are defended and explained with an abundance of references from the Old Testament. At the same time, the letter reacts to the accusation of polytheism, also commenting on the use of images and the adoration of the Cross – a point that will be touched upon again in what follows.

c) Islamic beliefs and practices are ridiculed by attributing them to Muḥammad's imagination. The Prophet himself is qualified as a "dissident" and "heterodox".[38] Several times Leo refers to the Qur'ān, either paraphrasing Qur'ānic passages as Muḥammad's words (e. g. "the head of your religion says"), or referring directly to the

35 Cf. Arzoumanian (cf. fn. 23), pp. 72 – 105; Jeffery (cf. fn. 7), pp. 281 – 330.
36 Arzoumanian (cf. fn. 23), p. 73.
37 Arzoumanian (cf. fn. 23), p. 77.
38 Arzoumanian (cf. fn. 23), p. 75.

Book. In one passage, the Islamic Scripture is called *Furqān*, a Qur'ānic Arabic term, in turn adopted from Syriac.[39] In particular, the author of Leo's letter refers to:

i) Q. 2:282, which prescribes the testimony of two witnesses, and Q. 28:28, which mentions the Mosaic law in this regard;[40]
ii) the Qur'ānic story of the creation of Adam and Iblīs' rebellion (Q. 7:12–19, 17:60–66, 20:115–22, 38:71–85);[41]
iii) the idea that humankind was created from "infirmities", which corresponds in the Qur'ān to man's creation from sperm (18:37), dust (3:52, 30:20, 40:67, 45:11), clay (23:12, 6:2, 32:7, 37:11, 55:14), and fermented clay (15:26);[42]
iv) the relationship between Mary, Aaron, and 'Imrān, mentioned at Q. 3:36–37, 66:12, and 19:27–29;[43]
v) Q. 3:55, where God announces to Jesus, "I will take you and raise you to Myself", and, "It is to Me that you shall return";[44]
vi) Q. 33:37, about the Prophet's marriage with Zaynab bint Jaḥsh;[45]
vii) Q. 4:156–57, which is probably behind Leo's accusations that Muslims do not recognize Christ's death;[46]
viii) the equivalence between *jinn*s and men ("these unclean spirits [...] you make yourselves equals to them here on earth and in the world to come"), echoing passages such as Q. 41:25, 46:18, 6:112, 6:130, 7:38; [47]
ix) Q. 2:223, which, according to Leo's reading, compares taking spouses to "the tilling of fields";[48]
x) passages depicting Paradise as a place to find "fountains of wine, honey and milk" (Q. 47:15), as well as "women who remain for ever virgins", which reflects the descriptions found in *Sūrat al-Raḥmān* (Q. 55) and *Sūrat Ṣād* (Q. 38).[49]

d) Besides Qur'ānic references, Leo alludes to several Islamic traditions. These include: the standardization of the Qur'ānic text ordered by the Umayyad governor al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf in the first half of the eighth century; the name of some of Muḥam-

39 Arzoumanian (cf. fn. 23), p. 75. This term started to be equated with the Qur'ān by Muslim scholars in the eighth century. See Fred Donner, 'Qur'ānic *Furqān*', JSS LII/2 (2007), pp. 279–300 (281–86).
40 Cf. also Q. 65:2, 5:106. Arzoumanian (cf. fn. 23), p. 74.
41 Arzoumanian (cf. fn. 23), p. 84.
42 Arzoumanian (cf. fn. 23), p. 84.
43 Arzoumanian (cf. fn. 23), p. 91.
44 Arzoumanian (cf. fn. 23), p. 93.
45 Arzoumanian (cf. fn. 23), p. 101. Muḥammad's wife is actually called "Zeda" in the Armenian text, but this is probably because of a confusion between Zaynab and his adopted son Zayd, whom she married, and who was also an adopted son of the Prophet. In fact, when this story is mentioned in the Qur'ān, only the name of Zayd is given. On this topic, see Ze'ev Maghen, "Intertwined Triangles: Remarks on the Relationship Between Two Prophetic Scandals", *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 33 (2007), 17–87.
46 Arzoumanian (cf. fn. 23), p. 94.
47 Arzoumanian (cf. fn. 23), p. 100.
48 Arzoumanian (cf. fn. 23), p. 101.
49 Arzoumanian (cf. fn. 23), p. 104.

mad's Companions – namely 'Umar, Salmān the Persian and Abū Turāb, a title of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib – who are said to be behind the codification of the Qur'ān; the Abrahamic foundation of the Ka'ba, also called "the dwelling of Abraham" (corresponding to the Qur'ānic *maqām Ibrāhīm*); the tradition according to which "Paraclete" was another name for Muḥammad, which was recorded in the *Sīra* of Muḥammad b. Isḥāq (d. ca. 770 CE/150 H), as revised and abridged by 'Abd al-Malik b. Ḥishām (d. 833 CE/218 H).[50] Moreover, Leo shows that he has heard something of the *naḥr*, Muḥammad's ritual sacrifice of a camel, which is recorded in *ḥadīth* literature. Lastly, the Islamic regulation on marriage and divorce is explicitly called into question.

e) 'Umar is reproached for the fact that, after only "a hundred years" since the emergence of Islam, his people has already fragmented into many sects; precise names are mentioned, but their correlation with historical groups has not proved easy.[51] This reproach is a response to 'Umar's question about the division of Christians into "seventy-two sects", which is absent from the previous summary. Leo also expounds on the variety of languages spoken by Christians, arguing that this diversity is a strength of Christianity.

Before drawing conclusions on pseudo-Ełewond's text, it is worth highlighting two elements: first, the abundance of references to the Islamic religious tradition that is found in this text, an important detail that seems to have escaped scholars' attention. Second, the fact that 'Umar's questions are condensed into a few lines only. This led Jean-Marie Gaudeul to argue that 'Umar's letter was a "forgery" created by pseudo-Ełewond.[52] In general, scholars have pointed to the uneven quality of the two parts of the exchange, and the fact that, when Leo quotes 'Umar's words directly,

50 This equation was obtained by changing the vowels of the consonantal skeleton of "Paraclete" in the Gospel of John, i.e. by changing *PaRaKLeToS* into *PeRiKLuToS*. This was possible thanks to the transposition of Greek into Arabic, possibly via Syriac, and the consequent omission of short vowels. According to Ibn Isḥāq, *periklutos* corresponds to the Arabic *aḥmad*, "much honoured". The identification of *Aḥmad* with *Muḥammad* (from the same root) was then corroborated with reference to Q. 61:6, where Jesus announces the coming of "Aḥmad": see Ibn Ḥishām, *Sīrat Sayyidinā Muḥammad Rasūl Allāh*, ed. Ferdinand Wüstenfeld (Göttingen, Dieterichsche Universitäts-Buchhandlung, 1858–60), pp. 149–50. That the author of Leo's letter knew this very tradition is clear from the following statement: "(The Lord) promised to send the Holy Spirit, under the name of Paraclete, that is the Comforter, to comfort them in the distress and sorrow they felt at the departure of their Lord and Master. I repeat: it was for this reason that Jesus called the Holy Spirit the 'Paraclete', since He meant to comfort them (...). 'Paraclete' thus signifies 'Comforter', while 'Ahmat' means 'to give thanks', or in our tongue 'to render grace', a meaning which has no connection with the word Paraclete." Arzoumanian (cf. fn. 23), pp. 79–80. On this tradition, see especially Uri Rubin, *The Eye of the Beholder: the Life of Muḥammad as Viewed by the Early Muslims* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1995), pp. 22–43; William Montgomery Watt, "His name is Aḥmad", *The Muslim World* 53/1 (1953), pp. 110–17; Mun'im Sirry, *Scriptural Polemics. The Qur'ān and Other Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 115–16.

51 Hoyland 1997 (cf. fn. 3), p. 492.

52 Jean-Marie Gaudeul "The Correspondence Between Leo and 'Umar", *IslamoChristiana* 10 (1984), 109–157 (113–114).

these differ from what is said in 'Umar's letter. Indeed, 'Umar's questions to Leo seem to aim precisely at being disproved by the Christian: according to many, this would indicate that pseudo-Łewond created the first letter as a "match" for the second one.[53]

Another answer is, however, possible: namely, that the Armenian author was sincere when he said that he had "summarised" 'Umar's words. After all, pseudo-Łewond's preference for Leo is perfectly logical, given the fact that he was a Christian author, and in view of the general interest of Armenian literature in the iconoclast emperors. The possibility should be considered, therefore, that 'Umar's letter in this work is not a "forgery" (a term which implies deliberate deception), but rather an abridgement. Had he invented 'Umar's letter, in fact, pseudo-Łewond would have probably been more careful in listing all the questions answered by Leo, including, for instance, the question on the "seventy-two" Christian sects. More arguments in support of this hypothesis will be adduced in the following paragraphs.

2.2 Latin

Another abridgement of the letter survives in a Latin translation that was published by Symphorien Champier in 1508.[54] Champier introduced the text as follows:

> Epistle of the emperor Leo (*epistola Lenis*)[55] to 'Umar (*ad Amarum*), king of the Saracens. This epistle was translated from Greek into Chaldean speech. Now indeed, God willing, we shall turn it from the Chaldean diction into Latin, respecting the particularities of that speech.

Whether Champier translated Leo's letter from "Chaldean", or whether he based himself on an older Latin translation, there is little doubt that "Chaldean" means Arabic in this passage; this can be argued based on the content of the text, but also from the

53 Gaudeul (cf. fn. 52), p. 114; Gero (cf. fn. 8), p. 46; Tim Greenwood, "The Letter of Leo III in Ghewond", in: David Thomas, Barbara Roggema (eds.), *Christian-Muslim Relations. A Bibliographical History. Volume 1 (600–900)* [henceforth CMR 1] (Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2009), pp. 203–208 (203–204).

54 Symphorius Champerius, *De Triplici Disciplina: cuius partes sunt, philosophia naturalis, medicina, theologia, moralis philosophia* (*editio princeps:* Lyons, 1508). The same letter to 'Umar was reprinted by Jacque-Paul Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* vol. 107 (henceforth *PG* 107), pp. 315–24, as a letter of Leo VI, and without the original introduction, which is only extant in the *editio princeps* of Champier's work. *PG* 107 is accessible at http://patristica.net/graeca/ (last accessed March 5, 2015). See Gero (cf. fn. 8), pp. 154–55; Hoyland 1997 (cf. fn. 3), p. 497. On the attribution of the letter to Leo VI, cf. Denise Cardaillac, *La polémique anti-chrétienne du manuscript aljamiado N° 4944 de la Bibliothèque Nationale de Madrid* (PhD thesis, Université Paul Valéry, Montpellier, 1972), 2 volumes: vol I, p. 15.

55 This genitive seems to suppose a nominative "Len", corresponding to Arabic *Lāwun* (the same form attested in Agapius). As noticed by Gero, Champier's misunderstanding of this name is a sign that he translated, rather than invented, the title of the letter: (cf. fn. 8) p. 158 n. 19.

fact that the same use is found in other Christian scholars.[56] Leaving aside for the moment the issue of the original language of the "correspondence", what is noteworthy is that the Armenian and the Latin texts clearly show to be somehow inter-related – a circumstance which has been often underplayed by scholars. Stephen Gero was the first scholar to pay due attention to the Latin version, and to highlight Champier's introduction to the letter, which is omitted in the widely used reprint in the *Patrologia Graeca*.[57] However, his eagerness to prove that pseudo-Łewond's text was a late interpolation composed in Armenian led him to overemphasise the differences between the two sources. In Gero's reconstruction, the two texts ultimately appear as completely independent. Similarly, Gaudeul's interest in discovering the "authentic" letter of the emperor Leo led him to exaggerate the distance between the two texts, and to dismiss Champier's letter as a Western "pamphlet".[58]

Differences between the two versions do exist: the Latin text is much shorter and less precise than the Armenian one; Biblical references in support of Leo's arguments are often different; and in the Latin translation, Biblical passages are quoted from the *Vulgata*.[59] Some arguments are unique to the Latin text: for instance, the Islamic argument that Christ would eat, drink and sleep as any other man (Q. 5:75); the occurrence of the *Filioque* in the creed; and an allusion to the Qur'ānic doctrine of predestination.[60] Nevertheless, similarities are equally striking. In the first place, the Latin text presents itself as a letter aimed at replying to polemical questions about Christianity. Such questions concern, in summary, the following issues:

a) why Christians worship Jesus the son of Mary;
b) Esdras' alteration of the Old Testament;
c) Christ's human nature and his equality with the other messengers, and the fact that he himself never claimed to be divine;
d) Mary's relationship with Moses' family;[61]

56 Cf. Gero (cf. fn. 8), pp. 157 – 62; Hoyland 1997 (cf. fn. 3), p. 497 n. 150; Kaplony (cf. fn. 2), p. 220. In general, Humanist authors used "Chaldean" to indicate Syriac, rather than Arabic. Alexander Treiger has suggested to me that this might indicate that the text known to Champier was written in Syriac characters, i. e. in Garshūnī, a hypothesis that seems very plausible. On Champier's knowledge of Arabic writings, cf. Richard Cooper, "Les dernières années de Symphorien Champier", *Bulletin de l'Association d'étude sur l'humanisme, la réforme et la reinassance* 47 (1998), 25 – 50; Brian Copenhaver, *Symphorien Champier and the Reception of the Occultist Tradition in Renaissance France* (The Hague – New York: Mouton, 1978), pp. 45 – 96.

57 See Gero (cf. fn. 8), pp. 153 – 71; Hoyland 1997 (cf. fn. 3), pp. 497 – 98; Kaplony (cf. fn. 2), pp. 217 – 20.

58 Gaudeul (cf. fn. 52), pp. 114 – 16. Gaudeul was probably not aware of the *editio princeps* of Champier's translation, which in fact he does not mention in his article; this appears also from his assumption that Migne's text in *PG* 107 was a direct translation from Greek (p. 115).

59 As pointed out by Gero (cf. fn. 8), p. 159. Cf. Gaudeul (cf. fn. 52), pp. 114 – 16.

60 *PG* 107, pp. 320, 324.

61 *Dicis quod Maria soror Aaron et Moysi: PG* 107, p. 315. According to Gero, this accusation is found only in the Latin text. However, cf. Arzoumanian (cf. fn. 23), p. 92: by saying that, according

e) why the Old Testament does not mention the resurrection, or paradise, or eternal life;
f) what is Christian sacrifice;
g) the unlikelihood that Jesus was crucified.

All these questions are attributed to 'Umar also in the Armenian version. In addition, both texts reply to the accusation that the three divine hypostases are three gods; and in both texts, Leo explains the mystery of the Trinity by comparing it to the sun and its rays, which, while being one in essence, are also different entities.[62] Both texts mention the Qur'ānic version of Jesus' birth, and both of them remark that Islam acknowledges Jesus as the Messiah.[63] Both of them, in addition, allude to the Qur'ānic story of the creation of Adam, the prostration of angels, and Satan's rebellion.[64] The above-mentioned Islamic tradition on the *naḥr* appears in both versions, and so does the polemical remark on the Islamic law on multiple marriages.[65] Lastly, both texts characterise the Qur'ānic teaching as "law".

The quantity of common arguments and examples, and the fact that they occur in the same order, is sufficient evidence that the two texts are related to each other. Such a relationship does not need to be direct; it is in fact unlikely that the Latin text depends on the Armenian text, or vice versa. It is equally unlikely, however, that they do not share any common source.[66]

The similarity between Champier's translation and pseudo-Łewond's text is a first counter-argument to Gero's hypothesis that the letter of Leo was created by the Armenian author. But what about 'Umar's letter? Since this was only summarised in pseudo-Łewond, and only alluded to in the Latin version, should one assume that their "common source" never included a direct speech attributed to the caliph?

2.3 Arabic and Aljamiado

In fact, there are two extant texts that contain an extended version of 'Umar's letter. The first one was discovered by Dominique Sourdel in 1966 among the Damascus

to the Qur'ān, Mary was the sister of Aaron and the daughter of 'Imran (Moses' father), the Armenian text is making exactly the same point.

62 Arzoumanian (cf. fn. 23), p. 71, 83; *PG* 107, pp. 316–17.

63 Arzoumanian (cf. fn. 23), p. 74; *PG* 107, p. 319, 321.

64 Arzoumanian (cf. fn. 23), p. 84; *PG* 107, p. 319.

65 Arzoumanian (cf. fn. 23), pp. 99, 101; *PG* 107, p. 319, 322. The Latin text introduces the polemic on divorce with the following remark: "You have in your law that it is licit to take as a spouse the wife of someone that is in your custody (*fidei vobis*)" (*PG* 107, p. 319). This might indeed reflect a criticism against Muḥammad's marriage with the wife of his adopted son, thus paralleling the Armenian version (Q. 33:37).

66 Cf. Jeffery (cf. fn. 7), p. 332; Hoyland 1997 (cf. fn. 3), p. 498.

documents of the Turkish and Islamic Art Museum of Istanbul.[67] This is an incomplete Arabic manuscript (only 10 folios), probably to be dated to the late-ninth or tenth century; more will be said on its characteristics below. Sourdel describes it as an Islamic "pamphlet" against Christians, and his hypothesis has never been challenged since.

Because the manuscript is incomplete, the title of the "pamphlet" has not been preserved. However, the discovery of a further version of 'Umar's letter in 1984 confirmed the correlation of this work with the "correspondence" of Leo and 'Umar, as highlighted by Jean-Marie Gaudeul.[68] This second text is an Aljamiado translation from Arabic (i.e. a Romance dialect written in the Arabic alphabet), preserved in one Spanish manuscript, Madrid 4944. The editor of the manuscript considers it to be a Morisco collection of polemical texts, and dates it to the sixteenth century.[69] The title of the Aljamiado text reads: "This is the epistle that 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Azīz, Commander of the Believers, wrote to Leo (*Alyon*), king of the Christian unbelievers."[70] The letter is introduced by an *isnād* (chain of transmitters), going back to 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Azīz, thus tracing the text back to the eighth century; the three scholars that are mentioned in this chain are said to come from the city of Ḥimṣ (Emesa).[71] In this version, 'Umar alludes to a longer correspondence, and imputes to Leo the request of a response on the part of the caliph ("since you ask my response"), also making reference to some envoys sent to Constantinople.[72]

As pointed out by Gaudeul, these two texts – the Arabic and the Aljamiado – are not only similar, but also partly overlapping.[73] Furthermore, the combined Arabic-Aljamiado version of 'Umar's letter appears to voice "the very objections that Leo's letter is trying to answer".[74] Moreover, all the sentences attributed to 'Umar in the Armenian text find precise correspondence in 'Umar's letter, and are treated in the

67 Dominique Sourdel, "Un pamphlet musulman anonyme d'époque 'Abbāside contre les Chrétiens", REI 34 (1966), pp. 1 – 34 (including the edition of the Arabic text, pp. 27 – 33).

68 Gaudeul (cf. fn. 52), pp. 116 – 27.

69 Gaudeul (cf. fn. 52), pp. 124 – 27; Cardaillac (cf. fn. 54), vol. I, pp. 5 – 18; vol. II, pp. 194 – 267. Cardaillac's dissertation has never been published and is not easily accessible; no scholar after Gaudeul seems in fact to have ever re-studied the Aljamiado text.

70 Gaudeul (cf. fn. 52), p. 123.

71 Cardaillac (cf. fn. 54), vol. II, pp.196 – 97 (ff. 84v–85r). Cf. Gaudeul (cf. fn. 52), p. 124. Robert Hoyland has remarked that there is no reason to doubt a priori the reliability of this *isnād*, especially considering that "there is no attempt to get back to 'Umar himself": 1997 (cf. fn. 3), p. 494. This is, however, not completely correct: the original text, published by Cardaillac, does mention the caliph at the end of the chain. See Cardaillac (see above), vol. I, p. 99; vol. II, p. 197. In fact, the accuracy of this *isnād* can neither be disproved nor proved with any certainty. It is worth noticing that even correct chains of transmission could be attached, in perfectly good faith, to any text at any moment.

72 Cardaillac (cf. fn. 54), vol. II, p. 199 (f. 85v).

73 See also, following Gaudeul, Hoyland 1997 (cf. fn. 3), pp. 493 – 94, and Barbara Roggema, "Pseudo-'Umar II's Letter to Leo III", CMR 1, pp. 381 – 385.

74 Gaudeul (cf. fn. 52), p. 124.

same order.[75] At the same time, the letter of 'Umar can be seen to be closely related not only to Leo's letter as found in pseudo-Łewond, but also – something that escaped Gaudeul – to the Latin version. The twine becomes even thicker as one compares the Arabic-Aljamiado version with the Armenian summary of 'Umar's letter: in particular, the first part of 'Umar's letter, which is attested only in Aljamiado, appears to contain all the questions that are found in the Armenian letter of 'Umar. Indeed, as some of these parallels are not repeated in the Armenian letter of Leo, pseudo-Łewond's summary of 'Umar's letter can no longer be regarded as a blatant "forgery". Rather, it should be considered an actual abridgement.

The Arabic-Aljamiado version of the letter of 'Umar raises the following issues and questions:

a) Jesus' exclusively human nature, which is shown by the fact that he lived like a man, that he ate, drank, and was circumcised; Jesus' miracles are also contested;[76]
b) the Old Testament was not inspired by Jesus and does not refer to him;[77]
c) God would never enter into the womb of a woman;[78]
d) Jesus and Adam should be put on the same level (cf. Q. 3:59);[79]
e) Christians believe that, because of the original sin, Satan took hold of human souls, and only Jesus defeated him;[80]
f) Christians venerate the "oil" of the martyrs, and they worship the Cross and images;[81]
g) Christians are against multiple marriages, in contrast to the practice of the old prophets, and they criticise Muḥammad's marriage to the wife of his adopted son (i. e. Zaynab, the wife of Zayd), albeit David himself did something similar.[82]

Moreover, the Arabic letter of 'Umar mentions the Islamic concept of a "physical" paradise, the Ka'ba and the *masjid* of Abraham, which are also present in Leo's response in Armenian and Latin. The Arabic "pamphlet" ends stating the case for

75 Gaudeul (cf. fn. 52), p. 124. These include the misquotation of Job/Jesus' saying, and the question on the absence of references to the Hereafter in the Old Testament. Cf. Cardaillac (cf. fn. 54), vol. II, p. 201 (f. 85bis r), p. 211 (f. 87v).
76 Sourdel (cf. fn. 67), p. 27 (Arabic); Cardaillac (cf. fn. 54), vol. II, p. 253 (f. 98r), 261 (f. 100) (Aljamiado); cf. *PG* 107, p. 320 (Latin); Arzoumanian (cf. fn. 23), p. 77 (Armenian).
77 Sourdel (cf. fn. 67), p. 27; Cardaillac (cf. fn. 54), vol. II, p. 207 (f. 86v); cf. *PG* 107, pp. 317 – 19, Arzoumanian (cf. fn. 23), pp. 86 – 90.
78 Sourdel (cf. fn. 67), p. 27; Cardaillac (cf. fn. 54), vol. II, p. 255 (f. 98v); cf. Arzoumanian (cf. fn. 23), p. 71 (summary).
79 Sourdel (cf. fn. 67), p. 27; Cardaillac (cf. fn. 54), vol. II, pp. 260 – 61 (ff. 99v, 100r); cf. *PG* 107, pp. 315, 320 : Arzoumanian (cf. fn. 23), p. 94.
80 Sourdel (cf. fn. 67), pp. 28 – 29; Cardaillac (cf. fn. 54), vol. II, pp. 236 – 37 (ff. 93v–94r); cf. Arzoumanian (cf. fn. 23), p. 78, 85, 93 – 94.
81 Sourdel (cf. fn. 67), p. 27, 29; cf. Arzoumanian (cf. fn. 23), p. 71 (summary), 98, 99.
82 Sourdel (cf. fn. 67), pp. 31 – 32; cf, *PG* 107, pp. 322 – 23, Arzoumanian (cf. fn. 23), p. 101.

the originality of Muḥammad's message, praising the fact that he led the Arabs out of ignorance, and that, in spite of their rudeness, they have managed to conquer a vast empire.[83]

The part of the Aljamiado letter that does not overlap with the Arabic "pamphlet" introduces the two accusations that Christians do not respect the words of the Gospel, and that the Jews have corrupted the Bible. After praising the Kingdom of Heaven, 'Umar challenges Leo to prove that David and the other prophets had born witness to the coming of Christ. Some of 'Umar's points are formulated as direct questions to Leo, often by referring to specific passages of the Gospel. References to the Christian Scriptures include the above-mentioned annunciation of the Paraclete, followed by its Islamic interpretation with respect to "Aḥmad"; the letter mentions also the application of Isaiah 21:7 to the prophet Muḥammad. Finally, the Aljamiado text contains an Islamic monotheist creed, as well as a translation of the *Pater Noster*.[84]

Interestingly, the combined Arabic-Aljamiado letter of 'Umar is full of Biblical quotations and paraphrases, especially from the New Testament;[85] it is also full of references to the Qur'ān, in the form of literal quotations or echoes. Admittedly, the number of citations from the Gospel in the Aljamiado text exceeds the number of Qur'ānic references. Overall, however, it seems that only few of these quotations correspond to Biblical references in the Armenian letter of Leo.

3. Strengths and weaknesses of Gero's thesis

Stephen Gero should be credited with the most accurate study to-date of the Armenian and Latin texts of Leo's letter. He was the first who tried to correlate the various references to the "correspondence", looking for direct influences between them, and taking into serious consideration Agapius and the Armenian authors, besides Theophanes. In addition, he suggested a Syrian origin for the composition of that text which, through multiple translations and probably abridgements, was eventually published by Symphorien Champier.[86] By analysing closely the Armenian letter of Leo, Gero was able to contest the traditional assumption that pseudo-Łewond had translated an original Byzantine text from Greek.[87]

83 Sourdel (cf. fn. 67), pp. 32–33.

84 Cardaillac (cf. fn. 54), vol. II, pp. 195–252 (ff. 90r–98v).

85 Cf. Sourdel (cf. fn. 67), p. 3.

86 Gero (cf. fn. 8), pp. 44–47, 132–40, 153–71.

87 As argued, notably, by Hans-Georg Beck, "Vorsehung und Vorherbestimmung in der theologischen Literatur der Byzantiner", OCA 114 (1937). Beck's argument was subsequently repeated by Jeffery (cf. fn. 7), p. 274 and n. 14; Hoyland 1997 (cf. fn. 3), pp. 492–93; Jean-Paule Mahé, "Le problème de l'authenticité et de la valeur de la Chronique de Łewond", in *Centre de Recherches d'histoire et de civilisation byzantines: L'Arménie et Byzance* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1996), pp. 119–126; Greenwood (cf. fn. 53), pp. 203–04. Cf. Gero (cf. fn. 8), pp. 168–71.

The supposed existence of a Greek original rests on two main arguments. First, on the belief that the letter should actually be attributed to Leo III, or, alternatively, to someone who wrote in Greek to add to the plausibility of that attribution.[88] The question of authenticity is, however, a false problem: the idea that this text was originally an authentic letter of the emperor Leo to the caliph 'Umar is, at the least, farfetched, given the contents, features and transmission history of the extant versions. Moreover, literature from all ages shows clearly that pseudo-authors do not always seek plausibility: just to mention two examples, many early-medieval texts were composed in Coptic under the name of Cyril of Jerusalem or John Chrysostom, while several pseudo-Aristotelian works were written in Arabic.[89] The second argument for a Greek original is the occurrence of "Hellenized" forms for Biblical names, namely *Nomos* for the Pentateuch, *Parimons* for Proverbs, and *Samatan* (from *asma asmatōn?*) for the "books of Solomon".[90] According to Gero, however, these names are not evidence that the author had a Greek written text in front of him, since they "evince a phonetic type of transcription" that could occur in Armenian when repeating, rather than transcribing, Greek words.[91]

What Gero did not say is that Greek loanwords were traditionally used to indicate Biblical words and figures also outside of Armenia, namely among Syriac- and Arabic-speaking Christians. In other words, their occurrence does not point necessarily to a Greek author, although it might point to a Greek-speaking milieu. What about the word *Furqan*, which is clearly an Arabic loanword (from *furqān*)? And what about proper names, such as 'Umar, Abū Turāb, or Aḥmad, which clearly reproduce Arabic, not Greek, forms? Indeed, the degree of familiarity with the Qur'ān and with Islamic traditions that is evident in this text suggests that the "correspondence" was written in Islamic lands. In this respect, it is noteworthy that only one known anti-Islamic polemical text written in Byzantium is datable with some certainty before the tenth century, and notably, its general tone and use of the Qur'ān is very different from the apologetic character of Leo's letter.[92] More cogently, it is striking that no

88 Cf. Hoyland 1997 (cf. fn. 3), p. 493.

89 On this subject, see for example Bart Ehrman, *Forgery and Counterforgery: the use of literary deceit in early Christian polemics* (Oxford – New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

90 Arzoumanian (cf. fn. 23), p. 76. Philological arguments were first raised by Nerses Akinean, "Ghewond erets' patmagir: matenagrakan-patmakan usumnasirut'iwn mĕ", Handēs Amsoreay 43 (1929), 330–348, 458–472, 539–619, 705–718, mentioned in Greenwood (cf. fn. 53), p. 206.

91 Gero (cf. fn. 8) pp. 168–69.

92 This is the rejection of the Qur'ān of Niketas Byzantios (late-ninth century). See Meyendorff (cf. fn. 26), p. 115; and especially Sidney Griffith, "Byzantium and the Christians in the World of Islam: Constantinople and the Church in the Ninth Century", *Medieval Encounters* 3/3 (1997), 231–265 (253–263). Wolfgang Eichner's list of ninth-century Greek Byzantine authors writing against Islam, which includes Theodore Abū Qurra, Leo III, Gregory of Dekapolis and Samonas of Gaza, is too optimistic and rather questionable: cf. Wolfgang Eichner, "Byzantine Accounts of Islam", in Averil Cameron, Robert Hoyland (eds.), *Doctrine and Debate in the East Christian World, 300–1500* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 109–171. Besides Niketas, another possible exception would be the treatise in

Greek version of this text has survived: besides the brief mention in Theophanes, who was probably basing himself on an Eastern source, and Kedrenos, who was quoting Theophanes, no Greek author is known to have ever transcribed, copied or cited Leo's letter – which is sufficient to undermine the theory that the text was originally composed in Byzantium.

Gero's study, therefore, hit the nail on the head: there is no evidence that a letter of Leo to 'Umar was ever written in Byzantium, and there is no firm evidence that pseudo-Łewond translated a Greek text. According to Gero, in fact, pseudo-Łewond did not receive and transmit any older text; instead, at some point between the eleventh and the thirteenth century, an anonymous Armenian author, having found an account of the "correspondence" in Thomas Arcruni, would have decided to interpolate the chronicle of pseudo-Łewond.[93]

On the other hand, Robert Hoyland has pointed out that Gero's reconstruction of the textual dependence of pseudo-Łewond on later Armenian authors, such as Thomas Arcruni, appears ultimately not straightforward and rather weak.[94] In addition to Hoyland's criticisms, one might also wonder why the supposedly interpolated version of pseudo-Łewond's chronicle, containing the letter of Leo, should be the only one that survived in the manuscript tradition. More strikingly, though, Gero's hypothesis was disproved by the discovery of the Arabic and the Aljamiado versions of 'Umar's letter. In the light of the evidence adduced by Gaudeul, it is extremely unlikely that an unknown Armenian interpolator was at the origin of the entire tradition on Leo's letter. It is also unlikely that this letter was created as late as the twelfth century; Gero himself thought that the Latin translation of Symphorien Champier came from a tenth-century original. Thus, only by downplaying the relationship between the Latin and the Armenian texts, and because he was not aware of the remaining two versions, was Gero able to envisage the Armenian letter as a late, independent text.

In conclusion, Pseudo-Łewond's version of the letter of Leo should be reconsidered as a *reformulation* in Armenian of a text that he received from outside Armenia, and that he certainly believed to reproduce the words of the emperor Leo.

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iambic verses that one manuscript from Mount Athos (Athos Lavra Ω 44, 1854) attributes to Theodore of Studios (d. 826). A treatise against Islam is in fact mentioned in the *Life of Theodore* (late-ninth century). The Athos manuscript, however, is very late, and the text seems to depend heavily on the work of John of Damascus; neither the authenticity nor the ninth-century dating of this polemical work are beyond question. Cf. John Thomas, Angela Constantinides Hero (eds.), *Byzantine Monastic Foundation Documents. Dumbarton Oaks Studies 35* (Washington DC, 2000), vol. 4, '*Stoudios: Rule* of the Monastery of St John Stoudios in Constantinople', pp. 84 – 119 (84 – 85); Antonio Rigo, 'Theodore the Stoudite', CMR 1, pp. 423 – 425.

93 Gero (cf. fn. 8), p. 170. The *terminus ante quem* is fixed by Gero to the thirteenth century because at that point pseudo-Łewond's account is cited by another Armenian author, Vardan: *Leo III*, p. 140; cf. Kaplony (cf. fn. 2), pp. 227 – 28.

94 Hoyland 1997 (cf. fn. 3), pp. 491 – 93.

4. Strengths and weaknesses of Gaudeul's thesis

The perspective of scholars suddenly shifted when Gaudeul made the connection between the Arabic "pamphlet", the Aljamiado translation, and pseudo-Łewond's letter. His discovery was in fact critical: not only did it invalidate Gero's thesis (of which, however, Gaudeul was probably unaware, since he never mentions it in his article); it also suggested that the "authentic" correspondence had been composed away from Byzantium, in an Islamic milieu. Gaudeul's work was extremely important in that it brought to light two new sources, which had not been previously associated with the "correspondence" of 'Umar and Leo, also showing their direct textual correlation.[95]

The thesis that has imposed itself among scholars after the publication of Gaudeul's article is that a ninth-century Muslim author, living in Syria (probably in Ḥimṣ, as indicated by the Aljamiado text), wrote a polemical "pamphlet" against Christianity. For this purpose, he used the name of the famous caliph 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Azīz, as the author of a letter purporting to be addressed to the emperor Leo III. According to Gaudeul, this text was preserved in its original form in the Arabic manuscript found by Sourdel in Istanbul. The Aljamiado text indicates that, at some point, this "pamphlet" was transmitted from Syria to the Muslims of Spain, where it reappeared again in a sixteenth-century manuscript. Shortly after the composition of the "pamphlet", a Christian – perhaps an acquaintance of the Muslim author – supposedly decided to meet the challenge. He wrote a response in Greek under the name of the emperor Leo III, thus directly responding to the "pamphlet". This Greek text was retained by Christians, who took it for an authentic letter of the emperor Leo. Having finally reached Armenia, sometime before 900, the letter was translated by pseudo-Łewond.[96] Although Gaudeul does not mention either author, the logical conclusion is that news of the Islamic "pamphlet" also reached Theophanes in Constantinople, while Agapius was informed of both letters. As for the Latin version, Gaudeul considered it a much later creation, "perhaps" vaguely reminiscent of the "Greek original".[97]

The appeal of Gaudeul's thesis is evident: besides accounting for the similarities between these different sources, he introduced a new element in the discussion – the Islamic perspective on Christianity – that had previously been absent. Moreover, he suggested the existence of a direct polemical exchange between a Muslim and a

95 To be fair, Denise Cardaillac did briefly compare the two texts in her PhD thesis, but without drawing definitive conclusions. She seemed to agree with Jeffery that the "authentic" version of Leo's letter was the Armenian text, considered to be a translation from Greek; she also supposed that the Morisco author of the manuscript Madrid 4944 had re-written 'Umar's letter, based on pseudo-Łewond's "summary" (thus assuming that he read pseudo-Łewond?). Cf. Cardaillac (cf. fn. 54), p.145; Gaudeul (cf. fn. 52), p. 123.

96 Gaudeul (cf. fn. 52), pp. 127 – 29.

97 Gaudeul (cf. fn. 52), p. 116.

Christian, who perhaps knew each other – a circumstance that would shed new light on the history of Christian-Muslim relations. In fact, although Christians and Muslims did engage in written polemics, not many Christian apologetic works from that period are so precisely directed at a specific Muslim text.[98]

From a different angle, this very point exposes the weaknesses of Gaudeul's argument. In fact, his article does not give serious consideration to the historical background of that supposed discussion: it does not mention any example of Christian and Muslim polemical literature written in that period to demonstrate or at least support the plausibility of such an epistolary exchange. The article does not address the issue of how and why the Christian text reached Armenia but was not preserved in the original language, and it dismisses too quickly the Latin version. Gaudeul did not mention either Theophanes or Agapius, and did not take into account Gero's work concerning the "correspondence", although this had been available for about ten years. Moreover, he took for granted that the Christian response to the Muslim "pamphlet" was written in Greek, without adducing any argument to support this assumption. In fact, the question remains why the response to an Arabic letter might have been written in Greek – in a language, that is, that most probably the recipient of the response would not have been able to read.

I would like to highlight a further weak spot that is intrinsic to Gaudeul's thesis, but that nonetheless has not been raised as yet. His thesis rests on two assumptions: first, that 'Umar's and Leo's letters were always two distinct literary pieces, rather than two passages that were originally part of one single text. Second, that the Arabic text discovered by Sourdel in Istanbul is also an *Islamic* text, and that therefore the polemical "correspondence" was instigated by a Muslim author. In fact, there is reason to believe that this might not be the case.

The hypothesis that I would like to put forward, and that can be corroborated by textual, palaeographical, philological and historical evidence, is that the entire "correspondence" had in fact its origin in the Christian Melkite environment of the Syro-Palestinian monasteries.

98 This seems to have been the case of the philosopher and theologian Yaḥyā b. al-'Ādī (d. 364/965), who responded to an anti-Christian treatise written by the Mu'tazili Abū 'Īsā al-Warrāq (ninth-century). On Ibn al-'Ādī, see especially Emilio Platti, *Abū 'Īsā al-Warrāq, Yaḥyà ibn 'Ādī: de l'incarnation* (Leuven: Peeters, 1987), and *Yaḥyà ibn 'Ādī, théologien chrétien et philosophe arabe: sa théologie de l'incarnation* (Leuven: Departement Oriëntalistiek, 1983). In Byzantium, the only exception would be represented by the two letters against Islam attributed to Niketas Byzantios, which, however, are usually considered spurious and dated to the eleventh or the twelfth century; in addition, these polemical letters are very likely to respond to fictitious, and not authentic, Islamic epistles. See James Demetriades, *Nicetas of Byzantium and his Encounter with Islam: a study of the "Anatropē" and the two "Epistles" to Islam* (PhD, Hartford Seminary, 1972), p. 116; Griffith (cf. fn. 92), pp. 257–58. For an opposite opinion, see Khoury (cf. fn. 32), pp. 110–33.

5. A Christian Arabic disputation

There are several indicators that the two letters of 'Umar and Leo were originally part of a single dialogical work, which must be considered lost. Presumably, this work consisted of two distinct passages in the form of epistles: the first attributed to an eminent Muslim, the caliph 'Umar, and the second to an eminent Christian, the emperor Leo. There are also signs that this work was composed in a Christian milieu.

This means, in the first place, that the "correspondence" should be placed in the context of Christian apologetic-polemical works composed in the late-Umayyad and early-Abbasid period. Jeffery, Sourdel, and after them Hoyland, have noted that there are similarities between the arguments found in the "correspondence" and those found in other Christian apologies.[99] As highlighted by Hoyland, many of the issues tackled in the letter of Leo – such as the Islamic rules on marriage, or the "carnal" conception of paradise – find parallels in polemical works such as John of Damascus' *On heresies* (mid-eighth century), or the Syriac *Disputation of a Monk of Beth Ḥālē and a Muslim notable* (possibly eighth century).[100] The issue of the existence of many different Christian sects and many different languages used by the Christians appears in the dialogue between a Muslim *amīr* and the Patriarch John Sedra, a Syriac disputation from the ninth or the tenth century.[101] The anecdote of al-Ḥajjāj's reformation of the Qur'ān is used polemically by 'Abd al-Masīḥ al-Kindī in his apology of Christianity (tenth century?), but also, about a century earlier, in the Syriac text *The Affair of the Qur'ān*;[102] while the interpretation of Isaiah 21:7 with respect to Muḥammad is also mentioned in a letter by the *katholikos* Timothy I (d. 823 CE/207 H).[103]

99 See Jeffery (cf. fn. 7), pp. 279–80; Sourdel (cf. fn. 67), pp. 6–7; Hoyland 1997 (cf. fn. 3), pp. 499–501.

100 On these works, see for example Hoyland 1997 (cf. fn. 3), pp. 480–90, 465–72; Sidney Griffith, "Disputing with Islam in Syriac: The case of the Monk of Bêth Ḥalê and a Muslim Emir", *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 3/1 (2000), 29–54; Robert Hoyland, Andrew Palmer, Sebastian Brock, *The seventh century in the West-Syrian Chronicles, including two seventh-century Syriac apocalyptic texts* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 1993), pp. 170–71; Daniel Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam. The "Heresy of the Ishmaelites"* (Leiden: Brill, 1972).

101 See Barbara Roggema, "The debate between Patriarch John and an emir of the Mhggrāyē: A reconsideration of the earliest Christian-Muslim debate", in Martin Tamcke (ed.), *Christen und Muslime in Dialog. Christlich-muslimische Gespräche im muslimischen Orient des Mittelalters* (Beirut: Orient-Institut cler DMG, 2007), pp. 21–39; Hoyland 1997 (cf. fn. 3), pp. 459–65.

102 See Laura Bottini, *Al-Kindī: Apologia del Cristianesimo* (Milano: Jaca, 1998), pp. 9–38 (including a discussion of earlier studies); Barbara Roggema, "The Affair of the Qur'ān", CMR 1, pp. 595–596; Barbara Roggema, *The Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā: eastern Christian apologetics and apocalyptic in response to Islam* (Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2009), pp. 302–309.

103 This is the famous *Debate* between Timothy I and the caliph al-Mahdī (775–85 CE/158–69 H). See for example Martin Heimgartner, "Timothy I: Letter 59, Disputation with the caliph al-Mahdī", CMR 1, pp. 522–526; Sidney Griffith, "From Patriarch Timothy I to Ḥunayn ibn Isḥāq: Philosophy and Christian Apology in Abbasid Times; Reason, Ethics and Public Policy", in: Martin Tamcke (ed.) (cf. fn. 101), pp. 75–98; Hoyland 1997 (cf. fn. 3), pp. 472–475. On *taḥrīf*, see Roggema (cf.

Barbara Roggema has highlighted in passing the parallelism between Leo's complaint that Muslims would replace the word "Father" with the word "Lord", thus corrupting the Scriptures themselves, with a similar remark in the dialogue involving the patriarch John.[104] The themes treated in the "correspondence" are also of use in dating the text: for instance, the author was aware of the Islamic law on divorce, and furthermore of the use of Q. 33:37 and 2:223 in this regard, something which was discussed in *ḥadīth* literature since the mid-eighth century.[105] But the letter of Leo is not simply informed of Islamic traditions; it also uses them to an essentially apologetic end, for example by insisting that the Qur'ān itself recognizes Jesus as the Messiah.

Parallels with Christian apologetic-polemical works in Arabic and Syriac are found in Leo's answers as much as in 'Umar's questions. Sourdel himself found similarities between the "pamphlet" and the writings of Theodore Abū Qurra (probably ninth century), for instance regarding the discussion about Christian teaching on Satan and original sin, or about the Islamic view (which Abū Qurra put in the mouth of Muslims themselves) of the Hereafter.[106] The argument that the Islamic conquests are a proof that Muslims enjoy God's favour is also found in the debate between an Arab notable and a monk of Beth Ḥālē, and so is the accusation that Christ's true words are not respected by Christians.[107] And again, the reference to the story of the monk/teacher "Nestorius", who is said to have secretly instructed Muḥammad, was an extremely common *topos* among Christian polemicists from the early Abbasid times.[108] Some of the issues treated in 'Umar's letter can also be found in the letter of al-Hāshimī, which is part of al-Kindī's apology: thus, the practice of fasting, the conception of paradise, the originality of Muḥammad's message.[109]

The extent and variety of such similarities suggests that the "correspondence" was written under Islamic rule, in the same historical context that saw the emergence of Christian apologetic treatises in Arabic and Syriac. To be sure, some of the issues discussed by 'Umar in his letter are also mentioned by Muslim authors. One Islamic apology has survived from the eighth century, that is the *Letter to Constantine VI* attributed to Abū al-Rabī' b. al-Layth; while at least two polemical works against Chris-

fn. 102), pp. 28 – 29; Gabriel S. Reynolds, "On the Qur'ānic Accusation of Scriptural Falsification (*taḥrīf*) and Christian Anti-Jewish Polemic", JAOS, 130/2 (2010), pp. 189 – 202.

104 Roggema (cf. fn. 101), p. 24.

105 It is found, for example, in the chapter on divorce of the *Muwaṭṭa'* of Mālik b. Anās (d. 795 CE/ 179 H).

106 Sourdel (cf. fn. 67), p. 7. On Abū Qurra, see for example Sidney Griffith, "The view of Islam from the monasteries of Palestine in the early 'Abbasid period: Theodore Abū Qurrah and the Summa Theologiae Arabica", *Islam and Muslim-Christian Relations* 7:1 (2007), 9 – 28; Sidney Griffith, "Theodore Abū Qurrah's Arabic Tract on the Christian Practice of Venerating Images", JAOS, 105/1 (1985), 53 – 73; John C. Lamoreaux, "The Biography of Theodore Abū Qurrah Revisited", DOB 56 (2002), 25 – 40.

107 Cf. Hoyland 1997 (cf. fn. 3), pp. 465 – 72.

108 Roggema (cf. fn. 102) is entirely devoted to this theme.

109 Bottini (cf. fn. 102), pp. 41 – 72.

tianity were composed in the ninth century, namely by the Christian convert 'Alī b. Rabbān (d. 865 CE/250 H) and by 'Abd Allāh b. Qutayba (d. 889 CE/276 H).[110] These, however, are greatly outnumbered by the amount of parallels in Christian texts. Sourdel has pointed out that the accuracy with which the Gospel is quoted in the letter of 'Umar has very few analogies in Islamic works before the twelfth century.[111]

In addition, parallels to the narrative framework of the "correspondence" are found in a number of early Abbasid Christian texts, where a notable Muslim and a notable Christian engage in doctrinal polemics. This is the case with the debate between the caliph al-Mahdī and Timothy I, recorded by Timothy in one of his writings; the debate between a Muslim *amīr* and the patriarch of Antioch John; the debate between a Muslim notable and a monk of Beth Hālē; and the so-called *Response of a monk* to the questions of a Muslim *shaykh*. Furthermore, there is a striking parallel to the "correspondence" of Leo and 'Umar in the apology attributed to al-Kindī, which consists of two letters: in the first, a notable Muslim promotes the views of Islam; in the second, a knowledgeable Christian replies point by point, scorning the former's arguments. [112]

It is therefore plausible that the two letters represent two parts of what was originally a dialogical work, because such dialogical works are indeed attested. This hypothesis is strengthened by the fact that the Armenian summary of 'Umar's letter corresponds to the Arabic-Aljamiado version, and in particular to the first part of the Aljamiado text, which suggests that pseudo-Łewond had at his disposal both letters – as, after all, he himself tells us. Similarly, Agapius' account mentions both letters, giving a brief description of each. Further confirmation comes from a close analysis of Sourdel's "Muslim pamphlet", which, in fact, points in the direction of a Christian milieu.

At a literary level, it is first noteworthy that the issues raised by the Muslim in the letter of 'Umar (Arabic and Aljamiado) seem to be aimed precisely at provoking Leo's

110 Sourdel (cf. fn. 67), pp. 6–7; Hoyland 1997 (cf. fn. 3), p. 500. On this topic, see for example Sabine Schmidtke, "Muslim Perceptions and Receptions of the Bible" (public lecture, Princeton Institute for Advanced Studies, Oct 24, 2014), published at https://video.ias.edu/schmidtke-lecture (last accessed March 5, 2015); Barbara Roggema, "The Letter of Abū al-Rabī' b. al-Layth which he wrote for al-Rashīd to the Byzantine emperor Constantine", CMR 1, pp. 349–353.

111 On the use of Christian Scriptures in Islamic works, see Sabine Schmidtke, "The Muslim Reception of Biblical Materials: Ibn Qutayba and his *A'lām al-nubuwwa*", *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 22/3 (2011), 249–74; Sabine Schmitdke, "The Muslim Reception of the Bible: al-Māwārdī and his *Kitāb a'lām al-nubuwwa*", in Carmela Baffioni et al. (ed.), *Le Sacre Scritture e le loro interpetazioni* (Rome: Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Bulzoni ed., forth-coming); David Thomas, "The Bible in early Muslim anti-Christian polemic", *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 7/1 (1996), 29–38.

112 See Sidney Griffith, "A 'Melkite' Arabic Text from Sinai and the Doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation in 'Arab Orthodox' Apologetics", in Emmanouela Grypeou et al. (ed.), *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam* (Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2006), pp. 277–309; Laura Bottini, "The Apology of al-Kindī", CMR 1, pp. 585–94. On Christian dialogues and disputations more generally, see Averil Cameron, *Dialoguing in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014).

answers. Thus, for example, 'Umar's starts his questions with a wrong reference to the book of Job, to be immediately reprimanded by Leo, who uses his misquotations to show that Muslims are ignorant of the Scriptures. He also attributes false doctrines to Christianity, which is easy for the respondent to ridicule. The entry on 'Umar's letter in the series *Christian-Muslim Relations* admits that, oddly enough, the author of the "pamphlet" adduced in support of Muḥammad's prophethood those same Qur'ānic verses that were usually impugned by Christians "to prove precisely the contrary".[113] As Laura Bottini has remarked with reference to the correspondence of al-Hāshimī and al-Kindī, the Muslim's letter appears to be aimed to introduce the arguments of the Christian respondent, rather than to confute the Christian religion.[114] The Arabic-Aljamiado text is also curiously embellished with a great number of references to the New Testament and citations of Jesus' sayings; if this is not evidence of its Christian character (just as Leo's Qur'ānic references do not indicate that the letter is Islamic), it is still a feature that is worth highlighting.[115]

There are additional reasons for thinking that the Arabic "pamphlet" reproduces a Christian text. These can be summarised under two headings: palaeography and philology.

As for palaeography, the manuscript discovered by Sourdel is a small, incomplete booklet in parchment. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, it was moved to Istanbul from Damascus, where it was found among the documents stored in the Umayyad Mosque.[116] The discovery of the Damascus "Genizah" revealed, among other things, an incredible number of Christian texts in Greek, Syriac and Arabic, including some late-antique texts that were re-used as palimpsests in the Islamic period. The depository also contained several Armenian manuscripts, from the tenth century onwards, as well as Georgian manuscripts and fragments in Coptic.[117] Arabic Islamic documents were found as well; however, the palaeographic features of our "pamphlet" resemble more closely, as Sourdel recognizes, that of Arabic Chris-

113 Roggema (cf. fn. 73), p. 384. Similarly, Cardaillac has noticed that the Islamic profession of faith stated by the caliph in the Aljamiado letter of 'Umar was expressed in terms that would be easily acceptable also for a Christian: (cf. fn. 54) vol. I, p. 102.

114 "La lettera del musulmano sembra destinata più a introdurre le argomentazioni dell'avversario che a confutare i dogmi della religione rivale (...). Il musulmano propone dell'Islam, al contrario di quanto ci si aspetterebbe, proprio quegli aspetti attaccati dal Cristianesimo.": Bottini (cf. fn. 102), p. 12.

115 Also pointed out by Sourdel (cf. fn. 67), p. 3, 9 – 10.

116 Sourdel (cf. fn. 67), p. 1; Dominique Sourdel, Janine Sourdel-Thomine, "Nouveaux documents sur l'histoire religieuse et sociale de Damas au moyen Age", REI 31 (1964), 1 – 25; Dominique Sourdel, Janine Sourdel-Thomine, "A propos de documents de la grande mosquée de Damas conservé à Istanbul", REI 32 (1965), 75 – 85; Arianna D'Ottone, "Manuscripts as Mirrors of a Multilingual and Multicultural Society: The Case of the Damascus Find", in Barbara Crostini (ed.), *Convivencia in Byzantium? Cultural Exchanges in a Multi-Ethnic and Multi-Lingual Society. Selected Papers from the European Foundation Exploratory Workshop, Dublin, 1 – 3 October 2010* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 2013), pp. 63 – 88.

117 D'Ottone (cf. fn. 116), p. 71.

tian writings from the ninth and the tenth centuries.[118] Its rather accurate script, characterized by sinuous elongated letters, such as *alif* and *lām*, and by a particular curved *dāl*, with almost parallel arms, has been compared in particular with that of two manuscripts: Paris BN arabe 6725, which contains a collection of different Christian texts, including a fragment copied in Jerusalem in 917 or 918 (*Anno Mundi* 6410 according to the Alexandrian calendar) by the scribe David al-'Asqalānī (cf. ff. 5r – 5v); and Vatican cod. arab. 71, which was copied at Mar Sabas in Rabī' I 272 AH, that is September 885, for the Monastery of St Catherine by the scribe Anthony David of Mar Sabas.[119] The peculiar notation of *qāf* with one dot underneath the letter occurs also in other Christian Arabic manuscripts, such as two fragments of the Gospel of Matthew and a ninth-century Arabic translation of the book of Job, mentioned by Bernhard Levin.[120] Two peculiar letters that appear in the "pamphlet" – a "curved" *dāl* with parallel arms and a *ṭā'* with the ascender slightly bending at the top – are mentioned by François Déroche as a characteristic sign of Christian manuscripts from the early Abbasid period.[121] Further comparisons might be possible, for example with the Arabic Gospel of Vat. Borg. Ar. 95, or with ninth- and tenth-century manuscripts of the Sinai collection (for example, Sinai ar. NF Perg. 14 and Sinai ar. NF Perg. 16).[122] These palaeographic features suggested to Sourdel that the "pamphlet" had been copied in Syria-Palestine, in a period between the mid-ninth and the early-tenth century; but it might also have suggested to him that it had been copied in a Christian environment. Obviously, comparisons could be drawn also with non-Qur'ānic Islamic manuscripts dated to the same period – which, however, are admittedly fewer in number.[123] The palaeographic evidence alone is not sufficient to postulate that the "pamphlet" was copied by a Christian scribe. Rather, it is the sum of indicators, including the palaeographic data, that points in this direction.

As for philology, both Sourdel and Gaudeul have noticed in passing that the Arabic of the "pamphlet" is strikingly "awkward", unusually inaccurate.[124] What they

118 Sourdel (cf. fn. 67), p. 2; but see especially François Déroche, "Les Manuscrits Arabes datés du IIIe/IXe siècle", REI 55 – 57 (1987 – 1989), 343 – 368 (esp. 353 – 365).

119 Sourdel (cf. fn. 67), pp. 3 – 4. Cf. William Wright, *Facsimiles of Manuscripts and Inscriptions. Palaeographical Society, Oriental Series* (London: William Clowes & Son, 1875 – 83), plate XX; http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8406179n/f20.image (last accessed March 3, 2015). See also Déroche (cf. fn. 118), p. 360; Griffith, "Anthony David of Baghdad, Scribe and Monk of Mar Sabas: Arabic in the Monasteries of Palestine", *Church History* 58/1 (1989), 7 – 19 (8 – 13); Paul Géhin, "Manuscrits sinaïtiques dispersés I: les fragments syriaques et arabes de Paris", OC 90 (2006), 72 – 92 ; Paul Géhin, "Manuscrits sinaïtiques dispersés III: les fragments syriaques de Londres et de Birmingham", OC 94 (2010), 14 – 57 (56).

120 Bernhard Levin, *Die Griechisch-Arabische Evangelien-Übersetzung: Vat. Borg. Ar. 95 und Ber. Orient. Oct. 1108* (Uppsala: Almquist & Wiksells, 1938), pp. 11 – 16.

121 Déroche (cf. fn. 118), p. 360.

122 Yiannis Meimaris, *Katalogos tōn neōn arabikōn kheirographōn tēs Ieras Monēs Aghias Aikaterinēs tou Orous Sina* (Athens: Ethnikon Hidryma Ereunōn, 1985), p. 7 (Ar. p. 24), pl. 16 – 17, 19 – 21.

123 For a list, see Déroche (cf. fn. 118), pp. 345 – 50.

124 Sourdel (cf. fn. 67), pp. 12 – 13; Gaudeul (cf. fn. 52), p. 126.

meant is that the author used a form of "Middle" or "sub-standard" Arabic, not entirely compliant to the rules of Qur'ānic Arabic.[125] This means that, supposedly, he was not a Muslim theologian. The "awkwardness" of this text can in effect be best understood when weighed against the features of Christian Arabic texts.[126] The available corpus of Arabic manuscripts written by Christian scribes in the early Abbasid period shows a certain number of recognizable variations from the classical standard; such variations were produced by Arabic-speaking Christians who, while attempting to write in the language of the Qur'ān, were naturally influenced by spoken Arabic and spoken Aramaic, and by factors such as bilingualism and familiarity with other literary languages, especially Greek and Syriac. Variations vary from scribe to scribe, being more or less accentuated, more or less distant from the classical standard. On the whole, however, and especially when combined with palaeographic and codicological data, they give the picture of a specific linguistic and cultural environment, that is the Christian Melkite environment of Syria-Palestine, that of the cloisters of Mar Sabas, Mar Khariton and St Catherine, and of the patriarchates of Antioch and Jerusalem.[127]

The Arabic "pamphlet" does not present all of the characteristic features mentioned by Joshua Blau in his *Grammar of Christian Arabic*. However, it does present some of them, such as a quite simple syntax, that avoids alternating paratactic and hypotactic sentences; a tendency to reduce all verbal moods to the "indicative"; an incorrect use of numerals; the tendency to use oblique cases even when a "nominative" is required. Those features are not applied systematically in the text, which indicates, following Blau, an unsuccessful attempt to write according to the rules of Classical Arabic ("hypo-" and "hyper-corrections"), rather than a phonetic or dialectal phenomenon. Similarly, the inappropriate use of the subjunctive and final ending *–n*, which is occasionally added when it should not, is considered a classic instance of "hyper-correction".[128]

125 See Cornelis H. M. Kees Versteegh, *The Arabic language* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 114 – 29; Joshua Blau, *A Handbook of Middle Arabic* (Jerusalem, Max Schloessinger Memorial Foundation, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2002); Benjamin Hary, "Middle Arabic. Proposals for New Terminology", *al-'Arabiyya* 22 (1989), 19 – 36.

126 Joshua Blau, *A Grammar of Christian Arabic, based mainly on South-Palestinian texts from the first millennium* (Louvain: Secrétariat du Corpus SCO, 1966 – 67), 3 volumes; see also Sidney Griffith, "The Monks of Palestine and the Growth of Christian Literature in Arabic", *The Muslim World* 78/1 (1988), 1/28.

127 Griffith (cf. fn. 126), pp. 6 – 12; "Greek into Arabic: Life and Letters in the Monasteries of Palestine in the Ninth Century: The Example of the *Summa Theologiae Arabica*", Byz 56 (1986), 117 – 38; id. "Stephen of Ramlah and the Christian Kerygma in Arabic in Ninth-Century Palestine", JEH 36/1 (1985), 23 – 45 (37 – 39).

128 Besides Blau (cf. fn. 126), see Kees Versteegh (cf. fn. 125), 114 – 129 (123 – 129); Joshua Blau, *The emergence and linguistic background of Judeo-Arabic* (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 1999, third revised edition), pp. 24 – 30; Joshua Blau, "The state of research in the field of the linguistic study of Middle Arabic", *Arabica* 28 (1981), 187 – 203 (on "hyper" and "hypo" corrections).

There is obviously nothing "Christian" about such linguistic phenomena, which are found in fact also in Islamic and Jewish texts, particularly from later periods; however, they are especially recurrent in Christian manuscripts produced in Syria-Palestine in the ninth and the tenth centuries.[129] In addition to using a "sub-standard" variety of Arabic, the "pamphlet" also shows the influence of Greek in its reference to two Church Fathers, Basil of Caesarea and John Chrysostom. This circumstance itself is somewhat at odds with the idea of a Muslim author, but, as a confirmation, one should note that the name of Chrysostom reflects unequivocally its Greek form.[130] The occurrence of other names, such as *fasḥ* for "Easter" (versus Classical Arabic *faṣḥ*), seems to reflect both the influence of the spoken language (replacement of the emphatic "ṣ" with a non-emphatic "s"), and the influence of Greek (*pascha*). To these, one might possibly add the influence of Greek on the Aljamiado translation, which appears when proper names are mentioned.[131]

Both Sourdel and Gaudeul were aware of those curious features. However, they preferred to think that the Muslim author of the "pamphlet" had been in close contact with Christians, or even that he had been living with Christians, rather than seriously considering the possibility that he was, in fact, a non-Muslim.[132] When taken together, these various indicators point rather clearly to the Christian milieu of Syria-Palestine, the same milieu where, between the eighth and the tenth century, an entire patrimony of Christian Arabic literature was being built.[133] The library of St Catherine at Sinai, the manuscripts produced at the cloisters of Mar Sabas and Mar Khariton, and those copied in Jerusalem by scribes such as David al-Asqalānī, bear witness to the construction of a Christian culture in the Arabic language. This entailed the translation of liturgical and hagiographical texts into Arabic, but also the creation of a new apologetic-polemical literature in response to Islam.

A last piece of evidence from this very environment must now be added to the picture: this is the fifth and last known version of the "correspondence" between 'Umar and Leo. Although Mark Swanson has recently acknowledged its existence precisely with respect to the "correspondence", this text has long remained neglected.[134] A detailed study of this text was unfortunately not possible in the present circumstances; what is known about it, however, is sufficient at least to suggest that it may represent the key to understanding the "correspondence" of Leo and 'Umar. Ioannis Meimaris recorded it among the "new Arabic documents" discovered at

129 Cf. Joshua Blau, "Are 'Judaeo-Arabic' and 'Christian Arabic' Misnomers Indeed?", *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 24 (2000), 49–57.

130 Sourdel (cf. fn. 67), p. 29.

131 Cf. for example Cardaillac (cf. fn. 54), vol. II, pp. 214–15 (f. 88).

132 Sourdel (cf. fn. 67), p. 3, 11–12; Gaudeul (cf. fn. 52), pp. 126–27.

133 On this subject, see especially the work of Sidney Griffith, for example the above-mentioned articles cf. fn. 126, pp. 6–28; cf. fn. 119, pp. 8–16; cf. fn. 112, pp. 277–83.

134 Mark Swanson, "The Arabic Letter of Leo III to 'Umar II", CMR 1, pp. 377–380 (376).

the monastery of St Catherine in 1975.[135] Sinai ar. NF pap. 14 is described as a manuscript of 90 folios containing two texts in Arabic: 1) an anonymous Questions-and-Answers work addressed to the "orthodox believers"; 2) the epistle of Leo, emperor of the Romans, to 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Azīz, Commander of the Believers (*min Iliyūn mālik al-Rūm ilā 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Azīz amīr al-mu'minīn. Salām*). The script in which the letter was written is comparable to that of the Arabic "pamphlet"; the date of the copy might be the late-ninth or early-tenth century. Based on the few folios that I was able to see, the Arabic letter of Leo addresses the question of Jesus' divinity and incarnation – with reference to Gospel passages – and the Christian version of the fall of Satan.[136] Interestingly, this point is also found in the Arabic, Aljamiado, Armenian and Latin versions of the "correspondence". What is more, Leo explains the mystery of the Trinity by using the very same metaphor of the sun and the rays that is used in the Armenian and the Latin texts; although this is a traditional patristic image, the coincidence is striking. In various passages, the author makes use of Qur'ānic phraseology and refers to Islamic concepts (alluding for example to Q. 2:30, 4:171), in a way that recalls the style of the Arabic "pamphlet".[137] On the other hand, this text can be compared to another work preserved at Sinai, an eighth-century apologetic treatise in defence of the Trinity.[138]

Mark Swanson has suggested that Sinai ar. NF pap. 14 might represent the first letter written in the name of Leo III by a Christian author: it is this first letter that the Muslim author of the "pamphlet" possibly found and to which he decided to reply.[139] Swanson thus accepted Gaudeul's thesis, but reversed the order of the exchange, positing a Christian letter at the beginning. However, the Sinai manuscript might also be seen as confirmation that the entire "correspondence" was created in the Melkite milieu of Syro-Palestinian monasteries.

6. The various strands of a complex textual tradition, from Sinai to Spain

According to Swanson's analysis, "it is possible that the composition of 'letters of Leo' was something of a standard exercise in early Christian apologetics with respect to Islam".[140] If this were the case, the Armenian and the Arabic (Sinai) versions at our

135 Meimaris (cf. fn. 122), p. 41, 116.

136 Swanson (cf. fn. 134), pp. 378–379.

137 Cf. also the use of the Qur'ān in Abū Qurra's works, in the Melkite treatise usually called *On the Triune Nature of God*, or in the *Summary of the Ways of Faith*, copied by the monk Stephen of Ramla in 877; the three works were discussed by Sidney Griffith in "The view of Islam" (cf. fn. 106).

138 See Mark Swanson, "*Fī Tathlīth Allāh al-wāḥīd*", CMR 1, pp. 330–33, including more bibliography on this text.

139 Swanson (cf. fn. 134), p. 379.

140 Swanson (cf. fn. 134), p. 379.

disposal would be similar but unrelated texts, written as an exercise by two different authors; presumably, the Latin text would be another "exercise" by another Christian author, while the Arabic "pamphlet" would represent the response of a Muslim, who had somehow come across one of these Christian letters (or even across a further non-extant "exercise"). This hypothesis is not implausible, but has the disadvantage of neglecting the quantity of precise, even word-by-word correspondences between all these various versions, reducing them to curious coincidences. In addition, since it relies on Gaudeul's thesis, this explanation is also subject to the same criticisms.

The simplest way to explain the many symmetries between the extant versions of the "correspondence" is to suppose that they depend on an original common source. As it has been shown, the evidence points to Syria-Palestine as the most likely place of composition. This is the region, in fact, where the Arabic "pamphlet" was copied and stored, and where the Aljamiado text claims to come from; it is also the region where the original Arabic text at the remote origin of Champier's translation was probably composed, as Gero convincingly argued. As for pseudo-Łewond, contacts between Armenians and the monasteries of Syria-Palestine were intense in early Islamic times, and the Armenian community remained substantial and influential in the region for a long period, as also shown by the number of Armenian manuscripts found at St Catherine's and in the depository of the Umayyad Mosque of Damascus. While it is unlikely that the "original" letter of Leo was composed in Greek, as we have seen, it is definitively likely that someone in Syria translated the original common source from Arabic into Armenian; or from Arabic into Greek, and finally into Armenian. The latter possibility is appealing, as it would account for both the Graecisms and the Arabicisms contained in the letter of Leo.[141] Only an Arabic common source, however, can be at the origin of the parallels between the Arabic "pamphlet" and the Aljamiado, the "pamphlet" and the Armenian, the "pamphlet" and the Latin, the Aljamiado and the Armenian, the Armenian and the Latin, and even the Armenian, the Latin and the Arabic (Sinai) letter of Leo. All these sources intersect with one another in Syria-Palestine; indeed, the discovery of Sinai ar. NF pap. 14 suggests strongly that the author of this common source might have been a Palestinian monk. Documents such as the treatise on the "Triune nature of God" and the debate between a monk and a Muslim *shaykh*, both attested only in the library of St Catherine, should be considered the touchstones of the milieu that created the "correspondence" of Leo and 'Umar.

None of the extant versions represents today the "authentic" correspondence. Sinai ar. NF pap. 14 is probably the text closest to the original, but it would be necessary to study the manuscript more closely (which I hope I will be able to do in the

141 On the other hand, one should also consider the possibility that the original Arabic source, written by a Christian author in Syria-Palestine, contained Graecisms itself, and that these were reproduced in the Armenian translation.

near future) to be able to draw more certain conclusions. To re-evoke the patristic simile, the image that might illustrate better the relationship between these texts is that of the sun, a Christian Arabic polemical dialogical work at the centre, and its rays, the various strands of the textual transmission that departed from that work.

One strand leads to the Eastern common source known to Theophanes – most probably via George the Synkellos – and to Agapius of Manbij. A second strand leads to pseudo-Ełewond, who had access to either a Greek or an Armenian translation, which he probably re-worked; how many reshuffles occurred between the original text and pseudo-Ełewond it is difficult to say. This author also abridged 'Umar's letter in a short summary, being not interested in reproducing it. A third strand leads to the Latin version, which already Gero considered to be based on an ancient Melkite treatise.[142] This text was translated into Latin possibly in the Crusader Levant, before being reworked by Champier in the Renaissance; it also clearly went through some severe abridgment. It is not possible to say whether there ever was any Greek intermediate between the original and the Latin version. Champier does say that the "Chaldean" text came from Greek, but this is not reflected in the text as we have it, and might be simply an inference from the letter's attribution to the emperor Leo.[143]

A fourth strand leads to the Arabic version, the "pamphlet", which, as argued above, is very likely to be a Christian copy. Only the central part of 'Umar's letter is preserved in the Damascus manuscript. The length of the first part, preserved only in Aljamiado, indicates that the Damascus manuscript is short of several folios, both at the beginning and at the end. Thus, it seems not at all unlikely that this copy initially contained also Leo's letter.[144] If, on the other hand, we were to assume that the Arabic "pamphlet" never included Leo's letter and that it was actually copied by a Muslim, it is still very likely that this scribe was copying from a Christian text, maybe inadvertently.

Finally, one strand of this complex textual tradition somehow reached Spain, where the Morisco community retained it and used it for apologetic purposes. The

142 Gero (cf. fn. 8), pp. 156–62.

143 Gero (cf. fn. 8), p. 158.

144 Something similar might be argued for the Arabic (Sinai) letter of Leo. This text, in fact, was transmitted in a composite manuscript, made partly in paper and partly in parchment. According to Meimaris, the following folios of Sinai ar. NF pap. 14 are in parchment: ff. 1, 20–21, 40–41, 60–61, 80–81, and 82–89. This pattern suggests that parchment folios were inserted at regular intervals to strengthen the ligature of the book. The composite nature of this manuscript is also shown by the two different hands in which the two works (i.e. the questions-and-answers work and Leo's letter) were copied, the text of Leo's letter being written in a seemingly older palaeographic style. The last block of folios is entirely in parchment. Since Leo's letter covers this last block, it is tempting to think that the copyist took it from an older manuscript, before combining it with the questions-and-answers work. This might mean that the letter was extrapolated from a longer work, which is now lost, and which possibly included 'Umar's letter. Like pseudo-Ełewond, the creator of Sinai ar. NF pap. 14 showed no interest in preserving that portion of the dialogue. This is obviously only an inferential reconstruction, but one that does not appear implausible.

prestige of the two pseudo-authors in their respective religious traditions explains why the two parts of the "correspondence" came to be transmitted separately. The moment in which this rupture occurred is perfectly visible in the *Chronicle* of pseudo-Łewond, who clearly had at his disposal both parts of the "correspondence", but who decided to preserve in length only the one that interested him. Similarly, the letter of 'Umar at some point was appropriated by Muslims, thus generating an "Islamic strand", which would explain al-Mubarrad's knowledge of the exchange. According to the Aljamiado text, in fact, the letter of 'Umar was "passed on unto" a Muslim scholar in Ḥimṣ already in the eighth century.[145] On the other hand, the sixteenth-century Aljamiado version is the only one that bears a recognizable Islamic character; a Muslim appropriation, therefore, might have happened at a very late stage. Nor is it possible to rule out altogether that the Morisco copyist received this text from a Mozarab (Christian) informant, or that he found it in a Mozarab source. The number and quality of New Testament references in the Aljamiado letter might in fact point to this conclusion. If so, however, the Muslim copyist clearly decided not to transmit Leo's contribution to the dialogue.

Once the jigsaw has been so recomposed, it is possible to venture some further remarks on the dating of the original Arabic source. On the one hand, the two Arabic manuscripts, plus the attestation of the exchange in Agapius and al-Mubarrad, show that this text was already in circulation by the tenth century. Even if the traditional dating of Pseudo-Łewond's *Chronicle* were contested, Agapius' passage would put a secure *terminus ante quem* in 941, since he knew the text in some detail. Given the plausible existence of an Eastern common source used by both Agapius and Theophanes, the *terminus ante quem* might be even traced back to the composition of the *Chronography*. Theophanes' description of the exchange, however, is somewhat cursory, and it seems likely that this author never read the text of the "correspondence". One might even wonder whether it was precisely Theophanes' mention of an exchange between the two rulers that prompted a Melkite author to create such a text; in this case, the *Chronography* would be the *terminus post quem*, rather than the *terminus ante quem*, for the creation of the Arabic apology. This is, however, a less likely hypothesis: besides the existence of the Eastern common source, one might notice also that, had the Melkite author drawn on the *Chronography*, he would probably have known that Theophanes did not consider Leo a pious emperor – let alone a defender of holy images. Indeed, the approach of our text to the question of images helps to contextualise its composition.

The veneration of images is mentioned twice in the "correspondence": once as a polemical question by 'Umar, preserved in the Arabic "pamphlet", and once as a reply by Leo, preserved in pseudo-Łewond. In the former, the author shows to know that quotations by Basil of Caesarea and John Chrysostom were used to sup-

145 Cardaillac (cf. fn. 54), vol. II, p. 195; Gaudeul (cf. fn 52), p. 125.

port the veneration of images.[146] In the latter, Leo defends the use of holy images, but maintaining a somewhat "soft" iconophile position:

> We honour the Cross because of the suffering of the Incarnate God borne thereon, as we learned from a commandment given by God to Moses [ref. to Exodus 28:36–38], and from the message of the Prophets. [...] As for images, we do not pay them less respect, not having received any commandment to that effect in the Holy Scriptures. We have, however, in the Old Testament the divine command which authorizes Moses to have the figures of the Cherubim in the tabernacle of witness. Likewise, animated by a sincere love for the disciples of the Lord, and burning with love for the Incarnate Lord himself, we have always felt a desire to conserve their images, which have come down to us from their times as their living representations. Having them before us, we joyfully glorify God.[147]

This suggests that the author of the "correspondence" lived in an environment where Leo III could still be presented as an iconophile, in spite of some internal debate concerning the doctrine of the Church Fathers on the matter. In other words, although he was familiar with some controversy, he seems to have been unaware of the fact that Byzantine iconophile authors – at least after 787 – portrayed Leo III's religious policy as the very source of that controversy.[148] Therefore, either this author did not know that the iconophile position was also an anti-Isaurian one, or he did not know that the emperor Leo had been concerned with the use of icons. Both hypotheses corroborate an Eastern, Syrian-Palestinian origin for this text, and are compatible with a relatively early dating. The iconoclast controversy, in fact, seems to have involved only marginally the Christians in the caliphate, where the issue of images had an inter-religious more than an intra-religious character.[149] The anonymous author appears in sum to have acted independently of Byzantine anti-Isaurian propaganda, independently of the 787 council, and independently of iconophile works such as John of Damascus' sermons on icons.[150] Indeed, his choice to portray Leo as the champion of Christianity should be attributed to the emperor's political achievements in the fight against Islam, rather than to his domestic policies. In fact, before becoming the object of iconophile polemics in Byzantium, the emperor had been the hero of

146 Sourdel (cf. fn. 67), p. 29.

147 Arzoumanian (cf. fn. 23), pp. 99–100. Cf. Hoyland 1997 (cf. fn. 3), p. 499; Meyendorff (cf. fn. 26), p. 127.

148 On Leo's iconoclasm, see especially Haldon, Brubaker (cf. fn. 8), pp. 69–155, partly based on Speck (cf. fn. 8); and Gero (cf. fn. 8).

149 On this matter, see for example Sidney Griffith, "Eutychius of Alexandria on the Emperor Theophilus and Iconoclasm in Byzantium: A Tenth-Century Moment in Christian Apologetics in Arabic", Byz 52 (1982), 154–90; "Images, Islam, and Christian icons: A Moment in the Christian-Muslim Encounter in Early Islamic Times", in P. Canivet, J.–P. Coquais (ed.), *La Syrie de Byzance à l'Islam. VIIe–VIIIe siècles* (Damascus: Institut Français de Damas, 1992), 121–38; Juan Signes Codoñer, "Melkites and Icon Worship during the Iconoclast Period", DOB 67 (2013), 135–87.

150 On the latter, see Haldon, Brubaker (cf. fn. 8), 183–84, 260–93; and id. *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era (ca. 680–850). The Sources* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 248–50.

the failed Muslim siege of Constantinople (717–18), and the author of an important truce with the caliph 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Azīz. Such political successes were all the more significant for Christian authors in the caliphate, since they occurred at a time witnessing an increase in the number of Christian converts to Islam, the creation of new strategies concerning the social-political assimilation of non-Muslims, and the beginning of more clear-cut separations between religious groups.[151] While falling within the literary convention of "notable" Christian-Muslim debates, the "correspondence" shows therefore to be charged with special political significance.

7. Conclusions

The "correspondence" of 'Umar II and Leo III, thus reconstructed, becomes a precious witness to the creation of a Christian Arabic culture in the centres of Syria-Palestine under Islamic rule. As the extant evidence indicates the late-eighth century as the most plausible dating, the "correspondence" can be considered one of the earliest examples of Christian apologetic literature originally composed in Arabic.

Temporarily, the original eighth-century disputation is to be considered lost. The absence of an "authentic" prototype, however, does not lessen the importance of the "correspondence" as a literary and historical source. On the contrary, the complex and fragmented transmission history of this source adds to its interest, allowing us to investigate practices of translation and literary transmission in the early medieval period. Indeed, "authenticity" and "authorship" may not be the best categories to appreciate the value of this source; the various "strands" that have been delineated above are significant precisely in that they provide different interpretations and adaptations of a common source. It is surprising, for example, that the same text could be used by an Armenian author writing under Islamic rule to celebrate the piety of a Byzantine emperor, and polemically by a Muslim author in sixteenth-century "reconquered" Spain. Individuating the origin of this rich textual tradition is thereby useful to highlight variations as much as communalities.

The various use of Scriptural references in the extant versions of the two letters is a case in point: while some of the Qur'ānic references are common to virtually all versions, Biblical references overlap only scarcely. This indicates that the authors adapted the text to their particular interests and tastes, by choosing to adduce different sets of Biblical verses; or to their knowledge of the Scriptures, by providing var-

151 See for example Sidney Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 129–55; Milka Levy-Rubin, *Non-Muslims in the Early Islamic Empire: From Surrender to Coexistence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 58–68, 88–103; and id. "Shurūṭ 'Umar and its Alternatives: The Legal Debate on the Status of the *Dhimmīs*", *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 30 (2005), 170–206.

iants of the same verses, as they drew on different florilegia, Biblical translations, or even their own memory.[152]

In addition, these extant versions give us a glimpse of the life of Chalcedonian communities outside of Byzantium, namely in Syria-Palestine, but also of the relationship between Byzantine and non-Byzantine communities, highlighting networks of communication between Constantinople, Syria-Palestine and Armenia. Lastly, the "correspondence" is an interesting testimony to the reception of the figure of Leo III among Christians who lived under Islamic rule, as a defender of orthodoxy and traditional Christian doctrines against the challenge of Islam – in the very same period in which, in Byzantium, the religious policies of his dynasty triggered controversy and the gradual rise of an iconophile and anti-Isaurian literary culture.

152 On the use of florilegia in Christian disputations, see Cameron (cf. fn. 112), pp. 33 – 34.