CHRISTIANS AT THE HEART OF ISLAMIC RULE

Church Life and Scholarship in 'Abbasid Iraq

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MUSLIMS AS CRYPTO-IDOLATERS—A THEME IN THE CHRISTIAN PORTRAYAL OF ISLAM IN THE NEAR EAST

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Probably the most important objection of Muslims to Christianity is that Christians, contrary to what they themselves claim, are not true monotheists. Because of their belief in the Trinity, Christians have constantly been accused of attributing partners to God, of being 'associators', *mushrikūn*. It is well known that a large part of Christian apologetics vis-à-vis Islam is devoted to the defence against this accusation. The veneration of the cross and of icons was another aspect of Christianity that elicited criticism from Muslims. In their eyes it was idolatry and hence another sign of *shirk*.

This polemic about polytheism and idolatry also went in the opposite direction, as one can see from the numerous Christian writings about Islam in which Islam is dismissed as some sort of idolatry. What jumps to mind are 'Mahomet, Apollo and Tervagant', the so-called gods of Islam according to the *Chanson de Roland*. They became a symbol of Christian misconception and misrepresentation of Islam in Medieval Europe.[1] In the thought world of Christians living in the Islamic empire a similar type of image making can be detected. Because of their linguistic and social proximity to Muslims they would not have been able to present a convincing portrait of Islam as polytheism, as Europeans did. And yet, they were keen to point out that Muslims tended towards idolatry. Various references to supposed idolatrous aspects of the Muslim faith are scattered through a large number of Eastern Christian writings about Islam. It is often suggested that these were the inheritance from pre-Islamic Arabian paganism.

The purpose of this study is to discuss this motif as it is found in Muslim-Christian literary debates, correspondence and apologetic treatises, from the different Christian communities and regions of the *Dār al-Islām*, from

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[1] See Appendix A, 'The Imputation of Idolatry to Islam', in Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West. The Making of an Image*, rev. edn, Oxford, 1997, pp. 338–43; John V. Tolan, 'Muslims as Pagan Idolaters in Chronicles of the First Crusade', in Michael Frassetto and David R. Blanks eds, *Western Views of Islam in Medieval and Early Modern Europe. Perception of Other*, New York, 1999, pp. 97–117; Jennifer Bray, 'The Mohammetan and Idolatry', in W. J. Sheils ed., *Persecution and Tolerance* (*Studies in Church History* 21), *s.l.*, 1984, pp. 89–98.

Umayyad times through the 'Abbasid era.[2] Some of the examples which I will discuss below have already received attention in modern scholarship for a variety of reasons. They have been studied as aspects of Christian polemic against Islam, but also as possible sources of information about the pre-Islamic religion of the Arabs and about the emergence of Islam. Although these two objectives seem to lie at opposite poles, in reality the pursuit of either one inevitably involves the other, because in either case the material concerned has to be sifted through in order to distinguish willful and/or innocent distortions from the aspects of Islam that Muslims would have recognized as belonging to their religion. In the case of texts from early Islamic times, such an evaluation of the Christian writings about Islam often presents us with an 'equation with two unknowns', because much of what the Islamic sources themselves say about the genesis and early history of the Islamic religion is rejected by modern scholars as non-contemporary and apologetic.[3]

Precisely on the topic of polemic about polytheism, a recent monograph has underlined the difficulty of sifting polemic from historical material. This is Gerald Hawting's *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam. From Polemic to History*,[4] in which the author tries to argue that a large part of the polemic against the 'associators' as found in the Qur'an was targeted at the People of the Book, rather than at idolatrous Arabs in Muḥammad's environment. His thesis is that this Qur'anic polemic was only later interpreted as referring to the pagan Arabs, that is to say by the early exegetes and traditionists who constructed the Jahiliyya and anchored the Rise of Islam in pagan Arabia. Hawting's work heightens our awareness that no consistent picture can yet be drawn of the nature of religion in pre-Islamic Arabia. This partly impedes the evaluation of

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[2] Which is to say that I do not restrict the literature to Iraq, the focus of the symposium, because the subject of this paper does not justify such a restriction. As I hope the discussion will show, the texts concerned from different regions have much in common. The manuscript traditions of several of these show that not only ideas floated from one Christian community to the next, but also the texts themselves. See Sidney Griffith, 'The Monk in the Emir's *Majlis*: Reflections on a Popular Genre of Christian Literary Apologetics in Arabic in the Early Islamic Period', in Hava Lazarus Yafeh *et al.* eds, *The* Majlis. *Interreligious Encounters in Medieval Islam* (*Studies in Arabic Language and Literature* 4), Wiesbaden, 1999, pp. 13–65.

[3] That very fact, however, is also the main driving force behind the study and use of the non-Muslim sources for the history of early Islam, the best known example of which is Patricia Crone and Michael Cook's *Hagarism; The Making of the Islamic World*, Cambridge, 1977. In response to this trend Robert Hoyland collected a vast number of non-Muslim sources in his *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It. A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (*Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam* 13), Princeton, 1997, and on the basis of his evaluation of some of these he dismisses the 'either/or approach' and proposes a careful comparison of the Muslim and non-Muslim sources.

[4] Cambridge, 1999.

some the earliest writings that I will discuss here, because we cannot safely conclude what supposed aspect of Islam the Christian author is reacting against.[5] In certain cases this prevents us from understanding exactly how sharp the polemicist's pen was. When, for example, a Christian author writes, 'You Muslims are worshippers of Venus really', it is hard to judge whether there is any basis for this in what the author thought he observed, and therefore we miss part of the essence of his polemic. We can nevertheless often understand the rationale of the polemics in our sources, and that is what I attempt do in this paper. To begin with, I shall review the different idolatry motifs and investigate how, if at all, they exploit aspects of Islamic doctrines and acts of worship.[6] Secondly, in a more general manner, I will discuss why the idea of Islam as a faith with idolatrous traits has been perpetuated and how it meshes with the more favourable descriptions of Islam as a monotheist faith that are central to many of the Eastern Christian apologetic texts.

The Kaʿba Cult

The veneration of the Kaʿba and its surrounding holy sites in Mecca is one of the aspects of Islam frequently criticized by Christian polemicists. Seeing that they often occur in the context of discussions about the veneration of the cross, one notices that such criticisms of Muslim rituals constitute a case of repaying in kind. In one of the popular Christian Muslim debates, the third/ninth century *Dialogue of Abraham of Tiberias with ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Hāshimī*, the Christian protagonist challenges his Muslim interlocutors by contending that the cross can work miracles and has healing powers whereas 'the *Rukn* and the *Maqām*', cannot. One of the Muslim participants in this debate feels affronted and begs the monk to travel with him to Mecca to prove the contrary. Then the monk asks: Is God's power not present everywhere? He claims that with the sign of the cross he can perform a miracle and that he does not have to go all the way to Constantinople for it—to the actual wood of the cross.[7] This reply is of course highly polemical: it insinuates that the Muslims worship things that have no relation to the Divine being.

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[5] This is especially the case with some of the examples discussed under the heading *Aphrodite-al-ʿUzzā-ʿAkbar*' below.

[6] A few of these are mentioned by Hawting in chapter 3 of his book mentioned above, pp. 83–5. This chapter appears in almost the same form as an article: '*Shirk* and Idolatry in Monotheist Polemic', *Israel Oriental Studies* 17, 1997, pp. 107–26.

[7] Giacinto Būlus Marcuzzo, *Le dialogue d'Abraham de Tibériade avec ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Hāšimī à Jerusalem vers 820. Étude, édition critique et traduction annotée d'un texte théologique chrétien de la littérature arabe* (*Textes et Études sur l'Orient Chrétien* 3), Rome, 1986, pp. 506–12.

In the apologetic treatise *Kitāb al-burhān* of the third/ninth century Nestorian ʿAmmār al-Baṣrī the imaginary opponent in the discussion is not identified as a Muslim, but it is clear whom the author has in mind when he writes 'As for those who speak with disdain about our kissing of the cross, we reply to them with the argument: more remarkable than that is their kissing of a stone which the associators used to venerate and kiss.'[8] This brings us to another aspect of this polemical theme: the Kaʿba represents a cult which is pagan in origin. It is that aspect on which the Christian author of the *Correspondence of al-Hāshimī and al-Kindī* focuses when he criticizes the Muslim rites connected with the Kaʿba and other parts of the sacred area in Mecca. To him it is a purely pagan affair and he compares the rites of the pilgrimage, the circumambulation and the casting of stones, with the Brahmans and Indian sunworshippers.[9] The *Correspondence*, which is clearly a purely Christian product, is well known for its vehement polemic against Islam, but it is also remarkable for its display of extensive knowledge of Muslim traditions. In connection with the Kaʿba, the author adds force to his rejection of these pilgrimage rituals by adducing a saying of the Caliph ʿUmar I who claimed that he only performed these rites because he had seen the Prophet himself do it. According to canonical Muslim tradition, ʿUmar addressed the Black Stone and the *Maqām* of Abraham and said: 'By God, I know well that you are nothing but two stones that can do neither good nor bad, but as I have seen the Prophet kiss you, I will do the same.'[10] The author undoubtedly not only wants to demonstrate that even ʿUmar was critical of these rituals, but also that if a caliph cannot think of other grounds on which to perform this ritual than imitation of the Prophet, the Muslim claim that the Kaʿba cult goes back to Abraham is not convincing.

There are other Christian sources which try to make the Kaʿba cult look as though it lacked foundation. For example, in the supposed correspondence of the Byzantine Emperor Leo III with ʿUmar II, the former wants to show that the sanctity of Mecca has nothing to do with Abraham and is a place governed by the demons who 'draw you, by occult machinations, to the loss of your souls, for example, by a stone that is called *rukn*, that you adore without knowing why'.[11]

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[8] ʿAmmār al-Baṣrī, *Kitāb al-burhān*, in Michel Hayek ed., *ʿAmmār al-Baṣrī, apologie et controverses*, Beirut, 1977, p. 87.

[9] A. Tien ed., *Risālat ʿAbd Allāh b. Ismāʿīl al-Hāshimī ilā ʿAbd al-Masīḥ b. Isḥāq al-Kindī yadʿūhu bihā ilā al-Islām wa-Risālat ʿAbd al-Masīḥ ilā al-Hāshimī yaruddu bihā ʿalayhi wa-yadʿūhu ilā al-Naṣrāniyya*, London, 1880, pp. 103–4; Georges Tartar trans., *Dialogue Islamo-Chrétien sous le calife Al-Ma'mūn (813–834), les épitres d'Al-Hāshimī et d'Al-Kindī*, Paris, 1985, pp. 213–14.

[10] Tien, *Risāla*, p. 104; Tartar, *Dialogue Islamo-Chrétien*, p. 214.

[11] A. Jeffery, 'Ghevond's Text of the Correspondence between ʿUmar II and Leo III',

In a later, immensely popular, Christian-Muslim debate, the *Disputation of George the Monk with three Muslims in the year 1207*, one of the Muslim notables tries to convince the old monk, the hero of this debate, to travel with him to Mecca for the pilgrimage.[12] The old monk asks what he could expect of such a trip, and this encourages the Muslim to list all the delights of the Hajj, including the attractive women of the Ḥijāz who never fail to please men.[13] This scandalous manner of depicting the pilgrimage and the motives of Muslims to undertake it is part of the author's attempt to portray Christianity and Islam as diametrically opposed faiths. It constitutes the main message of this debate: Christianity is the religion of the spiritual and Islam is the religion of the material and sensual. After listing all the ceremonies at Minā and ʿArafāt, one of the Muslims describes the supposed pilgrimage sights of Mecca: 'the Black Stone, the Well of Zamzam, al-ʿUrwa al-Wuthqā, the Green Dome, the Kaʿba, the Back of the Camel, and the Grave of al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn'.[14] In all likelihood the author makes a point of listing so many different sights to overemphasize the resemblance with idolatrous cults. By referring to the sights relating to Muḥammad's family he touches on the sensitive issue of grave visitation, and probably replies indirectly to the Muslim criticism of Christians' veneration of relics. But none of this is made explicit—the monk simply exclaims that he is stunned by these wonderful things. The Emir who leads the session, and who is presented as favouring the monk, laughs and ridicules the Muslim participants in the disputation, because they fail to notice that the monk is being sarcastic.

Harvard Theological Review 37, 1944, pp. 269–332; p. 323. For the caliph's letter see J.-M. Gaudeul, 'The Correspondence between Leo and ʿUmar. ʿUmar's Letter Re-discovered?', *Islamochristiana* 10, 1984, pp. 109–57. This partly reconstructed correspondence is third/ninth-century in its present form but probably contains some second/eighth-century material; R. Hoyland, 'The Correspondence between ʿUmar II and Leo III', *Aram* 4, 1993, pp. 165–77.

[12] Edited by Paul Carali and published under the title *Le Christianisme et l'Islam. Controverse attribuée au moine Georges du Couvent de St. Siméon (Séleucie) soutenue devant le Prince El-Mouchammar fils de Saladin en 1207*, Beit Chebab, 1933. English translation: Alex Nicoll, 'Account of a Disputation between a Christian Monk and Three Learned Mohammedans on the Subject of Religion', *Edinburgh Annual Register, ad annum* 1816, 9, 1820, pp. ccccv–ccccxliii. The popularity of this debate can be judged from the large number of manuscripts of it. Khalil Samir has traced 89 manuscripts which he lists in 'Bibliographie du Dialogue Islamo-Chrétien (septième partie). Auteurs arabes chrétiens du XIII^{e} siècle', *Islamochristiana* 7, 1981, pp. 299–307.

[13] Carali, *Le Christianisme et l'Islam*, pp. 141–2; Nicoll, 'Account of a Disputation', pp. ccccxli–ccccxlii.

[14] Carali, *Le Christianisme et l'Islam*, p. 142; Nicoll, 'Account of a disputation', pp. cc–cxlii.

Aphrodite-al-ʿUzzā-ʿAkbar'

Another instance of a comparison of the worship of the cross and the Kaʿba is to be found in one of the earliest and best known Christian discussions of Islam, the chapter on the 'Heresy of the "Ishmaelites"' in John of Damascus' *De Haeresibus*.[15] In his description of this 'heresy' he also refers to the former polytheism of the Arabs. The Muslim claim that the Kaʿba is being venerated because it was the place of Abraham, Hagar and Ishmael, is counteracted by the argument that Muslims tell different stories about what exactly Abraham's relation to the Black Stone was. He comments:

> They also defame us as being idolaters because we venerate the cross, which they despise; and we respond: 'How is it that you rub yourselves against a stone by your *Habathan*, and you express your adoration to the stone by kissing it?' And some of them answer that (because) Abraham had intercourse with Hagar on it; others, because he tied the camel around it when he was about to sacrifice Isaac.'[16]

According to John of Damascus, the Biblical account of the sacrifice of Isaac precludes its taking place in the desert. He prefers to trace back the veneration of the Black Stone to the cult of Aphrodite:

> This, then, which they call 'stone' is the head of Aphrodite, whom they used to venerate (and) whom they called Haber, on which those who can understand it exactly can see, even until now, traces of an engraving.[17]

This reference by John to Aphrodite and her alleged local name 'Haber' has caught the attention of numerous scholars, who have tried to understand what this statement is based on and whether it could add anything to the still relatively shadowy picture of religion in pre-Islamic Arabia. A number of late antique sources describe the Arabs as worshippers of Aphrodite, and it has been often been suggested, but never clearly proven, that this refers to the cult of al-ʿUzzā, who was worshipped by many Arabian tribes, and whose name features in the Qur'an alongside Allāt and Manāt.[18] Equally problematic is the name 'Haber'. If one is willing to assume that the words of John of Damascus are to some extent descriptive, the name 'Haber' has to be elucidated. At the

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[15] The authorship, and therewith the dating, of chapter 101 of *De Haeresibus* has often been contested, but as there exists a third/ninth century manuscript, and an even older fragment, it is still one of the earliest Christian discussions of Islam. See Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, p. 485. I will refer to the edition and translation in Daniel J. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam. The 'Heresy of the Ishmaelites'*, Leiden, 1972.

[16] Sahas, *John of Damascus*, pp. 136–7.

[17] Sahas, *John of Damascus*, pp. 136–7.

[18] See below p. 10 and n. 34.

beginning of the chapter on the Ishmaelites John already indicates that this means 'great',[19] and therefore it is reasonable to assume that the name has something to do with the root *k.b.r*, 'to be great', in Arabic.

This is the assumption of Gernot Rotter, who has tried to show that the epithet refers to the adjective al-Kubrā, which, on the basis of some fragmentary evidence, can be shown to be an epithet of Venus.[20] He rejects the idea proposed by several scholars that John of Damascus alludes to the Islamic expression '*Allāhu akbar*' and interprets it as 'Allāh *and* Akbar'. According to Rotter this does not make sense, because John of Damascus refers explicitly to the pre-Islamic Arabs. However, John may actually be trying to make a link between their belief and that of the Muslims. That, at least, is the case in another Greek text from the same period, an epistle of Patriarch Germanus in defence of the worship of icons, which also mentions the invocation the Saracens make to a stone called 'Chobar', 'even to this day'.[21]

Later sources leave no doubt that many Christian ears wanted to hear 'God and Akbar' when they heard the muezzin. The various comments of Byzantine writers who pointed out that this is what '*Allāhu akbar*' means have been documented.[22] Less well known are the Syriac and Arabic sources, which also suggest that 'Akbar' is worshipped next to God. In all likelihood it was Syriac and Arabic speakers who invented the idea of 'God and Akbar', since to their ears the *takbīr* could sound like that. One of the Syriac texts containing this motif is the Nestorian version of the legend of Sergius-Baḥīrā.[23] This legend, which describes the supposed teaching of a Christian monk to Muḥammad, ends with a note about how these teachings were ruined by the activities of the Jew Kaʿb, who gained influence in the Islamic community after the death of Muḥammad, taught the people the Old Testament after Baḥīrā had preached the Gospel, and 'confounded and corrupted everything which

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[19] Sahas, *John of Damascus*, pp. 132–3.

[20] Gernot Rotter, 'Der *veneris dies* im vorislamischen Mekka, eine neue Deutung des Namens "Europa" und eine Erklärung für *kobar* = Venus', *Der Islam* 70, 1993, pp. 112–32, pp. 126–8.

[21] Germanus, *Ep. ad Thomam episcopum Claudiopoleos*, *PG*, vol. XCVIII, pp. 136–221, 168 A–D.

[22] John Meyendorff, 'Byzantine Views of Islam', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 18, 1964, pp. 113–32, pp. 118–19; Adel T. Khoury, *Polémique Byzantine contre l'Islam*, Leiden, 1972, pp. 240–1, and for a summary of all the comments on the cult of the Kaʿba in Byzantine sources pp. 275–81.

[23] This legend, which can be partly traced back to the third/ninth century, is extant in four different recensions, two Syriac and two Arabic. All four refer to supposed idolatrous aspects of Islam, albeit in different ways. Because the editions by Richard Gottheil (published as a series of articles under the title 'A Christian Bahira Legend' in *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 13, 1898, pp. 189–242, 14, 1899, pp. 203–68, 15, 1900, pp. 56–102 and 17, 1903, pp. 125–66) contain many errors I will refer to the various manuscripts, which I have used for my new forthcoming editions.

Sergius had written originally'.[24] The explanation for why the Muslims chose to adhere to Ka'b's words rather than Baḥīrā's is given in the following, rather tendentious, passage:

> For the Sons of Ishmael were uncivilised pagans, like horses without a bridle. They bowed to the idol of al-Kabar, who is Iblīs. The names of the demons are these: Bahram, the god of the Persians, and Anahid goddess of the Aramaeans, 'Uddi of the Hittites—these are the children of Hormizd—and Ukabar of the Ishmaelites, and [Bel of the] Babylonians, Artemis goddess of the Ephesians, those are the Sons of the South. And they fixed the names of the demons on the stars and bow to them until this day. After the erring of the demons had been in every place, they worshipped Ukabar and the Stone and the well which is called Zamzam, and the grave of Jannes and Jambres, the magicians of Egypt. And in their days there was the division and the erring of demons among the people. And about Hormizd and Ahriman they say that Hormizd gave birth to the light and Ahriman to the darkness, and that Hormizd gave birth to good and Ahriman to evil. Bahram, 'Uddi and Anahid are the children of Hormizd, whose names are high in heaven. Bel and Ukabar and Artemis [are the children of] Ahriman: their names are down on the earth. And the Sons of Ishmael, lo and behold, they provoke the anger of God every day of their lives by associating with Ukabar, without knowing Him. And the name of Ukabar is proclaimed by them shamelessly with a loud voice, and, lo and behold, they sacrifice to him year after year, until our day.[25]

This passage is remarkable for its portrayal of Islam as a dualist belief of some sort. Not all of the references are clear (for example "Uddi, *'wdy*, of the Hittites, *ḥytya*'), but its intent can nevertheless be clearly understood. The passage is meant to hammer at the fact that Islam is directly related to known forms of paganism and that the religious practices of the Muslims have their roots there. Presumably al-Kabar (*alkbr*) and Ukabar (*awkbr*) come down to the same, i.e. 'Akbar' in its Christian polemical reading—here God's counterpart is, however, not Aphrodite but Iblīs. I presume that the word that I translate as 'associating', *shwtpwta*, is meant as the Syriac equivalent of the Arabic *shirk*. The proclamation of Ukabar's name in a loud voice refers undoubtedly to the *takbīr*.

In another anti-Muslim text, the *Disputation of George the Monk with three Muslims in the year 1207*, to which I have already referred above, there is also a reference to the Arabs' supposed belief in 'Akbar'. The old monk is asked by one of the Muslims in the debate to give his view on

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[24] For the Ka'b motif in anti-Muslim polemics, see S. H. Griffith, 'Jews and Muslims in Christian Arabic Texts of the Ninth Century', *Jewish History* 3, 1988, pp. 65–94, pp. 80–2.

[25] MS Mingana Syr. 604, f. 20a–21a. The words between the square brackets are emendations on the basis of MS Charfeh 122.

Muḥammad and Islam. He gives an account of Muḥammad's youth, focusing on the role of his teacher Baḥīrā. When portraying the audience of Muḥammad's early preaching, the monk comments:

> Their worship was to an idol called 'Akbar' and their prayers before him were poems on the subject of desire and love, which they used to write on tablets and which they would hang above that idol. They prayed to them and called them 'the suspended seven', *al-sabʿa al-muʿallaqa*.[26]

When, according to the old monk, Muḥammad began to preach the belief in one God, the Creator, and some of the people responded by expressing their fear of Akbar, Muḥammad told them: 'Worship God and reverence Akbar.'[27]

In the most extensive discussion of Islam in Syriac, composed by the sixth/twelfth century Jacobite bishop Dionysius Bar Ṣalībī, we encounter a similar description of the original belief of the Arabs: 'They used to worship the idol of Akbar and also the star al-ʿUzzā, that is to say, Aphrodite.'[28] According to Dionysius, Muḥammad induced these people to forsake their original form of worship and to convert to the belief in one God, by telling them that they would be given the land of milk and honey as a reward, as the Jews had for their belief in one God. The sharp polemical edges of Dionysius' words leap to the eye. He suggests that Muḥammad did not intend to do more than imitate the Jews and that the conversion of Muḥammad's first followers was not based on religious conviction, with which he counteracts the Muslim argument that the rapid spread of Islam and its great political power were given by God.[29]

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[26] Carali, *Le Christianisme et l'Islam*, p. 52.

[27] Ibid., p. 53. The version of the debate which Nicoll translated into English must have been different, since he gives: 'Mohammed said to them, Worship God, and reverence him. Who is *Acbar*?' Perhaps this is meant to suggest that the word 'Akbar', being an elative, implies a comparison and therefore a multiplicity. Nicoll, 'Account of a Disputation', p. ccccxiii.

[28] MS Mingana Syriac 89, f. 39a. For an introduction to this work, see S. H. Griffith, 'Dionysius bar Ṣalībī on the Muslims', in H. J. W. Drijvers *et al.* eds, *IV Symposium Syriacum 1984, Literary Genres in Syriac Literature (Groningen—Oosterhesselen 10–12 September)* (*Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 229), Rome, 1987. For a facsimile of the relevant chapters in MS Mingana Syriac 89, see A. Mingana, 'An Ancient Syriac Translation of the Kur'ān Exhibiting New Verses and Variants', *BJRL* 9, 1925, pp. 188–235. An edition of this work is being prepared by Prof. Joseph Amar.

[29] Several Syriac chronicles give a similar account of Muḥammad's attempts to persuade his people by telling them about the land of milk and honey. See Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, pp. 129–30. That Islam could not be the true religion, *because* there were many reasons, apart from belief, for which people converted to it, is suggested by many Christian apologists. See Sidney Griffith, 'Comparative Religion in the Apologetics of the First Christian Arabic Theologians', *Proceedings of the Patristic, Medieval and Renaissance Conference* 4, 1979, pp. 63–86.

The Jacobite Syriac recension of the Baḥīrā legend also mentions the belief of the 'Sons of Ishmael' in al-ʿUzzā. Before going into the story proper of the monk teaching Muḥammad, the legend digresses to the history of the Lakhmid kingdom of al-Ḥīra.[30] It is related how in the sixth century King Nuʿmān and his subjects were converted from the worship of al-ʿUzzā to Christianity by the Catholicos Sabrīshuʿ—a historical note that may have been included to give a Nestorian *couleur locale* to the legend.[31] This historical note ends with the narrator's comment:

> Before they were baptised they worshipped the star al-ʿUzzā, that is Aphrodite Venus, *prddyty zhrh*, about whom even these days they say, when they swear, 'No, by the Father of al-ʿUzzā!'. I said to them, 'Who is it by whom you swear?' and they told me, 'That is God the Mighty, *alha hw ʿzyzʾ*, adhering to this old tradition.

The explanation that the 'Father of al-ʿUzzā' is God accords with the notion of al-ʿUzzā as one of the 'daughters of God', *banāt Allāh*.[32] Swearing by al-ʿUzzā, and the Lord of al-ʿUzzā, does indeed seem to have been a custom in pre-Islamic times, but whether this account is really based on an observation of a practice that persisted in Islamic times cannot be known for sure.[33] Perhaps the intent is simply to associate the common expressions '*Allāh al-ʿAzīz*' and '*Rabb al-ʿIzza*' with the pre-Islamic oath swearing by al-ʿUzzā.

Both this example and the one of Dionysius Bar Ṣalībī confront us with the disparity between Muslim and non-Muslim sources on this issue. As I have already indicated above in the discussion of John of Damascus' passage, the identification of al-ʿUzzā with Aphrodite and the planet Venus is considered doubtful, because Islamic sources do not tell us anything of the kind.[34] According to Macdonald and Nehmé, 'The only unequivocal equation of al-ʿUzzā with the planet Venus is in the 10th-century Syriac-Arabic dictionary of Bar Bahlūl (ed. R. Duval, s.v. *estʿrā*); while the only explicit equation of al-ʿUzzā with Aphrodite, is in a 1st century BC to AD Nabataean-Greek inscription from the Greek island of Cos (F. Rosenthal, *Die aramaistische Forschung*, Leiden, 1964, 86 and 91 n. 4)'.[35] We should ask ourselves whether we could add to that the sources

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[30] MS Sachau Syr. 87, f. 49a.

[31] As suggested by Sidney Griffith in his article 'Muḥammad and the Monk Baḥīrā: Reflections on a Syriac and Arabic Text from Early Abbasid Times', *Oriens Christianus* 79, 1995, pp. 146–74, p. 158.

[32] For a discussion of what *banāt Allāh* may or may not have been, see Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, pp. 130–49.

[33] See M. A. C. Macdonald and Laila Nehmé, *EI*^{2}, vol. X, art. '*Al-ʿUzzā*'.

[34] Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, p. 142. For an inventory of sources about al-ʿUzzā, see John. F. Healey, *The Religion of the Nabataeans. A Conspectus*, Leiden, 2001, pp. 114–19 and *passim*.

[35] Art. '*Al-ʿUzzā*', *EI*^{2}, vol. X, p. 968a.

discussed here. The question is of course what their value is in this respect, bearing in mind their polemical purpose. One could argue that there is no reason to portray the cult of al-ʿUzzā as an astral cult as part of the polemics here, unless one assumes that there is a subtext that is trying to connect pre-Islamic beliefs with the cultivation of astrology and astronomy amongst Muslims.

A solid inanimate God

Nothing expresses the absolute monotheism of Islam more clearly than *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ*:

> Say: 'He is God, One,
> God, the Everlasting Refuge,
> Who has not begotten, and has not been begotten,
> And equal to Him is not any one.'

One will easily recognize how the third verse can be interpreted as a message addressed to Christians. They themselves, however, focused on this *sūra* to show what, according to them, is the implication of rejecting the Trinity. In the long Arabic version of the Baḥīrā Legend, it is explained that *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ* was one of the writings which the monk wrote for Muḥammad as a concession to the needs of his primitive audience. That is why the monk invented the term '*ṣamad*' for God (the epithet of God translated above as 'the Everlasting Refuge'). In the Baḥīrā Legend the monk comments: 'I likened Him to that which they were accustomed to serve and I made Him *ṣamad*, detached, not hearing or seeing, like a stone.'[36]

The question of how Christian polemical thinking about Islam could espouse such an interpretation of *al-Ṣamad* and make it into a 'lithic God' brings us to the history of this word in Muslim exegesis.[37] It has been shown that in pre-Islam it was already used for 'the one to whom one turns in devotion'. Early traditionists, however, liked to read it as an expression of absolute oneness and immutability, perhaps as an attempt to distance the term from this pre-Islamic connotation.[38] The terms with

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[36] MS Par. Ar. 215, f. 172b. See also B. Roggema, 'A Christian Reading of the Qur'an: the Legend of Sergius-Baḥīrā and its Use of Qur'an and Sīra', in D. Thomas ed., *Syrian Christians under Islam. The First Thousand Years*, Leiden, 2001, pp. 57–73, p. 61.

[37] The development of the *tafsīr* of this *sūra* has been meticulously analysed by Uri Rubin in his article '*Al-Ṣamad* and the High God. An Interpretation of *sūra* CXII', *Der Islam* 61, 1984, pp. 197–217. For all its different connotations, see also D. Gimaret, *Les noms divins en Islam, exégèse lexicographique et théologique*, Paris, 1988, pp. 320–3.

[38] Rubin, '*Al-Ṣamad*', pp. 210–12.

which they circumscribed those qualities are, however, physical and material. Al-Ṭabarī links it to *muṣmaṭ*, 'solid' and records numerous traditionists who interpret it as 'something which is not hollow and from which nothing goes out', or 'someone who does not eat or drink'.[39] While these descriptions are undoubtedly meant as anti-anthropomorphic and 'anti-material' expressions, it is not difficult to see how a non-Muslim could turn this into a material, 'monolithic' conception of God.[40]

John of Damascus does not refer to *al-Ṣamad* in his discussion of Islam, but he does insinuate that Muslims believe in a material God. As a reply to the accusation that Christians are 'associators' he remarks that people who regard God as being without Word and Spirit are 'mutilators (*koptas*) of God' and 'introduce him as if he were a stone, or wood, or any of the inanimate objects'.[41] Remarkably similar are the words of Patriarch Timothy in the Syriac version of his famous debate with the Caliph al-Mahdī. In a more circumspect, but no less polemical, manner he also replies to the Muslim rejection of the Trinity by suggesting that whoever does not believe in it believes in an inanimate God. The caliph claims that Christians believe in three 'heads', but Timothy argues that God's Word and his Spirit cannot be separated from him, and says:

> The Word and the Spirit are eternally from the single nature of God, who is not one person divested of Word and Spirit as the weakness of the Jewish belief has it. He shines and emits rays eternally with the light of His Word and the radiation of His Spirit and He is one head with His Word and His Spirit. I do not believe in God as stripped of His Word and Spirit, in the case of the former without mind and reason, and in the case of the latter, without spirit and life. It is only the idolaters, who believe in false gods or idols who have neither reason nor life.[42]

Then the caliph continues the debate by remarking, 'It seems to me that you believe in a vacuous, *ḥlyla*, God, since you believe that He has a child.' Timothy answers, 'I do not believe that God is either vacuous or solid, *ṭmyma*, because both of these adjectives denote bodies.' But the caliph insists and asks, 'What then do you believe if He is neither vac-

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[39] Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʾwīl al-Qurʾān*, Cairo, 1905–12, vol. XXX, pp. 222–3.

[40] The idea of a 'solid God' being preached by Muḥammad suited the Byzantine polemicists well and they used it for centuries to depict Islam as idolatry. See Meyendorff, 'Byzantine Views of Islam', pp. 122, 124–5 and especially Daniel Sahas, '"Holosphyros?" A Byzantine Perception of "The God of Muḥammad"', in Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Wadi Z. Haddad eds, *Christian-Muslim Encounters*, Gainsville, etc., 1995, pp. 109–25. Sahas assumes that the whole of this polemic can be traced back to what he regards as Theodore Abū Qurra's mis-translation of *al-Ṣamad* in Greek in *Opusculum* 20, but since we know that Christian Arabs interpreted the term in the same way as the Byzantines, it is more likely that Theodore was deliberately transmitting this polemical interpretation.

[41] Sahas, *John of Damascus*, pp. 136–7.

[42] A. Mingana, 'The Apology of Timothy the Patriarch before the Caliph al-Mahdi', (*Woodbrooke Studies* 2), *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 12, 1928, pp. 137–298, p. 214.

uous nor solid?'[43] The caliph's questions are telling; they are, without doubt, made to suit the apologetic purposes of his opponent. At first sight they look out of place, since the caliph is the one who frequently criticizes the patriarch for using material terms to describe God. The point is, however, that it is the caliph himself who resorts to material terms when conceptualizing God.

The 'new pagans'

Finally, we should draw attention to another way in which the Syriac and Christian-Arabic writings suggest that Muslims are some kind of pagans, that is: by simply calling them so. In many Syriac and Christian-Arabic texts which deal with Islam, Muslims are referred to by a term that originally meant 'pagan'. In Syriac the term is *ḥnpa* and in Arabic *ḥanīf* (pl. *ḥunafā'*). Sometimes one finds 'the new pagans' as a designation for Muslims, as with Nonnus of Nisibis.[44]

In Muslim eyes 'Hanifism' constitutes something positive. In the Qur'an it is used for Abraham's faith and refers to his monotheism, which by Muslims was seen as a pristine form of Islam. In the Prophet's time there were still a few *ḥunafā'* according to Muslim tradition. Whether Christians initially used this term for Muslims somewhat innocently we cannot know for sure, but there is no doubt that through the centuries it has become a pejorative term, which was kept in use in order to associate Islam closely with paganism.[45]

The polemical aspect of its usage can be clearly recognized in a work by Severus ibn al-Muqaffa', the *Kitāb al-īḍāḥ*. In his introduction to the first chapter, 'The Clarification of the Trinity and Unity of the Persons of God', this fourth/tenth century Coptic theologian motivates his writing by drawing attention to the poor understanding of the mystery of the Trinity amongst the Christians of his time, which is due to their 'mingling with the *ḥunafā'*':

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[43] Mingana, 'Apology of Timothy', p. 214.

[44] A. van Roey, *Nonnus de Nisibe: traité apologétique* (*Bibliothèque du Muséon* 21), Louvain, 1948, p. 12*.

[45] For a discussion of the ways in which this term was used by Christians, see Sidney Griffith, 'The Prophet Muḥammad, his Scripture and his Message according to the Christian Apologies in Arabic and Syriac from the first Abbasid century', in T. Fahd ed., *La vie du Prophète Mahomet, Colloque de Strasbourg (octobre 1980)*, Paris, 1983, pp. 99–146, pp. 118–21 (repr. in Griffith, *Arabic Christianity in the Monasteries of Ninth-Century Palestine*, Aldershot, 1992). In some early Syriac writings it is difficult to determine whether real pagans or Muslims are meant when there is mention of '*ḥnpa*'. See Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, pp. 146, 148–9, 162, 193–4, and Gerrit Reinink, 'Die Muslime in einer Sammlung von Dämonengeschichten des Klosters von Qennešrīn', in René Lavenant ed., *Symposium Syriacum VI 1992* (*Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 247), Rome, 1994, pp. 335–46.

> I shall begin with its clarification by first saying that the clear exposition of this mystery is undisclosed to the believers, *mu'minūn*, in the present age as a result of their mingling with the *ḥunafā'* and of their having lost their language by means of which they may understand the truth of their religion. They do not hear the Trinity mentioned often anymore, and the Son of God is not mentioned among them except by way of metaphor. Ever so often they hear that God, exalted be His name, is *ṣamad* and the rest of these words which the *ḥunafā'* utter.[46]

There is no doubt that these *ḥunafā'* are the Muslims, in contradistinction to the Christians for whom Severus uses a term which Muslims also reserve for themselves, namely *mu'minūn*, 'believers'.

Discussion

Some of the functions of the type of writing about Islam of which I have given examples reveal themselves immediately, while others are more indirect. In many cases we see first of all the straightforward polemical aim of questioning Islam's claim to *tawḥīd* and *tanzīh*, as a reply to the criticism which Christians had to endure from Muslims on the issue of *shirk*. The urge to repay in kind is immediately clear from the passages where the veneration of the cross evokes criticism of the veneration of the Kaʿba.

But there is more than this simple outright confrontational aspect. One can also see how the writings concerned are not only meant to challenge Muslim dogmas but also Muslim apologetics. The supposed link between the Kaʿba and the cult of Aphrodite are undoubtedly meant to undercut Islam's claim to having its roots in the pristine monotheism of Abraham. Another ground for which the perpetuation of the idolatry motif was attractive was that it could counteract the argument that Islam spread miraculously. Muslims considered it miraculous that a whole nation left their pagan beliefs behind so readily and converted to belief in the one God. In the *Dalā'il al-nubuwwa* literature the Muslim apologists showed that the veracity of Muḥammad's prophethood was supported by the fact that his religion had spread so quickly in a milieu that was deeply idolatrous. For example, in the third/ninth century debate between Ibn al-Munajjim and Qusṭā ibn Luqā, the former uses this rapid spread to prove Muḥammad's supernatural intelligence, which in consequence proves his prophethood.[47] One could argue that the dis-

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[46] R. Y. Ebied and M. J. L. Young, 'A Theological Work by Severus ibn al-Muqaffaʿ from Istanbul: MS Aya Sofia 2360', *Oriens Christianus* 61, 1977, pp. 78–85, pp. 80–1.

[47] S. K. Samir and P. Nwyia, 'Une correspondance islamo-chrétienne entre Ibn al-Munaǧǧim, Ḥunayn ibn Isḥāq et Qustā ibn Lūqā, *Patrologia Orientalis* 40, 1981, pp.

course about Islam's proximity to pre-Islamic paganism forms an indirect reply to this claim.[48]

However, when we go on to ask how the idolatry motif fits in with Christian apologetics, we find a considerable dissonance with the mood of the numerous historical and apologetic texts that originate in the same Christian communities as the texts we have discussed, for the latter seem to regard Islam and its prophet in a more favourable light and speak well of its monotheism. How do such more sympathetic and faithful Christian portraits of Islam mesh with the polemical passages that we have discussed above? Does the idea of Islam as a somehow pagan polytheistic belief predate these texts? On the basis of some of the earliest Christian references to Islam we can conclude that this is not the case.[49] For example, in one of the oldest known Christian-Muslim disputations, the Syriac *Dialogue of the Monk of Bet Hale with an Arab Notable*, the monk shows that he is aware of Islam's call to monotheism.[50] The Muslim asks him, 'How is the prophet Muḥammad regarded in your eyes?' The monk

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519–722, pp. 568–75. Qusṭā ibn Lūqā replies by contesting the argumentation in favour of Muḥammad's supernatural intelligence, but does not refer to his idolatrous milieu. It is interesting to note that an elaborate reply to this 'proof of prophethood' is to be found in what is undoubtedly the most enlightened and most critical interreligious discussion in Arabic, the thirteenth century *Tanqīḥ al-abḥāth li-al-milal al-thalāth*, by the Jew Ibn Kammūna. In this work of 'comparative religion' this physician and philosopher discusses the apologetics of each of the three monotheistic religions. The chapter on Islam is largely a response to the apologetic works of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, who uses the arguments of the rapid spread of Islam and the eradication of the idolatry in which the Arabs were deeply rooted to prove Muḥammad's superiority to all prophets. Ibn Kammūna puts forward a number of different points in reply. First he draws attention to the fact that even though the Islamic community is large, there are still vast communities of polytheists all over the world (not knowing that a few years later the Mongol rulers would convert to Islam). Then he concedes that idolatry disappeared in Arabia when Muḥammad appeared, but he goes on to point out that the differences between Islam and the old Arabian religion are not great. Here we find again the claim that the cult of the Kaʿba is a reduced form of the old Arabian idolatry. However, Ibn Kammūna's argument is not that Islam is close to idolatry, but rather that the idolaters were close to monotheism. He claims that they did not believe in another Creator than God, but had their idols to bring them closer to Him. For this he even adduces the Qur'an (Q 39.4)! Ibn Kammūna, *Saʿd b. Manṣūr b. Kammūna's Examination of the Inquiries into the Three Faiths. A Thirteenth-Century Essay in Comparative Religion*, ed. Moshe Perlmann, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1967, pp. 98–101; *Ibn Kammūna's Examination of the Three Faiths. A Thirteenth-Century Essay in the Comparative Study of Religion*, trans. and ann. Moshe Perlmann, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1971, pp. 143–9.

[48] Another way in which Christians tried to reply to that claim was by arguing that many people converted to Islam for other reasons than belief in the truth of its message, as for example in the fragment of Dionysius Bar Ṣalībī above.

[49] See Gerrit Reinink, 'The Beginnings of Syriac Apologetic Literature in Response to Islam', *Oriens Christianus* 77, 1993, pp. 165–87; Robert G. Hoyland, 'The Earliest Christian Writings on Muḥammad: an Appraisal', in Harald Motzki ed., *The Biography of Muḥammad. The Issue of the Sources*, Leiden, 2000; pp. 276–97, esp. pp. 283–4.

[50] This text has been edited by Gerrit Reinink and will be published soon, together with a new edition of the Dialogue of Patriarch John with an Arab Commander, under the title: *Early Syriac Dispute Texts in Response to Nascent Islam*. I would like to thank him

answers, 'A wise and God fearing man, who has liberated you from the worship of demons and has brought you to the knowledge of the one True God.'[51]

So are there two very different strands in the literary responses of Christians to Islam? Perhaps not.

Let us look again at Patriarch Timothy's *Apology*, which is another example of a Christian text which expresses its approval of Muḥammad and calls him someone who 'walked in the path of the prophets'. The Patriarch gives two main reasons why the Prophet deserves this description, in what has been called a 'very balanced' text. Firstly, he states that Muḥammad taught the doctrine of one God, and separated his people from idolatry and polytheism, as all the prophets have done. This is why god 'honoured him exceedingly' and gave him victory in the world. Then secondly, again like all the prophets, Muḥammad taught about God and his Word and his Spirit.[52] This concise statement, in my opinion, represents the core of Eastern Christian apologetics vis-à-vis Islam. For its twin aspects demonstrate that Muḥammad's message had two layers: he preached monotheism to his people and at the same time his scripture mentioned the Trinity. This second aspect of Islam is a covert message, which is covered by its thick monotheistic outer layer. The notion is central to Timothy's thinking about Islam and to that of many of his coreligionists. This is shown by the fact that from the various Christian communities in the Near East through the centuries, we possess writings that aim at demonstrating the corroboration of Christian beliefs in the Qur'an.[53]

To prove his point, Patriarch Timothy mentions, amongst other things, that the three secret letters at the beginning of some of the *sūra*s of the Qur'an are in fact references to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.[54] For the Caliph al-Mahdī this was not very convincing. Why would Muḥammad have to conceal his true message? We are made to believe that it is the caliph who asks this question, but in reality it reflects the Christians' own questioning about God's design behind the rise of Islam.

The force of Christian apologetics vis-à-vis Judaism was that simple monotheism was a phase in human history that had passed. It had been

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for making the edition of the *Dialogue of the Monk of Bet Hale with an Arab Notable* available to me before publication.

[51] MS Diyarbakir 95, f. 5r.

[52] Mingana, 'Apology of Timothy', p. 197. See also Samir K. Samir, 'The Prophet Muḥammad as Seen by Timothy I and Some Other Arab Christian Authors', in Thomas, *Syrian Christians*, pp. 75–106, pp. 93–6, for a translation and discussion of this passage in the different recensions of the Apology.

[53] Paul Khoury describes this phenomenon in 'Exégèse chrétienne du Coran', which is the fifth chapter of his *Matériaux pour servir à l'étude de la controverse théologique islamo-chrétienne de langue arabe du VIII^e au XII^e siècle*, Würzburg/Altenberge, 1999.

[54] Ibid., pp. 203–4.

only a step towards the full revelation of the mystery of the Trinity. Even though the Old Testament had foreshadowed the coming of Christ and the revelation of God as triune, that first phase of revelation placed a necessary emphasis on monotheism on account of the Jews' tendency towards idolatry and the possibility that they would interpret the Divine being as a multiplicity of Gods. From the early apologetic writings that have come down to us it is clear that the necessity of having to reconsider this construction in the face of a new powerful monotheistic religion was turned into a virtue. The interpretation of Judaic monotheism was extended to Islam—it had its function as a clear-cut message to the idolatrous pagans. Some of the apologists, calling to mind the Apostle Paul who spoke of the Jews as children, and Christians as those of 'mature manhood' (Eph. 4.13–15), simply say that babies need blander food than adults.[55]

The Jews *needed* their simple monotheistic message, and the same could also be said about the Muslims. Muḥammad's role came to be regarded as that of the preacher of monotheism to the pagan Arabs. Allotting this role to Islam was convenient for the Christian apologists, as it counteracted Islam's claim to be a universal religion and explained, from a *heilsgeschichtliche* point of view, why it existed alongside Christianity. Muḥammad could be safely and endlessly praised for his mission as 'a step in the right direction' for his people, because he did not address himself to Christians, to whose existing beliefs the Qur'an did not add anything. That is why Patriarch Timothy declines the caliph's invitation to follow the words of the Prophet Muḥammad and believe in one God, as follows: 'This belief in one God, O my sovereign, I have learned from the Torah, from the Prophets and from the Gospel. I stand by it and shall die in it.'[56]

To reinforce this view, Christians set out to prove it by the very words of the Qur'an itself—not only by uncovering the veiled Christian message of the Qur'an (as seen in Patriarch Timothy's reference to the secret letters at the beginning of certain *sūra*s), but also by showing that the Qur'an itself endorses a diversity of faiths in the world, and states explicitly that is only directed at a specific group of people. According to the sixth/twelfth century Melkite bishop, Paul of Antioch, the Qur'an is addressed only to the Arabs of the Jāhiliyya, who had not received a 'warner', *nadhīr*, before.[57] The same is said by the seventh/thirteenth century Coptic theologian al-Ṣafī ibn al-'Assāl who believes that the Qur'anic

[55] In the *Dialogue of the Monk of Bet Hale*, MS Diyarbakr f. 5r. In the shorter Arabic version of the Baḥīrā legend the physical pleasures of the Islamic paradise are compared with baby food; MS Bodleian Or., p. 26.

[56] Mingana, 'Apology of Timothy', p. 198.

[57] Paul Khoury, *Paul d'Antioche. Évêque melkite de Sidon (XII^e s.). Introduction, édition critique,*

message was intended for the Arabs of the Ḥijāz, who were *ummiyyūn* and who had previously been in obvious error, *fī ḍalāl mubīn*.[58] At the same time, both these theologians show the confirmation of their own beliefs on the basis of verses from the Qur'an.

The apologetic structure that Christians built with this interpretation of the Qur'an and the function of Islam is extremely solid. It allowed them to praise Islam's monotheism and use it as an explanation of Islam's success in the world, and also simultaneously to disregard that monotheism. It goes without saying that it was therefore attractive to sustain the persuasive power of the portrayal of the Islamic message as 'two-layered'. This is where we see another function of the idolatry motif emerging. If the issues of polytheism and idolatry had lost their relevance, which was the case at a certain point in time of course, then the Christian apologists would have had to address the call to *tawḥīd* in a more serious way. Instead, they insisted on focusing on Islam's 'historical' role and its intrinsic idolatrous aspects. Although the authors of our earliest sources deserve the benefit of the doubt, I would dare to assume that no one who wrote that Muslims believe in both Allah and in Akbar, or in a stone God, believed that this was true. These kinds of statements, nevertheless, buttress the more earnest view of Islam which I have outlined above.

In other words, we should regard the frequent and far-fetched references to pre-Islamic Arabian idolatry and the remarks about supposed traces of idolatry in Islamic religious observances as a propaganda device used to maintain the apologetic attractiveness of the concept of Islam as primitive monotheism. The apologists portrayed Islam's strict monotheism as an antidote to latent polytheism. The 'outer layer', as I have called it, functions as an antidote, but in order for this to remain convincing, the polytheistic tendencies of the people who followed it had to be shown to be somehow still current. This is how we can explain the references to supposed traces of idolatry in Islam. It has to be recognized that whenever Muḥammad is mentioned in a positive way as a monotheist converter, it automatically evokes the memory of the paganism that he counteracted—underscoring thereby his specific and limited role. The paradox is that within this apologetic framework the existence of Muslims, or in the language of our sources '*ḥunafā*'', explains the need for the existence of Islam in the world.

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traduction, Beirut, 1965, p. 61 (Arabic), p. 170 (French trans.). For a discussion of this aspect of Paul of Antioch's thinking about Islam, see D. Thomas, 'Paul of Antioch's Letter to a Muslim Friend and The Letter from Cyprus', in Thomas, *Syrian Christians*, pp. 203–21, esp. 206–10.

[58] Khalil Samir, 'La réponse d'al-Ṣafī Ibn al-'Assāl à la Réfutation des chrétiens de 'Alī al-Ṭabarī', *Parole de l'Orient* 11, 1983, pp. 281–328, pp. 313–15.