Intolerance, Polemics, and Debate in Antiquity

Politico-Cultural, Philosophical, and Religious Forms of Critical Conversation

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CHAPTER 15

Christian-Muslim (In)tolerance? Islam and Muslims according to Early Christian Arabic Texts

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The plight of Christians (and other religious minorities) living under Muslim rule is an oft-debated topic in contemporary discussions about Islamic societies.[1] Critics of contemporary (and historical) treatment of non-Muslims, especially Christians, in Muslim-majority societies are quick to point out the second-class status of *dhimmī*s (those non-Muslims granted the "protection" of the Islamic government in exchange for a tax, the *jizya*, loosely based on Qur'ān 9:29). A classic formulation of the stipulations of life under Muslim rule is found in the provisions of the Covenant of Umar,[2] according to various recensions of which Christians should wear distinguishing clothing; should not build churches close to, or bigger than, mosques; should not ring bells; and should not teach the Qur'ān to their children, among other stipulations. Today, these debates are reflected in very real concerns for the existence and safety of Christian communities in Muslim-majority areas (including the ability of Christianity to survive in the land of Christ's birth).[3]

But, much like fifteenth-century artists setting the Annunciation in the Tuscan countryside, scholars reading classical or Middle Arabic texts[4] about Islam or Christian-Muslim relations often read their own situations, problems, or challenges into the historic narrative. Such writings often ignore the pre-Islamic history of the Christians and others who came to live under Islamic rule. For example, a century before Muhammad's lifetime, the emperor Justinian promulgated a number of laws regulating (and, often, restricting) the rights

1 A concern reflected in the Marrakesh Declaration, the result of discussions among various Muslim intellectuals in January 2016. It is available at http://www.marrakeshdeclaration.org/.

2 On this, see, for example, Milka Levy-Rubin, "Shurūṭ 'Umar and Its Alternatives: The Legal Debate on the Status of the Dhimmīs." *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 30 (2005): 170–206; Mark R. Cohen, "What Was the Pact of 'Umar? A Literary-Historical Study," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 23 (1999): 100–57.

3 As exemplified by articles such as Eliza Griswold's 26 July 2015 piece for the *New York Times*, "Is This the End of Christianity in the Middle East?" available at https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/26/magazine/is-this-the-end-of-christianity-in-the-middle-east.html.

4 For further discussion of Middle Arabic, see Benjamin Hary, "Middle Arabic: Proposals for New Terminology," *al-'Arabiyya* (1989): 19–36.

 | DOI:10.1163/9789004411500_017

of Jews, pagans, and also Christians whose beliefs were deemed heretical by the ruling authorities.[5] Under these laws, the construction or repair of places of worship by non-Christians (and those deemed unorthodox) was regulated; they were not allowed to possess Christian slaves; Jews and heretics were not allowed to be witnesses against Christians. Similarly, later Islamic practice resembles aspects of the tax and class system of the earlier Sasanian Empire.[6] When the regulations and restrictions that Christian and other non-Muslim communities faced under Muslim rule are read against the background of previous legislation in the region, they resonate differently than when one reads the same rules against the backdrop of contemporary constitutions that, in theory, view minority communities as the legal equals of other members of society.

In addition to legal and social-political history,[7] another means of gaining insight into the realities of Christian life under Muslim rule is the body of literature that Christians produced, in Arabic and other languages, as subjects of the caliphate.[8] In order to understand this literature, however, the contemporary reader should be alert to both the literary genre and the author's theological orientation. For, as Michael Penn has recently observed in his masterful survey of early Syriac Christian writings on Islam, "the greatest challenge in remembering the conquests was explaining their results: good things happened to other people."[9] Rather than taking early Christian descriptions of the Arab conquests at face value, he argues for a reading of such conquest accounts as

5 For an overview, see John Tolan, "The Legal Status of Religious Minorities in the Medieval Mediterranean World: A Comparative Study," in *Hybride Kulturen im mittelalterlichen Europa: Vorträge und Workshops einter internationalen Frühlingsschule/Hybrid Cultures in Medieval Europe: Papers and Workshops of in International Spring School* (Ed. Michael Borgolte, Bernd Schneidmüller; Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2010), 141–49.

6 For further discussion, see M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, "The Jizya Verse (Q. 9:29): Tax Enforcement on Non-Muslims in the First Muslim State," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 14 (2012): 72–89; Levy-Rubin, *Non-Muslims in the Early Islamic Empire: From Surrender to Coexistence* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

7 See, for example, Jan J. Van Ginkel, "The Perception and Presentation of the Arab Conquest in Syriac Historiography: How Did the Changing Social Position of the Syrian Orthodox Community Influence the Account of Their Historiographers?" in *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam*, ed. Emmanouela Grypeou and David Richard Thomas (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 171–84.

8 For an excellent introduction to and overview of the history of Christians under Muslim rule, see Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

9 Michael Philip Penn, *Envisioning Islam: Syriac Christians and the Early Muslim World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 17.

a form of collective memory.[10] While such a reading does not necessarily deny the accuracy of the details preserved in Syriac Christian accounts of the Arab conquests, it "acknowledges that contemporary concerns more often shaped the ways these writers transmitted this information than did their actual knowledge of the early seventh century."[11]

1 Early Christian Writings on Islam

By the seventh century, Christians had a richly developed triumphal theology. Although Christianity was, for its first three centuries, a politically marginalised religion in the Roman Empire, by the early fourth century it was officially recognised with the Edict of Milan (313).[12] With the eventual adoption of Christianity by Roman emperors and as the religion of the empire, Christian theology was increasingly public—both in its triumph over Judaism and in assertions of "correct" belief.[13] Although Christianity was far from uniform, ecclesiastical councils, summoned by the emperors, attempted to define correct belief, often restricting the rights of those who were deemed erroneous or heretical.[14] For example, the fifth century witnessed acrimonious debates among Christians over how to understand and express Christ's humanity and divinity. Two major ecclesiastical councils were convened, at Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451), and those who did not agree with the conciliar christological definitions were, to varying degrees and in various ways, marginalised or excluded from the public life of the empire.[15]

10 See Penn, *Envisioning Islam*, 189n1, for an extensive bibliography of the literature on collective memory.

11 Penn, *Envisioning Islam*, 16.

12 For the development of Christian discourse in the context of the Roman Empire, see Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

13 For one example, see Margaret R. Miles, "Santa Maria Maggiore's Fifth-Century Mosaics: Triumphal Christianity and the Jews," *Harvard Theological Review* 86 (1993): 155–72.

14 For a recent overview of these ecclesiastical and imperial politics, see Michael Gaddis, "The Political Church: Religion and the State," in *A Companion to Late Antiquity*, ed. P. Rousseau (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 512–24. For a non-theological interpretation, see also Arnold Hugh Martin Jones, "Were Ancient Heresies National or Social Movements in Disguise?" *The Journal of Theological Studies* 10 (1959): 280–98.

15 For further details, see, for example, Susan Wessel, *Cyril of Alexandria and the Nestorian Controversy: The Making of a Saint and of a Heretic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press on Demand, 2004); Nikolai N. Seleznyov, "Nestorius of Constantinople: Condemnation, Suppression, Veneration," *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 62 (2010): 165–90; Jan Jacob

In order to understand the nuances of early Christian writings on Islam, therefore, the theological orientation of the Christian author should be borne in mind. For example, one ninth-century Syriac world history explains the Arab/Muslim conquests as follows:

> the God of vengeance, who rules the kingdom of men on earth, who gives it to whom He wants and appoints the lowest of men over it—when He saw that the measure of the Romans' sins was overflowing and that they were using every sort of cruelty against us and our churches and [that] our confession was close to being destroyed, He rose, persuaded and brought the Sons of Ishmael up from the land of the south, those indeed who had been despised and scorned and unknown among the nations of the world. And by them we gained deliverance. In this way, we profited not a little. For we had been ransomed from the tyrannical kingdom of the Romans.[16]

As Penn points out,[17] scholars who take this account at face value and use this chronicle (of Dionysius of Tel Mahre) to illustrate the complicity of Syriac Christians in the success of the Arab Muslim conquests misrepresent the larger body of Syriac writings on the conquests. For the author of this account was a Miaphysite, a member of one of the Christian groups that did not agree with the Chalcedonian christological definition. As he was from a Christian group that was not granted full rights or freedoms under Roman rule, was his description of Arab rule intended as a faithful depiction of the Arab conquests, or a rhetorical device to emphasise his community's disagreements with the theology and policies of late antique Byzantine ruling elites? Additionally, was this ninth-century account intended to convey events of the seventh century, or was it composed in such a way as to speak to the realities of the ninth-century Miaphysite community, which was desirous of being in the good graces of the contemporary (Muslim) ruling elite? Although these questions may not be fully resolved, knowledge of both the situation of the Miaphysite Christian community at the time of the chronicle's composition (and that of

Van Ginkel, "John of Ephesus on Emperors: The Perception of the Byzantine Empire by a Monophysite," *Orientalia christiana analecta* 247 (1994): 323–33.

16 As quoted by Penn, *Envisioning Islam*, 15. See ch. 1 of *Envisioning Islam* for a detailed discussion of this and other early Syriac conquest accounts.

17 Penn, *Envisioning Islam*, 49.

its later dissemination), as well as the intra-Christian dynamics, help nuance the reading of this account.[18]

Although many of the first Christians who encountered Muslims were Syriac speakers, Christians who came under Muslim rule wrote in a variety of languages, including, eventually, Arabic. In fact, in ninth-century Baghdad, the caliph employed multi-lingual Christians (and others) to translate Greek and other works into Arabic.[19] The Arabic writings of Christians who came under Muslim rule[20] provide particular insights into the (in)tolerance that existed in the early centuries of the caliphate. For, unlike compositions in Syriac or other languages that were used by non-Muslim communities, Christians who wrote in Arabic were using a language that was easily accessible to their Muslim overlords, based as it was on the language of the Qur'ān itself.[21] Given the power dynamics, one might expect to find cautious or obsequious language in Christian Arabic writings that touched on political or theological matters involving Muslims. But, much as with the Syriac literature that Penn has surveyed, Christian Arabic texts comprise a range of genres and widely varying approaches to Islam and Muslims.[22]

2 Early Christian Arabic Texts: Two Examples

The following section uses two Christian Arabic texts from the early Islamic period as an initial investigation into what these writings might tell us of the (in)tolerance present in early Islamic societies. Both depict a Christian in conversation with a Muslim (or Muslims). One takes the form of a letter, while the

18 Yet another dynamic is the redeployment of ancient "types" to meet the needs of the new situation. See, for example, Griffith, "Jews and Muslims in Christian Syriac and Arabic Texts of the Ninth Century," *Jewish History* 3 (1988): 65–94.

19 See the study by Dmitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early'Abbasaid Society* (*2nd–4th/5th–10th c.*) (London: Routledge, 1998, repr. 2012).

20 For a concise overview, see Griffith, "The Monks of Palestine and the Growth of Christian Literature in Arabic," *The Muslim World* 78 (1988): 1–28.

21 On the complex dynamics of Christians who came to write, speak, and think in Arabic, see Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic: The Scriptures of the "People of the Book" in the Language of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

22 See, for example, Alexander Treiger, "Christian Graeco-Arabica: Prolegomena to a History of the Arabic Translations of the Greek Church Fathers," *Intellectual History of the Islamicate World* 3 (2015): 188–227. For sources on one of the Christian communities that came to use Arabic, see Samuel Noble and Alexander Treiger, eds., *The Orthodox Church in the Arab World, 700–1700: An Anthology of Sources* (DeKalb, IN: Northern Illinois University Press, 2014).

other is framed as a debate text. Debates and debate texts as a genre of literature have a long history in Mesopotamia[23]—one that was continued under the caliphs, in Baghdad and beyond. For Christians who would come to write in Arabic, debate texts likely served as a catechetical tool—and one that promoted in-group pride.[24] They are often constructed as a Christian debating a Muslim or a group of Muslims—and, in the Christian texts, the Christian (of course) "wins" the debate, but in a respectful manner. Although the manuscript tradition is often later than the historical setting the manuscripts purport to represent, such texts preserve items of interest to historians and other scholars.[25]

The debate text from which the following examples are drawn is attributed to the early ninth-century bishop of Harran, Theodore Abū Qurra.[26] He was summoned by the caliph al-Ma'mūn (r. 819–33)[27] to debate a number of Muslim notables on the veracity of the Christian religion. The discussion ranges from points of Christian doctrine that are not compatible with Islamic belief (e.g., the divinity of Christ) to pointed attacks on the weaknesses of Islamic faith (e.g., if God is just, what is the eschatological reward for Muslim women if their husbands are promised *houris* in paradise?). In this debate, the Muslim notables are vanquished—and not just because of Abū Qurra's familiarity with points of Christian doctrine and his ability to explain their validity. His victory

23 See, for example, the collection of essays in Gerrit Jan Reinink and Herman L. J. Vanstiphout, eds., *Dispute Poems and Dialogues in the Ancient and Mediaeval Near East: Forms and Types of Literary Debates in Semitic and Related Literatures* (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 1991).

24 For further discussion of this genre, see 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 *The Majlis: Interreligious Encounters in Medieval Islam*, ed. Hava Lazarus-Yafeh et al. (Wiesbaden: Harrossowitz Verlag, 1999), 13–65.

25 As, for example, with the discussion of Qur'ān 108 and Qur'ān 111, preserved in Theodore Abū Qurra's debate (one of the texts discussed below). See Clare Wilde, "The Qur'an: Kalām Allāh or Words of Man?: A Case of Tafsir Transcending Muslim-Christian Communal Borders," *Parole de l'Orient* 32 (*Actes du 7e congrès international des études arabes chrétiennes* [*Sayyidat al-Bir, septembre 2004*]) (2007): 401–18.

26 Ignatius Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra avec les ulémas musulmans devant le calife al-Ma'mūn* (Aleppo: n.p., 1999). Twenty-six manuscripts of the text are known, dating from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries, in two recensions: Melkite and Jacobite. For the manuscript history of the text, see Griffith, "Monk in the Emir's Majlis," 38–39. A student of Fr. Samir has produced an English translation and edition of this text: see Wafik Nasry, *The Caliph and the Bishop: A 9th Century Muslim-Christian Debate; al-Ma'mūn and Abū Qurrah* (Beirut: CEDRAC, 2008).

27 On the historicity of the encounter between Abū Qurra and al-Ma'mūn, see Griffith, "Reflections on the Biography of Theodore Abū Qurrah," *Parole de l'Orient* 18 (1993): 143–70, esp. 156–58.

is also attributable to a deep knowledge of the Qur'ān itself—and an ability to employ it in defence of Christian doctrines and to critique it.[28]

The other text is a letter, preserved in a unique manuscript (Sinai Arabic 434, ff. 171r–181v, copied in 1138), a microfilm copy of which is housed in the Library of Congress in Washington, DC. As with debate texts, letters are an ancient literary device through which an author can put forth a set of ideas in a relatively concise form, but—conveniently—without the expectation of a response: a letter is used when the two parties are at a distance. The letter can be anonymous, or it can carry a semblance of an actual epistolary exchange through allusions to places, events, or individuals known to a wider audience.[29] This manuscript contains the response of an anonymous Melkite monk in Jerusalem to three questions posed by a Muslim sheikh. The sheikh has read a "Refutation of the Christians" and wants the monk's expert opinion on three questions concerning 1) the relationship of the eternal being of God to the three persons of the Trinity; 2) the hypostatic union of God and man in the person of Christ; and 3) the proof of this hypostatic union in the actions of Christ. In his response, this monk, who lived in pre-Crusader Jerusalem,[30] employs both biblical and qur'ānic "proof" in support of Christian doctrines. That a scribe would transcribe an anonymous letter, decades if not centuries after the date of the purported correspondence, argues that this "letter" be read in the genre of literary epistles, rather than (primarily) as a record of an actual exchange.

Finally, a comment on the nature and dissemination of these two texts. That only one manuscript of this letter survives (as opposed to the rich manuscript tradition of Theodore Abū Qurra's debate) indicates that it may have had a more limited audience or been a less effective teaching tool. Perhaps its topics were too specialised to appeal to the general population, or the anonymous epistolary format was too dry (akin to an academic essay), as opposed to the debate text, which had historic characters (the caliph al-Ma'mūn, the bishop of Harrān, Theodore Abū Qurra, and his interlocutors, who—while not mapping

28 Dick, *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 80.

29 For the Greek genre, see Patricia A. Rosenmeyer, *Ancient Greek Literary Letters: Selections in Translation* (London: Routledge, 2006); for Greek and Latin letters, see Michael Trapp, ed., *Greek and Latin Letters: An Anthology with Translation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

30 Robert Haddad, *La Trinité divine chez les théologiens arabes 750–1050* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1985), 38. He dates the text to 780 (see Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 504–05). A ninth-century date is suggested by Mark Swanson, "Beyond Prooftexting: Approaches to the Qur'ān in Some Early Arabic Christian Apologies," *The Muslim World* 88 (1988): 297–319, esp. 301n25.

directly onto historic actors—have names that resonate with readers familiar with Islamic history: e.g., "al-Hāshimī" or "the company of the Quraysh") and dialogue, much like a stage play. The relatively "academic" and non-polemical nature of the anonymous monk's letter may have contributed to its obscurity, while the lively language of Abū Qurra's debate may explain its popularity.

2.1 *Official Intolerance?*

The highly stylised and formulaic nature of Christian-Muslim debate texts, in Arabic or other languages, argue against their "true-to-life" depiction of the actual encounters they purport to represent. For example, after one of Abū Qurra's rejoinders, the caliph is depicted as saying, "O 'Abū Abbās, Abū Qurra has made us listen to a speech. I am afraid that our minds will veer away from the truth and we will enter into his religion."[31] He goes even further, dismissing this same man after Abū Qurra has defeated him in the debate: "Be quiet, God shame you and curse you! You have spoken nonsense and silliness out of ignorance, all the while thinking that you are one of the modest godfearers. By God, were it not for the malicious pleasure those present would take in your lot, I would put you in a place in which your worth would be lower and your influence smaller. Leave us. There is no good in you, nor in anything connected with you."[32]

Although this debate text is adept at showing the flaws and weaknesses of the arguments made by Abū Qurra's Muslim interlocutors, it is quite careful to depict the caliph in benign (if slightly insipid) terms. The caliph is described as delighted with Abū Qurra[33] and even laughs when Abū Qurra triumphs over his Muslim interlocutors.[34] But, as opposed to any of the Muslim debate partners, the caliph is also treated with great deference. For example, after one of his interlocutors criticises the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, Abū Qurra is silent until the caliph asks why he is not responding. Abū Qurra says that he is waiting until "the Commander of the Faithful gives me the command."[35]

Their nature as a literary construction does not, however, mean that the events they purport to relay did not occur. A range of sources attests to the

31 Dick, *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 81.

32 Dick, *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 81–82.

33 Dick, *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 73, 86, and 119.

34 Dick, *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 70, 91, and 123 (for Abū Qurra's laughter).

35 While this caliphal title has a military connotation, it may also be translated as "prince of the believers." Did the author of the text choose this honorific to designate the caliph because of the use of "believers" (*mu'minīn*), rather than of "Muslims" (*muslimīn*)? For a revisionist reading of Islamic origins that focuses on the concept of "believer," see Fred M. Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

phenomenon of debates both within and across confessional lines, as attested to by the description of such a session by a fourth-/tenth-century Andalusian visitor to Baghdad:

> When the meeting was jammed with its participants, and they saw that no one else was expected, one of the infidels said, "You have all agreed to the debate, so the Muslims should not argue against us on the basis of their scripture, nor on the basis of the sayings of their prophet, since *we put no credence in these things*, and we do not acknowledge him. Let us dispute with one another only on the basis of arguments from reason, and what observation and deduction will support.[36]

The surprise registered by this visitor at the respect accorded to all the participants gives a sense of the relative comfort of the various religious minorities in the Islamic East—while also suggesting that religious minorities in the western part of the Islamic world at that time might not have been accorded the same freedoms. But, as discussed below, factors other than attestations to the participation of religious minorities in public debates are needed in order to establish the nature or extent of the tolerance of the caliphate.

Islamic literature also includes guidelines for the proper conduct of the participants in a debate. According to al-Ashʿarī (d. 324/936), the eponym for what would become normative (Sunni) theology:

> In dialectical debates and disputations one should seek to get closer to God, the exalted. They should serve as a way to worship Him and to fulfil his commands. Their motive should be the desire to achieve His reward and to avoid His punishment. When these are lacking, disputations have no reason except greed, obstinacy, or glee in defeating the opponent and over-coming him. Other animals, such as the stallions of camels, rams and roosters, share this drive to conquer.[37]

That such behaviour was not unheard of is indicated by Ibn Ḥaẓm's (d. 456/1064) including "bad manners" among the conditions for one participant "losing" a round of a debate: "If one of the participants is making insinuations

36 Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Ḥumaydī, *Jadhwat al-Muqtabis*, ed. Muḥammad b. Ṭāwīt al-Ṭanjī (Cairo: Dār al-Miṣrīyya, 1953), 101–02, emphasis mine.

37 Cited by Sarah Stroumsa, "Ibn al-Rāwandī's sū' adab al-mujādala: The Role of Bad Manners in Medieval Disputations," *The Majlis. Interreligious Encounters in Medieval Islam*, ed. Hava Lazarus-Yafeh et al. (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz Verlag, 1999), 66–83, here 70–71.

by smiling to himself, or if he yells; if he imitates the other, or makes jest, or treats the other as a fool, or treats him rudely; or when he insults the other and calls him an infidel, curses and reviles him or makes foul accusations about his mother or father, let alone if this is accompanied by slapping and stamping the feet."[38]

The debate text attributed to Abū Qurra echoes these concerns. For example, the caliph assures Theodore that his is

> a *majlis* of justice, equity and proof. No one will treat you unjustly in it. So loosen your tongue, put forth your question, make clear what is on your mind. There is no one here who will respond to you in any but the best way (cf. Qur'ān 29:46), nor will anyone frighten you, or loom large in your eyes, nor should you be afraid of anyone. This is a day of proof (*burhān*, cf. Qur'ān 2:111), on which the truth is to be made clear. So whoever is in possession of the verification of his religion, let him speak.[39]

This promise, coming from the mouth of the caliph, is in stark contrast to Abū Qurra's description of Muslim-Christian interactions (discussed in the next section), which alludes to Muslim dominion (over Christians) as well as Muslim defamation of, and disdain and contempt for, Christians. For, while the text is fairly free in its mentions of Muslim mistreatment of Christians or disrespect for Christianity, it is very careful to exempt both the figure of the ruler (the Muslim caliph)[40] and the Qur'ān and Muḥammad from these charges. In other words, it is not the Qur'ān or even the teachings of the Prophet that are to blame, but (wilful) Muslim misinterpretation of their tradition. In fact, Abū Qurra frequently reminds his Muslim interlocutors of qur'ānic passages that can be read as in agreement with Christian theology[41] or passages that

38 Cited in Stroumsa, "Role of Bad Manners," 73.

39 Dick, *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 72.

40 The figure of al-Ma'mūn as the sympathetic caliph is surely no accident, especially in the light of his ultimately unsuccessful "inquisition" (*miḥna*) and attempted imposition of "rationalist" Mu'tazila theology on state officials. For more on al-Ma'mūn and these policies, see John A. Nawas, "A Reexamination of Three Current Explanations for al-Ma'mun's Introduction of the Miḥna," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 26 (1994): 615–29; and Michael Cooperson, *Al Ma'mun* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2012).

41 A frequently exploited practice of Christian Arab apologists, and one that did not go unnoticed, or uncriticised, by Muslims. For further discussion of prooftexting, see Swanson, "Beyond Prooftexting," and the comments of a later Christian Arab apologist, Paul of Antioch, in P. Khoury, ed. and trans., *Paul d'Antioche. Évêque melkite de Sidon* (*XII^e s.*), Recherches publiées sous la direction de L'Institut de Lettres Orientales de Beyrouth 24 (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique Beyrouth, 1965), esp. the *Risāla*, pars. 45–47.

encourage respectful engagement with Christians, such as the exhortation in Qur'ān 29:46 to address the People of the Book in the "best way."

Thus, while Theodore Abū Qurra alludes to Muslim ill-treatment of Christians in the course of his debate, the environment of the debate itself is carefully depicted as one of equity and fairness, largely thanks to the presence and patronage of the person of the caliph. And in this fair, equitable environment, the Christian can easily best his Muslim opponents. However, the text also emphasises the distinction between this *majlis* of fairness and the hostile, arrogant, disrespectful, and unjust treatment that Christians are accustomed to receiving at the hands of Muslims.

2.2 *Societal Intolerance?*

Even if Christian debate texts are literary constructions, the fact of their circulation, in Arabic, is potentially significant for our understanding of the (in)tolerance of those societies. It is worth noting that, despite the text's frequent and facile use of qur'ānic passages, Abū Qurra does not employ the two qur'ānic passages that frequently appear in contemporary arguments for a qur'ānic (and Islamic) religious tolerance[42] (Qur'ān 109: "to you your religion, and to me, mine"; and Qur'ān 2:256: "there is no compulsion in religion"). And, although Arabic terms for "intolerance" are not found in the texts under discussion here, related concepts—such as (in)justice—do occur, as do allusions to Muslims' preferred societal status. For example, Theodore Abū Qurra asserts that "[w]ere I to have any justice from you, O Muslim, you would not have any favor over me, nor power, nor right, due to what God has accorded me before you, by means of which He gave me preference instead of you, in witness of which your own scripture testifies in my behalf."[43]

There are also allusions to Muslim power—frequently as a proof of God's love (for Christians), since God tests (or disciplines) those he loves (cf., e.g., Proverbs 3:12)[44]—as well as the means by which Muslims came to power:

> the apostles (*ḥawāriyyūn*), God's *anṣār*, [...] brought to very ignorant nations, without sword or rod or money or men, a difficult *madhhab*, leading them from this world (*duṇya*) to the next (*ākhira*), and they responded obediently, in their life and after their death. And, in the name of

42 For a survey of this topic, see Yohanan Friedmann, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam: Interfaith Relations in the Muslim Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

43 Dick, *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 90.

44 Dick, *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 123.

> the crucified [one], they raised the dead and worked every miracle. That shows the divine power—that of the Messiah, to whom was testified.[45]

These two passages are illustrative of the frequent and oblique allusions to Muslim dominion found in Christian Arabic texts. Often, Muslim maltreatment of Christians is implied, rather than explicitly stated, as in the suspicion of the author of Sinai Arabic 434 that the three questions challenging the veracity of the Christian faith were initially put forth out of malice. (But, much like the figure of the caliph in Abū Qurra's debate, the Muslim who sought his views is presented as fair-minded, genuinely wanting to understand the Christian position. He therefore addresses a respectful reply to a sheikh "pre-eminent in his Islam," whose "noble lineage" prevents him from asking his questions about Christianity out of "malice.") Alternatively, it is found in a passing reference as a contrast to the (correct) behaviour of Christians. Sometimes, however, Muslim maltreatment is clearly stated.

Abū Qurra tells his Muslim interlocutors that it is Muslim bad behaviour, rather than a dearth of Christian arguments on behalf of their faith, that prevents Christians from defending their beliefs:

> Do not suppose, O Abū 'Abd Allāh, that we do not have any argument that we could use to argue in behalf of the verification of our religion. Your dominion (*tasalluṭ*) over us is the only thing imposing it, then your disdain (*izdirā'*) for us, and your defamation (*qadhf*) of us, to the point that all of you suppose that there is no religion and no argument we could use to argue in our own behalf, and that due to the frequency of our keeping away from you in silence, we have according to you, among the lowest estate (*aḥqar al-manāzil*), indeed the most despicable (*adhill*) one in your eyes. No one comes close to the rush to anger (*al-ḍajar*), the impudence (*al-salāṭa*), the audacity (*al-tajāsur*) and the conceit (*al-i'jāb*) that is in you. But now my lord and master, the Commander of the Faithful, has given me permission to speak, and I must answer for my religion and set forth the argument in its behalf, by means of which I will find my way to it. And if in your unfairness (*ẓulm*) and hostility (*ta'addī*) you harbor feelings of hatred against me (*taḥqad 'alayy*), and you will not listen, then listen now to what your own scripture utters. Do not act haughtily against me (*tatajabbar 'alayy*), or disdainfully (*ta'anaf*), out of concession (*mina l-i'tirāf*), once it is clear to you from your scripture you should address me "only in the best way," just as your prophet commanded you

45 Sinai Ar. 434, ff. 178r–178v.

> in your scripture, speaking of Christians whom he had met earlier: "We believe in what He sent down to us and to you; our God and your God are one." (Qur'ān 29:46) But you, due to your conceit (*i'jāb*), have not accepted what he said, nor have you obeyed his command. Rather, in the place of his commandment to you, you have put your contempt for our religion (*izdirā'ikum bi-dīninā*), and your defamation of us (*qadhfakum lanā bi-l-qabīḥ*).[46]

But how do we understand allusions, in Arabic, to Muslim injustice? That Muslims were not expected to read these texts? Or that Muslims would not be bothered by such allusions, somewhat belying the accusations levelled at them?

Although in the light of current events, some may be tempted to take the allusions to Muslim maltreatment of Christians at face value, the existence of a multi-confessional debate as a literary genre indicates a level of intercommunal interaction that argues against a uniformly hostile Muslim attitude towards Christians, particularly at the official level. And there are also favourable depictions of Muslims, such as the caliph in Abū Qurra's text as well as the addressee of the monk. Furthermore, many texts written by Christians under Muslim rule, in Arabic and other languages, evidence intimate familiarity with Muslim beliefs and practices. Even the language used (e.g., books of God, *kutub Allāh*[47]—including, seemingly, the Qur'ān) indicates a high degree of assimilation into Arab, Muslim society—on the part of the authors as well as, presumably, their audiences.

This leads to the possibility that the hostile Muslim could, to some degree, be yet another literary trope, as it were. But this hypothesis raises the question of why such a trope would be needed—or successful. *Pace* Penn's discussion of Syriac accounts of the Arab Muslim conquests, Christians had to explain why "good things happened to other people."[48] For Christians had, by the seventh century, developed both a triumphal and a supercessionist theology, especially vis-à-vis "vanquished" Judaism. With the emergence of Islam as both a new and also a militarily and politically victorious religious player, neither of these categories was particularly applicable. Christians who came under Muslim rule had to develop new categories, or revisit old ones, not just

46 Dick, *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 74–75.

47 Sinai Ar. 434, ff. 171r; 181v; 174r: *kutub allāh taʿāla*; 175r: *kutub allāh al-munazzala, kutub allāh rabbī*. While Abū Qurra's debate does not speak of the Qur'ān in these terms, it contains numerous references to the Qur'ān, Islamic theology, and even obscure intra-Muslim debates. See, for example, Wilde, "Kalām Allāh."

48 See ch. 1 of Penn, *Envisioning Islam*, which uses this phrase as its title.

to explain their subjugation to this new religion, but also to justify the continued validity of their Christianity—even when, in the new political order, they were the social equals of both Jews and other Christians whom they deemed heretical. One recurring theme was that God tests those he loves. The power of this explanation would increase in direct proportion to the villainy of the rulers.[49] Theodore Abū Qurra's debate text demonstrates with particular clarity how Christians managed their new situation. On the one hand, he states (in defence of Christian veneration of the cross):

> there is no king who goes out to do battle with his enemies, having the sign of the cross with him, goes without victory and triumph being his, and he comes to rule over his enemies. There is not one of the kings of the earth, who does not have a banner by means of which he is recognized as who he is, the son of whom he is, and what his strength is, by means of which one distinguishes between him and his enemies. The sign of our master, Jesus the Messiah, is the sign of the cross. Just as we accept the Messiah with a truthful intention and a sincerely genuine creed, so also do we accept his cross, extol it, and embrace it in all our affairs.[50]

But this same text refuses to interpret Muslim dominion over Christians as a sign of divine favour for Islam. Rather, the political dominance of Islam is seen as a sign of divine favour for Christians (and not as a punishment for Christian infidelity or a foreshadowing of the antichrist).[51] Just like the Israelites, God's *umma* (community) that lived under Pharaoh's yoke for 400 years, "[w]e, the people of the religion of Christianity, He put the lash of punishment upon us. That is a benefit for us, according to the reckoning of the saying of Solomon, son of David, 'Whom the Lord loves, He puts to the test; He disciplines the men with whom He is well pleased.'"[52]

Finally, despite the frequent allusions to Muslim mistreatment of Christians, actual or threatened, Christian Arabic texts contain sometimes-strong criticisms of Muslim beliefs or practices. That these criticisms survived, and circulated in Arabic, belies (or perhaps accounts for) the description of Muslim

49 Yet another tactic was to "downgrade" Islam to either a Christian heresy, or to depict Muslims as the new Jews or even pagans. For further discussion, see Griffith, "Jews and Muslims."

50 Dick, *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 92–93.

51 For more on the characterisations of Islam in early Christian texts, see Robert G. Hoyland, "The Earliest Christian Writings on Muhammad: An Appraisal," in *The Biography of the Prophet*, ed. Harald Motzki (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 276–97.

52 Dick, *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 123.

hostility to Christians.[53] While an argument could be made for such communal separation that Muslims would not have read Christian Arabic texts, the familiarity that Christian and Muslim texts show with the beliefs and practices of the other community argues strongly for porous communal borders.[54]

2.3 *Christian Intolerance?*

In addition to the implied (or explicit) criticisms of Muslim rule, or the means by which Muslims came to power, Christian Arabic texts also criticise Muslim beliefs and practices. As with Christian criticisms of Islam in other languages, Muslim sexual freedom—in this world (polygamy and divorce) and the next (*houris*)—is criticised, as in Abū Qurra's query as to

> who will be the partners of your wives in the hereafter, since you will have disowned them and replaced them with *houris*? You will have left them in sadness and great distress, while you are in happiness and delight with the *houris*. God will be made the cause of injustice and wrongdoing, since He will have provided partners for the men, but He will not have provided partners for the women. He will have committed an injustice against them and done them a wrong.[55]

As this criticism indicates, Christians writing in Arabic were familiar with points of Muslim belief that extended beyond daily practices. Although such paradisiacal delights attracted the attention of Christians who wrote in other languages, Christian Arabic texts evidence particular familiarity with the Qur'ān. And, although Christian Arabic texts frequently mine the Qur'ān (and even Islamic tradition) for arguments to support Christian beliefs, especially regarding Christology and the Trinity, criticisms of the Qur'ān and also Muḥammad himself do appear. This is true even of texts such as the two under discussion here, which tend to avoid directly criticising the Qur'ān or the Prophet and, instead, level their critique at Muslim misinterpretation—and even corruption[56]—of the text and teachings of Muḥammad. For example, Abū Qurra's debate text notes the discrepancy in marriage rules between what was permitted for Muḥammad and what was allowed for others (other men):

53 See, for example, the provisions of the Covenant of Umar, as discussed by Cohen, "What Was the Pact of 'Umar?"

54 See, for example, ch. 4 of Penn, *Envisioning Islam*, and the overview of Islamic exegesis on a selection of verses found in Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *Qur'anic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

55 Dick, *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 77–78.

56 On this, see Wilde, "Kalām Allāh."

> he provided four wives for you and he died with fourteen wives. That man could not manage without marriage. Even more than this, when he saw Zayd's wife he became infatuated with her and he said that *inspiration* came down upon him. It said, ["When Zayd has consummated desire with her, We *will marry you to her* in a new marriage."] (Qur'ān 33:37) God, mighty and exalted be He, was the broker and Gabriel was the witness! He made Zayd divorce his wife and he married her at his Lord's command! You tell this repulsive thing about your prophet and in your prayers you pray on his behalf and you ascribe to him the speech of God, may He be exalted![57]

In addition to criticisms of the Qur'ān and Muḥammad, including Muslim misinterpretations,[58] Christian Arabic texts also criticise Islam as both religion and polity. For, in addition to the aforementioned criticisms of the means by which Muslims came to power, Muslim claims of Islamic supercession are also disputed through claims of the intellectual superiority of the older tradition. In the words of one of Abū Qurra's Muslim interlocutors, "Abū Qurra's religion is genuinely old and you its adherent are neither weary nor too tired to give an answer. The religion of Salam is young, tender and mild; its adherent is content with faith, too rich in the love of God for giving replies in matters from which my intellect falls short, about which my thinking is baffled, and for which I have no answer."[59]

That this argument for the superiority of an older religious tradition could be applied to Judaism vis-à-vis Christianity is not addressed. Rather, Christian Arabic texts repeat ancient Christian polemics against Judaism, some of which are also found in Islamic tradition (e.g., God's anger at the Jews):

> You even say he vilified us, which we do not believe, nor do we see it. It is not proper for you, O Muslim, to disavow your prophet's ennoblement of our religion and of its merits, in his command to you to seek from the master of the Day of Judgment that He guide you from error to "the straight path which He graciously bestowed on those at whom He was not angry, who were not going astray." (cf. Qur'ān 1:6–7) Who were those with whom He was angry, if not the Jews and the worshipers of idols? Those going astray were the ones asking God to guide them to the straight path. Those on whom He had graciously bestowed [it] were the

57 Dick, *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 86.

58 See, for example, Abū Qurra's discussion of Qur'ān 108 and 111, in Dick, *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 108; discussed in Wilde, "Kalām Allāh."

59 Dick, *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 80.

> "Christians" (*al-naṣārā*), who believed in Him and in His Messiah, while being obedient to Him, submitting to His precepts, and following His practices. But you, in your unfairness and your hostility to us, associate us with the worshipers of idols, comparing us with them and likening us to them. Yet your scripture testifies in our behalf that we were "Scripture People" before you, believing in the Gospel and in the One Who sent it down to us. You even confess that our Lord the Messiah in Heaven has precedence over all the prophets. Therefore, those who follow him have precedence over all religions.[60]

This passage demonstrates the ease with which Christian Arab apologists could weave ancient Christian polemics against Judaism into their arguments against Islam. It also shows Christian familiarity with Muslim exegesis of the Qur'ān. For the opening chapter of the Qur'ān alludes to those with whom God is angry and those who have gone astray. Although neither Jews nor Christians are mentioned in this qur'ānic chapter, a common gloss is that the former are the Jews, and the latter are the Christians—an interpretation with which the Christian text is clearly familiar, given its rebuttal. But the final assertion, that followers of Christ have precedence over all religions, raises interesting questions about "tolerance" in Christian responses to Islam, especially when the Christians are living under Muslim rule.

How ought we to understand the claim that the followers of one religion should have precedence over all other religions, particularly in the light of the texts' disrespectful allusions to Islam and Judaism? Is this a philosophical assertion, akin to the idea present in Latin theology, that "error has no rights" and only truth has rights—but that error might be tolerated if circumstances dictate?[61] Or is this wishful thinking, an expression of a desire for a return to an earlier situation? For Christians were not a uniform entity. The texts discussed here came from the Melkite community—Chalcedonian Christians who came to write in Arabic. For the former subjects of the Roman Empire, this had been the preferred form of Christianity.[62] As such, it had enjoyed privileges that

60 Dick, *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 74–75. See pp. 117–18 for a further example of contra-Iudaeos argumentation. This passage is notable both for its casual mention of *jihād* and the presumption, on the part of the Muslim interlocutor, of Christian anti-Jewish sentiments.

61 See John Courtney Murray's discussion of this classical position of the Roman Catholic Church at https://www.library.georgetown.edu/woodstock/murray/1965ib.

62 For a discussion of the analogous situation of Sunni Islam and its history of association with state power, see Khaled Abou El Fadl, "Islam and the Theology of Power," *Middle East Report* 221 (2001): 28–33.

Jews and even other Christians had not had. Might, then, this statement be an expression of a desire to return to its former position (of power)?

"Tolerance" connotes the permission or allowance of beliefs or behaviour with which one disagrees. Is "intolerance" therefore the refusal to accept such beliefs or behaviours, or the active prevention of them? In other words, are tolerance and intolerance only the provenance of those who hold political power or the means of enforcing their rules? As Christian Arabic texts contain both anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim rhetoric, can they be labelled as intolerant, even if their authors wielded little or no political power? If not, does that mean that minorities—religious or political—cannot be intolerant?

The case of Christians who came under Muslim rule problematises the association of (in)tolerance with power on three levels. Firstly, Christians had been in power prior to Muslim rule, and their writings reflect a desire for a return to their former glory, either in this world or the next. Secondly, their refusal to recognise the truth claims of other religious communities did have consequences for those who wished to transgress the communal borders: excommunication or refusal of marriage, among others. Thirdly, the refusal to accept (as true) the beliefs and practices of others was not restricted to a rejection of the religion of the ruling elites; it also extended to socio-political peers (Jews and also other Christian groups).

3 Conclusion: Minority Religion Truth Claims—an Acceptable Intolerance?

Unlike their Muslim neighbours, the first Christians who wrote in Arabic did not have the power of the state to enforce their desire for "precedence" over "all other religions." But church teachings, in Arabic-speaking and other Christian communities under Muslim rule, did attempt to influence and, often, restrict interactions between Christians and others. Although Islamic law would permit a Muslim man to marry a Christian or Jewish woman, church canons attempted to prevent such interactions: as one example from a Miaphysite council in 785 reveals, priests who allowed their daughters to marry pagans, Muslims, or Nestorians (a Christian group deemed heretical by the council) were to be expelled from the priesthood. Lay parents who permitted such intermarriage were not to receive the Eucharist or enter a church. This same council also ruled that Christian wives of Muslims should be excluded from the Eucharist and the church.[63] Similarly, Muslims are prevented from attend-

63 Penn, *Envisioning Islam*, 152.

ing the Christian Eucharist.[64] Are such rules examples of intolerance, even though Christianity was not the religion of the ruling power? Or does the lack of political power give greater licence for "intolerant" attitudes and actions on the part of religious minorities? Does the tolerance of a ruling power ironically create space for intolerant minorities?

If the writings of some of the first Christians who came under Muslim rule are read with an ear attuned to the genre and tone of the text, both the definition and the extent of "intolerance" is problematised. For, despite numerous allusions to social disadvantages, Christian Arabic texts also depict benevolent Muslims, particularly Muslim officials. And Christian Arabic texts also contain disrespectful remarks about Islam, the Qur'ān, Muḥammad, Muslims, Jews, and others with whom they disagree. Christian criticisms of these—in their view, erroneous—beliefs, in Arabic, undermine claims about the restrictive or oppressive nature of Muslim rule. Finally, in addition to being reduced to a subordinate status by the Islamic state, Christians themselves were also intolerant of the errors of Islam, and of Muslims, and of Jews—not just in their literary productions, but also in their attempted regulation of cross-communal interactions.

With the rise of Islam, a new Abrahamic, monotheistic, self-defined "religion" with a book from God in a "clear" Semitic tongue had entered the scene. And, in this world, Christians were no longer the definitive earthly victors (not only over Jews, but also over pagans). Rather, under Islam, Christians and Jews were equally "protected" "People of the Book." Theological justifications of earthly power (such as Eusebius's) would have to be revisited, as would the seemingly already solidified distinctions between Christianity and Judaism (as found, for example, in Athanasius, Aphrahat, Augustine, Gregory Nazianzus, Theodoret of Cyr, and John Chrysostom).

What light might Christian Arabic texts shed on how this "complete Christianity" that was "glorified over [its] enemies"[65] dealt with its re-equation (in political terms) with "vanquished Judaism" under Islam? The very fact of a harsh criticism of Muslim rule posed—and preserved—in Arabic, by Christians, may caution against a literal reading of the words on the pages. Instead, these Christian criticisms of their new overlords may be understood as wistful laments over their own loss of power, rather than depictions of the actual circumstances in which they found themselves. This may be likened to Christian Arabic apocalyptic discussions of the "beast" with reference to Arab/Muslim conquests. They rarely intend an actual horned animal, but rather

64 Penn, *Envisioning Islam*, 160.

65 Sinai Ar. 434, f. 181r.

an allegorical explanation for a new set of political circumstances, variously attributed to the impiety of different Christian groups or a temporary spell of "infidel" rule before the restoration of the rule of Christ.[66] For would rulers as tyrannical as those portrayed by some Christian Arab texts have allowed such criticisms to circulate under their very noses?

The numerous—but woefully understudied—works written by Christians who came under Muslim rule are a potentially rich source of information. But, like any other body of literature, Christian Arabic texts also contain their own interpretive conundra and demand a careful reading—one that takes into account the genre, tone, and purpose of their composition as well as the interests of later scribes in transcribing and/or circulating these accounts. Christian Arabic texts merit further attention from scholars of Christian and Islamic history as well as social and political historians. A close reading of such texts may be particularly helpful in discussions focusing on the (in)tolerance of Islamic states, broadening our understanding of (in)tolerance and its relation to the power of the state or other institutions. Finally, attention to the genre of literary sources encourages a careful reading of the past in the light of the present, and vice versa.[67]

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66 See, for example, Jason R. Zaborowski, "Egyptian Christians Implicating Chalcedonians in the Arab Takeover of Egypt: The Arabic Apocalypse of Samuel of Qalamūn," *Oriens christianus* 87 (2003): 100–15; F. Javier Martinez, *Eastern Christian Apocalyptic in the Early Muslim Period: Pseudo-Methodius and Pseudo-Athanasius* (PhD diss., Catholic University of America, Washington, DC, 1985).

67 I would like to thank the conveners of and participants in the Intolerance, Polemics and Debate conference. The event and the helpful comments on my paper have given me the chance to think about Christian Arabic texts from a new angle. Any errors are my own.

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