

THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA

Produce your proof if you are truthful (Q 2:111)
The Qur'ān in Christian Arabic texts (750-1258 C.E.)

A DISSERTATION

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DEDICATION

In memoriam

Robert Wilson Wilde
Myles M. Bourke
John J. O'Connell
James P. Griffin

*Let me no more my comfort draw
From my frail hold of Thee
In this alone, rejoice with awe
Thy mighty grasp of me*

GAUDIUM DOMINI EST FORTITUDO NOSTRA

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ABBREVIATIONS

EI = *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New Edition. Edited P.J. Bearman et al. 12 vols. + Index. Including Supplement. Leiden: Brill, 1960-2004.

EQ = *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*. Edited Jane Dammen McAuliffe. 5 vols + Index. Leiden: Brill, 2001-2006.

PREFACE

The inner rapprochement between Biblical faith and Greek philosophical inquiry was an event of decisive importance not only from the standpoint of the history of religions, but also from that of world history – it is an event which concerns us even today. Given this convergence, it is not surprising that Christianity, despite its origins and some significant developments in the East, finally took on its historically decisive character in Europe. We can also express this the other way around: this convergence, with the subsequent addition of the Roman heritage, created Europe and remains the foundation of what can rightly be called Europe.¹

(Benedict XVI, 12 September 2006, Regensburg, Germany)

While biblical faith and Greek philosophy may indeed have converged in the Roman empire to create ‘Europe’, the Christianity of the Arabic speaking ‘Islamic’ world has, arguably, yet to receive due scholarly attention. Once the gates of inquiry are more fully opened, its “historically decisive character” will also come to light, adding to our appreciation for the catholicity of the church universal. And, particularly in the post-9/11 world, discussion of the contributions of Christians and Christianity to Islamic civilization, as well as examination of theological (and other) trends particular to Arabophone Christian communities living under Muslim rule, may prove to be a welcome contribution

¹ Benedict XVI, “Faith, Reason and the University,” Vatican Archives, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg_en.html (accessed February 3, 2011).

to our dialogue of civilizations, as it will highlight how difficult it is to draw clear lines between the 'Islamic' and the 'Christian' worlds.²

'Islamic'?

The designation 'Islamic' is multi-faceted. Is it a religious (*dīn*) or political/communal term (*umma*)? Regional (*dār*) or legal (*shar'*), or practical/interpretive (*madhhab*)? Does it designate a public or a private realm? Is it at the level of the individual or the community?

If religious, is it a matter of (private – individual?) 'faith' (Ar. *īmān*) – belief in God, his angels, his messengers, his books, the Last Day or (outward – collective?) 'praxis' – that is, the five 'pillars' (Ar. *islām*)? Is it generally upright behavior (*ihsān*) or 'piety' (*taqwā*: cf. Q 49:13)? Would it be marked by rule of the (religious) scholars ('*ulamā'* – or, in Shiite tradition, ayatollahs)? A (centralized) body of (learned – religious?) advisors: those who 'loose' and 'bind' (*ahl al-ḥall wa-l-'aqd*)? The (decentralized) authority of a variety of legitimate 'religious' authorities (imam, mufti, *qādī*, *khaṭīb*, etc.)?

If political, is it '*dār al-islām*' under a caliph, whose name is mentioned in the Friday congregational prayer, and who can collect *zakat* and call his male Muslim subjects to offensive *jihād* once a year? Until 1924, the caliph served as a central point for the *umma*, or community of believers (although the early

² This is not a novel suggestion, or endeavor. See, for example, Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early Abbasid Society (2nd-4th/8th-10th centuries)* (London: Routledge, 1998) and Richard Bulliet, *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

Constitution of Medina arguably includes Jews in this *umma*,³ and, as discussed below, later Christian Arabophone authors would speak of the ‘*umma*’ of the Christians or the Jews). Traditionally, the caliph was the ‘commander of the faithful’ (*amīr al-mu‘minīn*), the ‘viceregent’ of the Messenger of God (*khalīfat rasūl allāh*), the *imām* (or ‘leader’ of prayer; although this eventually shifted to the mention of his name in the Friday congregational prayer as the leader of the state), as well as the protector / guardian of the ‘two sacred sites’ (Mecca and Medina)⁴. The collection of *zakat* (alms tax) and declaration of *jihād* were under his authority. Jurists would debate the distinctions between the first four (for Sunnis, ‘rightly guided’) caliphs (*khulīfat al-nubuwwa*) and the later, dynastic caliphates (e.g. Umayyad, Abbasid, Ottoman: *khulīfat al-mulk*)⁵. Could there be more than one caliph at a time? What if the caliph was known to be unjust? Or a sinner? And, while Shiites did not acknowledge the legitimacy of the (Sunni) institution of the caliphate, instead of advocating revolt against the caliphs, Shiites developed the doctrine of *taqiyya* (dissimulation), for life under an illegitimate and sometimes hostile regime. And, in these discussions, the world was often divided between the ‘region of Islam’ and the ‘region of war’ (*dār al-islām* and *dār al-ḥarb*; as well as – especially in Shiite discourse - the ‘region of security’ or that of ‘safety’: *dār al-aman/dār al-ṣullḥ*).

³ In Muḥammad b. Ishāq, *Sīrat rasūl Allāh*, trans. Alfred Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad. A Translation of Ibn Ishāq’s Sīrat rasūl Allāh* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), 231-3; Fred Donner, “From Believers to Muslims,” *al-Abḥath* 50-51 (2002-2003): 9-53.

⁴ Today, the king of Saudi Arabia uses the title “*khādim al-ḥaramayn al-sharīfayn*” – Custodian of the Two Holy Sanctuaries.

⁵ See the classic discussion in ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah. An introduction to history*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, abr. and ed. N. J. Dawood, new intro. Bruce Lawrence (1967; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 154-83.

Is it a region of the world in which mosques are seen and the call to prayer is heard? Is it a region in which men and women *each* 'lower their gazes' and behave modestly (Q 24:30-31)? In which the state 'commands the good and forbids the wrong'? In which the principles of the 'sanctity' (*hurma*), 'dignity' (*karāma*) and 'inviolability' (*salāma*) of human life are honored? One in which *maṣlaḥa* (concern for the general welfare) is exhibited?

Is it marked by a legal system in which all human acts are divided into those that are 'man-God' (*ibādāt*) and those that are 'man-man' (*mu'āmalāt*), and in which the appropriateness of a deed is discerned – by scholars – from the Qur'ān, traditions of Muhammad and (by analogy with?) previous juridical decisions? Is it a pluralistic or homogeneous milieu? Is there diversity of religions (each of which has its own rule, or *shar'*) and/or '*Islamic*' interpretive traditions? Or, is it a system in which a central state enforces a particular interpretation of '*sharī'a*', with a visible emphasis on '*ḥudūd*' punishments (with or without the traditional evidentiary requirements)?

Sharī'a = Via, vita, veritas?

Given the current confusion over the concept of *sharī'a*, the following comment of Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) is worth quoting:

People ... do not understand clearly the distinction in the meanings of the word Shari'a as employed in the Speech of God and His Apostle (on the one hand) and by common people on the other...Indeed, some of them think that Shari'a is the name given to the judge's decisions; many of them even do not make a distinction between a learned judge, an ignorant judge, and an unjust judge. Worse still, people tend to regard any decrees of a ruler as Shari'a, while sometimes undoubtedly the truth (*ḥaqīqa*) is actually contrary to the decree of the ruler.

The Prophet himself said: 'You people bring disputes to me; but it may be that some of you are able to put their case better than others. But I have to decide on evidence that is before me. If I happen to expropriate the right of anyone in favour of his brother let the latter not take it, for in that case I have given him a piece of hell-fire'. Thus, the judge decided on the strength of depositions and evidence that are before him while the party decided against may well have proofs that have not been put forward. In such cases the Shari'a in reality is just the opposite of the external law, although the decision of the judge has to be enforced...⁶

Questions, therefore, could range from matters of personal status, criminal justice, to business transactions – no realm of human life is beyond the scope of *shari'a*. While the Gospel does contain the exhortation to render to God what is God's, and to Caesar what is Caesar's (Matthew 22:21; Mark 12:17; Luke 20:25), and Christianity has a long tradition of attempting to separate the mundane ('secular' – i.e. 'worldly') matters from the spiritual⁷, Christian tradition has also understood Jesus' assertion in John 14:6 ("I am the way, the truth and the life") to indicate that the 'Christian' life should encompass every aspect of one's being. Contrary to the assertion of Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) –

Muhammad brought down from heaven and put into the Koran not religious doctrines only, but political maxims, criminal and civil laws, and scientific theories. The Gospels, on the other hand, deal only with the general relations between man and God and between man and man. Beyond that, they teach nothing and do not oblige people to believe anything. That alone, among a thousand reasons, is enough to show that Islam will not be able to hold its power long in ages of enlightenment and democracy, while Christianity is destined to reign in such ages, as in all others.⁸

⁶ Quoted in Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (1966; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 112-13.

⁷ They range from the teachings of the 1st/2nd century *Didache* to the 4th century Augustine's *City of God* and the 20th century Reinhold Niebuhr's *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*.

⁸ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. G. Lawrence (1840; New York: Harper and Row, 1969), p. 445 (vol. 2, pt. 1, ch. 5).

- and despite differing legal and political structures, modern discussions of ‘secularism’ and ‘separations’ of ‘church’ and ‘state’⁹, and the charges found in discussions such as those of ‘Abd al-Jabbār¹⁰ (d. 415/1025) or, nearly a millennium later, Syed Qutb¹¹ (d. 1966), Christianity [and also Judaism], too, would classically say there is no realm of life that should be outside the dictates of the faith.

While the Qur’ān and *sunna* became the cornerstone of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence – discernment of the *sharī‘a* in different times and place), human reasoning (analogical or other) and the methods and opinions of earlier scholars, came also to be understood as the ‘roots’ of this process. (And, each of these categories had its own sub-disciplines that had to be mastered in order to be considered fully qualified to be a *mujtahid*, one qualified to appropriately discern a judgment [*ḥukm*] as to whether an action would be recommended, discouraged, etc.)¹² And, in fact, two of the earliest ‘law’ schools disputed not *whether* to incorporate non-qur’ānic material in the discernment of *sharī‘a*, or the ‘proper’ life of the Muslim community, but, rather, if judicial preference/discretion (*istiḥsān* – the position of Abu Ḥanīfa, d. 150/760) or the custom of the people of Medina (the position of Mālik, d. 179/795) should be used, even in preference to the Qur’ān. A slightly later scholar, al-Shāfi‘ī (d. 204/820), tried to synthesize the

⁹ Sherman A. Jackson, “Shari’ah, Democracy and the Modern Nation State: Some Reflections on Islam, Popular Rule and Pluralism,” *Fordham International Law Journal* 27/1 (December 2003): 88-107.

¹⁰ Moshe Stern, “Abd al-Jabbar’s Account of how Christ’s Religion was Falsified by the Adoption of Roman Customs,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 8 [XIX/1] (April 1968): 128-85.

¹¹ Syed Qutb, “Religion and Society in Christianity and Islam,” in his *Social Justice in Islam*, revised ed. (1949; North Haledon, NJ: Islamic Publications International, 2000), 19-35.

¹² See the discussion in Wael Hallaq, “Was the Gate of *ijtihād* Closed?” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 16/1 (March 1984): 3-41.

varying positions of Abu Ḥanīfa's and Mālik's 'schools', but it was not until towards the middle of the 3rd/9th century, and in response to a perceived 'hyper-rationalization' of matters of faith (theologically and juridically), that Qur'ān and prophetic tradition (the customs of Muhammad) were established as the definitive determiner of proper 'Muslim' behavior (notably with the tradition of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal). This was sometimes to the exclusion of other elements, and occasionally while ignoring the historical processes that led to the form of Qur'ān or *ḥadīth* then current. As will be discussed below, Christians were both knowledgeable of, and possibly partners to, such debates on the nature and status (if not the content) of the Qur'ān.

**

In the following, the 'Islamic' world will generally be discussed as the *dār al-islām* of our Christian authors, all three of whom (Theodore Abū Qurra – bishop of Harran, Paul of Antioch – bishop of Sidon, and an anonymous monk of Jerusalem) lived during the Abbasid times, prior to the Mongol destruction of Baghdad - a period in which 'Islamic' theological discussions – on faith and praxis – were attaining their classical formulations, simultaneous with the emergence of the very understandings of 'Islam' and 'Islamic' societies.¹³ Just as the 'Christianity' of Constantine's day might not be immediately recognizable to contemporary Christians, so, too, should we be cautious both in too hastily understanding our texts' references to 'Islam' (or Muslim, or *umma*) -- exclusively or primarily or selectively -- through their various contemporary manifestations,

¹³ Donner, "From Believers to Muslims."

and in taking at face value the assertions found either in our texts or contemporaneous accounts, without factoring in the intent of the author or later scribes (polemical, apologetic, etc.) and the literary devices employed thereby (hyperbole, rhetoric, etc.). Generally speaking, to the best of our knowledge, theirs was a time in which the *umma* was mainly living under a caliph, in a region in which Arabic was spoken, mosques were seen and the call to prayer was heard, and in which the various religious communities were allowed to live under their own *sharʿ* (as long as they respected the larger public order, which was regulated in conformity with the dictates of the ruling Muslim faction). And, although politically dominant, ‘Muslims’ (who were by no means a uniform entity, or a single *madhhab*) were certainly not the only religious group, nor were they always demographically the majority. (All three of our authors, in fact, allude to multiple ‘religions’ or ‘laws’.¹⁴)

Education

As in the Latin West, the centers of scholarship in this ‘Islamic’ world were places of religious learning. Equally the heirs of Alexandria, Antioch and, ultimately, Athens as their Christian European counterparts, the quest for truth and knowledge (*ʿilm* or *maʿrifa*) was, for the Arab-Islamic world (as also in

¹⁴ For Theodore’s use, see Ignace Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abu Qurra avec les ulémas musulmans devant le calife al-Maʿmun* (Aleppo: n.p., 1999), 75-76, 80, 94-95; for that of the anonymous monk of Jerusalem, Sinai Ar. 434, St. Catherine’s Monastery, Mt. Sinai, Egypt, facsimile in Library of Congress, f. 174r; and also par. 59 of Paul of Antioch’s “Letter” to his Muslim friends, Paul Khoury, ed. and trans., *Paul d’Antioche. Évêque melkite de Sidon (XIIe s.)* [Recherches publiées sous la direction de L’Institut de Lettres Orientales de Beyrouth, 24] (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique Beyrouth, 1965).

Europe), not distinct from the religious reality.¹⁵ Theological inquiry has, therefore, been the soul of intellectual life, not only in the Latin West, but also in the Islamic world. It has been the so-called 'Queen of the Sciences' for both traditions, even if with slightly different nuances to that designation: in the understanding of Bonaventure (in his *De reductione artium ad theologiam*), Theology was the Queen (to which philosophy was a handmaiden), as all knowledge ultimately has its origin in the divine illumination of sacred scripture¹⁶. In the Islamic context, the distinction was between jurisprudence - 'fiqh' (the 'Queen', as the result of active reasoning) - and 'ilm' (knowledge based on authority).¹⁷ Perhaps taking their cue from the various Christian groups they encountered, and who came to live under Islamic rule, Muslim theologians developed the practice of *kalām*, or investigation into (lit. discussion about) the proper articulation of the nature of God and other topics not explicitly or unequivocally delineated in the Qur'ān, a discipline that was early on termed the 'greater' jurisprudence (*al-fiqh al-akbar*, to quote Abū Ḥanīfa, the eponym of one of the four 'schools' of Sunni jurisprudence¹⁸).

For the professing Muslim, qur'ānic and prophetic guidelines (*sunna*) came to set the tone for many daily practices, but always with local customs as subtext, as attested to by the very process of the codification of the accounts of

¹⁵ For an excellent overview of the intellectual vitality of the three Abrahamic traditions, see Robert Wilken, "Who Will Speak for the Religious Traditions (Presidential Address to the American Academy of Religion)," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LVII/4 (1989): 699-717; see also George Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981).

¹⁶ Edward Grant, *Science and Religion, 400 B.C. to A.D. 1550: From Aristotle to Copernicus* (Greenwood Publishing Group: 2004), 181.

¹⁷ Cf. Jacob Neusner, *Comparing Religions through Law: Judaism and Islam* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 55.

¹⁸ cf. e.g. Neusner, *Comparing Religions through Law*, 55.

the sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad (*ḥadīth* collection).¹⁹ The recurrent question was: how to live one's life in the most 'Islamically-appropriate' manner, but often in circumstances and also in time periods very different from those in which the Prophet and the early community had found themselves? In addition to *'ibādāt* (the 'worship' owed God, that is, the relations between God and man, such as prayer), life encompasses *mu'āmalāt* (human interactions). This 'way' of life, and the guidelines therefore: *sharī'a* (literally, a well-worn path to a watering hole), therefore, had to be discerned in accord with the needs and times in which later generations found themselves.

And Christians (and Jews) were no strangers to the intellectual enterprise of this 'Islamic' world.²⁰ For, Islam as religion (*dīn*) came to be articulated primarily in regions in which Muslims ruled, but in which, until the 4th/10th and even, in parts, the 8th/14th centuries, non-Muslims were often the majority²¹. And, each religious grouping was granted permission to judge its members (in matters that did not infringe on the public interest of the larger society, in which case the 'law' of the ruling Muslims was generally evoked) in accordance with its own law (*sharī'a*). Furthermore, many of those who came to live under Arab, Muslim

¹⁹ For a solid introduction to Islamic tradition, see Ignaz Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981 [repr.]).

²⁰ Sidney Griffith's introduction to *The Reformation of Morals: A Parallel Arabic-English Text* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2002) provides a detailed discussion of the confessional overlap of scholarly pursuits in Abbasid Baghdad.

²¹ Richard Fletcher, *Moorish Spain* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1992), 35-51; cf. the discussions in Hugh Goddard, *Christians and Muslims: From Double Standards to Mutual Understanding* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (New York: MJF Books, 1991); Tobin Siebers, ed., *Religion and the Authority of the Past* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993); Jonathan P. Berkey, *The Formation of Islam* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Bulliet, *Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization*; Jacob Lassner, *The Shaping of Abbasid Rule* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980). For an overview of contemporary demographics, see Philippe Fargues, "Demographic Islamization: Non-Muslims in Muslim countries," *School of Advanced International Studies Review* 21/2 (Summer/Fall 2001): 103-16.

rule came to adopt the language of their overlords, even if they were not themselves Muslim.

For, soon after the establishment of Arab/ Islamic hegemony, Persians and other converts to Islam²² began to compose grammars of the Arabic language, attempting to understand this “clear Arabic” of the Qur’ān, often with the assistance of Meccan and other dialectical traditions – and, Christian monks from Jerusalem to Baghdad began to adopt the language of the Qur’ān as their own²³. Eventually, Copts in Egypt lamented the loss of their language²⁴, and Christians in Syria consoled themselves by saying that Syriac was the heavenly tongue²⁵, but very often such regrets were voiced in Arabic²⁶.

Christian Arabic and the Qur’ān

Until the Crusades, Christians were a significant presence, culturally if not always demographically, in this ‘Islamic’ world.²⁷ And, in this, its classical

²² For an overview of the history of Arabic grammar, see *EQ*, s.v. “Grammar and the Qur’ān”; Kees Versteegh, *The Arabic Language* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001) may also be of interest.

²³ Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); for an overview of the early Jewish Arabic literature in its Islamic context, see Mark Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross. The Jews in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), esp. ch. 9.

²⁴ For a later example of this phenomenon, see, e.g., the Apocalypse of Samuel of Qalamūn, as preserved in MS Paris no 150, ff. 20-31 (copied 1606 CE), esp. f. 23r. See Jason Zaborowski, “Egyptian Christians Implicating Chalcedonians in the Arab Takeover of Egypt: The Arabic Apocalypse of Samuel of Qalamun,” *Oriens Christianus* 87 (2003). My thanks to Jason Zaborowski for sharing his work on this manuscript.

²⁵ For discussion of the notion of the ‘heavenly language’ polemic among the monotheistic Abrahamic religions in the Semitic world, see *EQ*, s.v. “Language and Style of the Qur’ān.”

²⁶ Cf. e.g. Harald Suermann, “Koptische arabische Apokalypsen,” in Rifaat Ebied and Herman Teule, *Studies on the Christian Arabic Heritage in Honour of Father Prof. Dr. Samir Khalil Samir S.I. at the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, vol. 5 of *Eastern Christian Studies* (Leuven: Peeters, 2004), 25-44.

²⁷ Their contributions ranged from their service in the administration of the empire to their translation skills (esp. of Greek works into Arabic). See the discussions in Griffith, *Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*; Jonathan P. Berkey, *The Formation of Islam* (New York: Cambridge

period (632-1095 CE), the various peoples of the Islamic world – be they Arab or ‘*ajamī*’ (speaking accented Arabic, customarily designating Persians), Muslim, Christian, Jew, Sabian or Magian - communicated in Arabic, the language of the Qur’ān. The Qur’ān is understood to have been revealed in clear (or clarifying: *b-y-n*, Q 16:103)²⁸ Arabic. As such, early converts to Islam (as well as apologists bent on defending their own faiths) wanted to be able to read and understand the Qur’ān for themselves without reliance upon either the – Arab – Qur’ān ‘readers’ or ‘reciters’ (who were part of the establishment of many cities as they came under Islamic rule), or the interpretations of – local, but not always well-informed - popular preachers, or storytellers, who would peddle their tales of the prophets to the masses.²⁹

The preference for reading the Qur’ān in the language of its revelation, rather than in translation, complemented the development of the doctrine of the inimitable nature of the Arabic Qur’ān, and the ease with which Arabic was adopted by many who came under Arab, Islamic rule. While a causal relationship of any of these various elements on the others is difficult to determine, (as in Christianity) the linguistic situation of Islam parallels the political: Christianity spread to all quarters of the Roman empire and beyond, but did not – in the first three centuries, until the toleration accorded by the Edict

University Press, 2003) and Ira Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

²⁸ Claude Gilliot, “The Creation of a Fixed Text,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur’ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 41-58, esp. p. 43.

²⁹ For a general overview, see *EQ*, s.vv. “Readers of the Qur’ān” and “Recitation of the Qur’ān,” and bibliographies included there. The following (especially the introductions) provide an excellent overview of the ‘tales of the prophets’ genre: Wheeler M. Thackston, Jr. (trans. and annot.), *The Tales of the Prophets of al-Kisā’ī* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978); William Brinner (trans. and annot.), *‘Arā’is al-majālis fī qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā’*, or *Lives of the Prophets* (Leiden: Brill, 2002); Roberto Tottoli, *The Stories of the Prophets by Ibn Mutarrif al-Tarafī* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 2003).

of Milan (313 CE), under the first ‘Christian’ of the emperors, Constantine (r. 306-337 CE) – initially assume political power, or take with her the *language(s)* of the empire or the region out of which she emerged. Rather, Christianity was established under a variety of regimes, among a range of peoples, and in their various languages. In the traditional narrative, Islam, on the other hand, accompanied the Arab conquests of the 600s and 700s of the Common Era, and the peoples who came under this Arab rule also adopted the Arabic language. Thus, Arabic became the language not only of theological discourse, but also political, historical, social, philosophical, and financial.

While the plight of the Christians of the *contemporary* Middle East is not infrequently discussed, especially in political circles,³⁰ why has Arabic Christianity not received its fair share of scholarly attention? Although contemporary realities, such as the defensiveness of many Arab Christians in the light of their shrinking numbers in the lands of their origin³¹, has certainly constrained their own scholarly investigations, the Balkanization of academic

³⁰ E.g. Bat Ye’or, *The Decline of Eastern Christianity Under Islam: From Jihad to Dhimmitude: Seventh – Twentieth Century* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996), or the most recent US State Department report on “International Religious Freedom,” found on <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/irf/> (accessed February 4, 2011). The January 2011 uprising in Egypt has also sparked some discussion. See the Arabic text of the January 24, 2011 al-Azhar document on “renewing Islam” – “Awwal wathīqa maktūba li-tajdīd al-khiṭāb al-dīnī,” *al-Yawm al-sābi‘* (January 24, 2011), on <http://www.youm7.com/News.asp?NewsID=343007> (accessed February 5, 2011), with the comments of Samir Khalil Samir, SJ, “Egyptian Imams and Intellectuals: Renewing Islam Towards Modernity,” *AsiaNews.it* (January 26, 2011), on <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Egyptian-Imams-and-intellectuals:-Renewing-Islam-towards-modernity-20609.html> (accessed February 5, 2011). Another Roman Catholic commentary on contemporary trends in Islam towards non-Muslims, particularly Christians, can be found on Sandro Magister’s website, <http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/islam?eng=y> (accessed February 5, 2011).

³¹ See, for example, Nina Shea, “A Creche Without Christians: Christian Persecution in the Middle East,” Assyrian International News Agency (December 26, 2007), <http://www.aina.org/news/20071226113525.htm> (accessed February 4, 2011), or the various reports of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association, on <http://www.cnewa.us/default.aspx?ID=27&pagetypeID=1&sitecode=HO&pageno=1> (accessed February 4, 2011).

disciplines and university curricula throughout the world has also played some part in this oversight. The lines of scholarly communication among Arabists, Islamicists, and Church historians are not frequently used. Arabic is considered the primary 'Islamicate' language, so many Arabists focus on Islam; in the Latin West, Church historians rarely study the Christian Orient (especially after the Islamic period, the commencement of which is commonly dated to 622 CE, the year of the 'emigration' from Mecca to Yathrib/Medina, and the beginning of the Islamic calendar) and, when they do, do not tend to specialize in Islamic Studies; and Islamicists, while they generally will have a strong background in Arabic, frequently steer clear of the 'imperfections' of Christian, or Middle, Arabic.³² 'Secular' historians³³ may bridge some of these difficulties, but the relevance of theological inquiry for History (or any 'scientific' discipline, for that matter) is a matter of dispute in the contemporary world, as shown in the very subject of Pope Benedict's Regensburg address (which furnished the quote used above): the place of Theology in University curricula.

³² One need only look at the paper topics in the major academic associations relating to the region, such as MESA (Middle Eastern Studies Association), the American Oriental Society, the North American Patristic Society, or the sessions on Islam and Christianity at either the American Academy of Religion or the Society for Biblical Literature. The International Syriac Symposium saw this tendency, and made room for sessions on Christian Arabic Studies in its periodic meetings, the most recent of which was held in Granada, Spain, in September 2008. Fr. Samir Khalil Samir has been instrumental in advocating increased attention to the study of Christian Arabic, and Professor Irfan Shahid is largely responsible for our awareness of the contributions of pre-Islamic Arabs at the borders of Byzantium and Persia.

³³ Cf. e.g. the works of Peter Brown on Late Antiquity.

'Dhimmitude'?

In those lands that were ruled by Muslims, non-Muslims (especially Jews and Christians, as 'People of the Book'³⁴) were guaranteed protection (*dhimma*) by the payment of a certain tax (*jizya*). Although the plight of the *dhimmī* has had occasion to be highlighted in recent years, due to factors both intrinsic to the Islamic world, as well as external thereto³⁵, the contributions of such 'protected persons' to the civilization of their protectors/overlords merit deeper study – as does the ways in which they were, in turn, shaped by the society in which they lived. In large part, the following attempts to reach beyond the rhetoric of the writings we are examining (as well as the contemporary situations in which many non-Muslims in today's Arabophone world find themselves), in order the better to understand the various approaches to the Qur'ān evidenced by our authors. We cannot but look at any discipline, past or present, from the position in which we are currently standing (the very field of "Islamic Studies" is striking testimony to the competing agendas – political, pious, or pragmatic – of its practitioners: Prof. Fred Donner of the University of Chicago alluded to this at a recent conference on the Qur'ān³⁶; cf. also the contributors to Brill's *Encyclopaedia*

³⁴ For discussion of the nuances of the divisions of the world in classical Islamic political thought, see Sohail H. Hashmi, ed., *Islamic Political Ethics: Civil Society, Pluralism, and Conflict* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

³⁵ See, for example, the Charter of HAMAS, on <http://middleeast.about.com/od/palestinepalestinians/a/me080106b.htm> (accessed February 4, 2011), as well as the writings of Abu 'Ala' l-Mawdudi ("Jihad in Islam," delivered in Lahore on Iqbal Day, 1939) and Yūsuf Qaraḏāwī (www.qaradawi.net, in Arabic, accessed February 4, 2011) on jihad and dhimmitude, past and present.

³⁶ Nicholas D. Kristof, "Islam, Virgins and Grapes," *The New York Times* (April 22, 2009), on http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/23/opinion/23kristof.html?_r=1 (accessed February 3, 2011).

of the *Qur'ān*, and the recent discussions in *The Jerusalem Post* over programs of study at Georgetown University³⁷).

In recent years, study of Arabic and Islam in American universities is difficult to divorce from the “War on Terror”; while, in Catholic circles, the exhortations of Paragraph 3 of *Nostra Aetate* cannot be ignored³⁸. But, would *Nostra Aetate* (initially a document only on the Jews, rather than non-Christian religions) have been produced if much of European Jewry had not been nearly exterminated? Could Israel exist as the “Jewish State” without political Zionism, messianism, or the ever-present memory of the Shoa?³⁹ Would contemporary manifestations of “Muslim anti-Semitism”⁴⁰ exist without the Jewish State in Palestine (in her 1948 or 1967 borders)? (In Muslim circles, is this Jewish State, in

³⁷Asif Romirowsky, “Balancing the Bias,” *The Jerusalem Post*, February 1, 2009, on <http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Op-EdContributors/Article.aspx?id=131368> (accessed February 4, 2011), with Jacques Berlinerblau’s responses on February 4, 2009 (<http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Op-EdContributors/Article.aspx?id=131749>, accessed February 4, 2011) and February 7, 2009 (<http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Op-EdContributors/Article.aspx?id=132038>, accessed February 4, 2011).

³⁸ “The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, His virgin Mother; at times they even call on her with devotion. In addition, they await the day of judgment when God will render their deserts to all those who have been raised up from the dead. Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting.

Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems, this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom. “ on Vatican Archives, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html (accessed February 4, 2011).

³⁹ cf. Amos Oz, *In the Land of Israel* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983).

⁴⁰ Cf. e.g. Bernard Lewis, “Muslim anti-Semitism,” *Middle East Quarterly* V/2 (June 1998), on <http://www.meforum.org/396/muslim-anti-semitism> (accessed February 4, 2011).

turn, viewed in theological, political, humanitarian or historical terms? As a vestige of European colonialism, a manifestation of US neo-imperialism, or evidence of qur'anic and Islamic warnings against Jewish injustice?) Would Jewish and Christian groups in the US gain a hearing for their concerns over the plight of Christians in majority-Muslim lands if the US did not also have strategic interests in the Middle East? Did Oriental Christian connections (perceived or real) to European powers, through Capitulations, colonization or beyond, contribute to the isolation of some Christians from their Muslim neighbors in certain post-colonial Muslim-majority regions?

Just as the benefits that accrued to some Oriental (Arabophone or other) Christians under Colonialism or Capitulations should not be forgotten⁴¹, neither should the historic presence of non-Muslims within *dār al-Islām*. Traditional Islamic teachings about the place and function of non-Muslims in 'Islamic' societies (however defined) have a wide range of contemporary interpretations. The situation of Copts in Egypt differs (today, and in the past) from that of Chaldeans and other Christians in Iraq. The many debates that have arisen over the Qatari government's establishment of a "Church Square" for its guest workers in Doha provides a sampling of the range of available interpretations: See, for example, the opinions of 'Abd al-Ḥāmid al-Anṣārī, former dean of the Sharī'a Faculty at Qatar University ("having places of worship for various religions is a fundamental right guaranteed by Islam") and former Justice Minister, Najīb al-Nluaymī ("Qatar is a Muslim, not a secular state, as per its constitution"), as well as those of Lahdān b. 'Īsā al-Muhanaddī, a columnist for

⁴¹ Charles A. Frazee, *Catholics and Sultans: The Church and the Ottoman Empire, 1453-1923* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

the Doha-based daily, *al-Arab* (“The cross should not be raised in the sky of Qatar, nor should bells toll in Doha”)⁴². Might not the voices of Christians who wrote in Arabic long ago help in the discernment of what is a ‘necessary’ as opposed to a ‘sufficient’ (let alone an inauthentic) element of an ‘Islamic’ society? If these ancient voices are given a fair hearing, we may deepen our understanding of the dynamics of the early Islamic period, providing yet another model for those who wish to find a balance between the claims of Islamic tradition and modernity. Additionally, we may add to the resources at our disposal for gaining a deeper, yet authentic, Christian response to, appreciation for, and understanding of, Islam.

In the ‘secularized’ world, the various nuances of ‘religion’: faith, creed, ‘identity’ are all too often lost, as religion is increasingly deemed a matter of private preference, rather than communal obligation⁴³. Examination of our authors’ statements about religions (Islam, but also Christianity and Judaism) and their adherents will help us to bridge the centuries, enabling a deeper understanding of the texts they have left us. But, while their discussions of Christianity and Judaism will provide telling insights into their various worldviews, it is particularly their estimation of Islam that will interest us as we

⁴² “Islamic Criticism and Support for the First Catholic Church in Qatar,” *AsiaNews.It*, on <http://www.asianews.it/index.php?l=en&art=11549&size=A> (accessed February 4, 2011). The existence of an ancient Syriac bishopric of Beth Qatrāyā, however, indicates that these are not the first churches in the region; cf. J.B. Chabot, *Synodicon Orientale ou Recueil de Synodes Nestoriens*, (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1902), 216.

⁴³ See, for example, Joshua Mitchell, “Religion is not a Preference,” *The Journal of Politics* 69/2 (2007): 352-62.

explore these Christians' uses of the Qur'ān, and its seeming placement among the 'books of God'.

When discussing 'monotheism', there are a number of levels to bear in mind: the community of believers, in different times and places; the 'religion' of that community: their practices and beliefs, in response to their understanding of the God; the scripture(s) the community believes to be from the God, including the various accounts of their revelation, and their – authoritative - collection, codification, translation and transmission thereof; the community's understanding of the nature – and existence – of the one, living, speaking, Creator, God; and the prophet(s) through whom the community believes God has revealed himself. The present work will, of necessity, touch on each of these themes (God – scripture – prophetology – religious beliefs/practices – communal identities), but the primary focus is the appearance of the Qur'ān in three early Christian Arabic texts. Rather than the nature or existence of the one, living God, the focus here is on human attempts to discern 'true' revelation, and, therefore, the 'true' prophet(s), the 'true' religion, and the 'true' believing community, in the face of competing claims. Writing – presumably – outside of the purview of what would come to be 'normative' Islam, these early Arabophone Christians lend (sometimes surprising) insights on the process of this discernment, among both Christians and Muslims who were coming to write in Arabic. Of particular interest to the present work is their willingness, at times, to term the Qur'ān among the "books of God," and, rather than dismissing Muhammad or the Qur'ān as not "from God," to attempt to reconcile 'Christian' claims with 'Islamic' ones – occasionally blaming the later 'Muslim' community, rather than

the (original?) Qur'ān itself, or the prophet Muhammad himself, for any discrepancies. As in the past, so in the present, Christians and Muslims find themselves living together, more or less comfortably. And, as the selection and interpretation of qur'ānic passages, by Muslims and Christians (and others), not infrequently determines the perception – and portrayal – of 'Islam' and 'Muslims' in contemporary media and scholarship, perhaps the examples of the past may help to nuance contemporary discussions of similar issues.

Towards this end, particular attention will be devoted not only to the selection of qur'ānic passages and their wording in the texts before us, but also to the use and interpretation made thereof. As a recent example from within today's 'Islamic' world (2008), the various interpretations of the suitability of a church in Qatar, a state located on a peninsular formation on the southeast side of the Arabian peninsula, stem from a particular saying attributed to the prophet Muhammad, once his troubles with the Meccan leadership and other tribes was at an end: 'No two religions (*lā dīnayn*) will remain on the land of the Arabs (*bi-arḍi l-'arabi*)'⁴⁴. What, exactly, is meant by "two religions" "not remaining, or being established," and where, exactly, is "the land of the Arabs"? To what extent is the history of the collection, compilation and 'codification' of such prophetic statements relevant for a fuller understanding of their relevance to today's world?

While Christian Arabic texts have been studied, edited and translated, and their place in the larger – Christian – world has been examined, the present work,

⁴⁴ cf. A.J. Wensinck, *Concordance et Indices de la Tradition Musulmane*, 8 vols. in 4 (Leiden: Brill, 1992), ii, 168, s.v. *d-y-n: lā yabqayanna dīnān bi-arḍi al-'arabi*.

building on the seminal work of Mark Swanson⁴⁵, highlights the role of the Qurʾān in early Christian Arabic texts. And, rather than exclusively (or primarily) focusing on the form in which the texts before us have preserved the qurʾānic passages, the use that our authors make of them will be examined for the light they might shed on the larger ‘Islamic’ milieu’s approach to the Qurʾān (as text or recitation, in devotion or law). In many ways, then, this thesis is the product of personal observations on trends in Arabic, qurʾānic, Islamic and ecclesiastical studies, and contemporary Muslim-Christian interactions, in Jerusalem, Rome, DC, Doha, and Princeton. It has been greatly informed by Sidney Griffith’s gentle guidance in Syriac and Christian Arabic, the lessons learned, within and outside of the classrooms, at PISAI, seven years of Jane Dammen McAuliffe’s guidance in my reading and editing of the fine contributions to Brill’s *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān* and the *Cambridge Companion to the Qurʾān*, the questions, engagement and challenges of my students at CUA and Georgetown, in DC and Doha, the encouragement of colleagues at various Syriac, qurʾānic and Christian Arabic conferences over the past six years, and the constant love and support of my family.

Thus, in this attempt to demonstrate the potential value of Christian Arabic texts to qurʾānic and Islamic, as well as to ecclesiastical, studies, the present work offers a close reading of three texts attributed to Arabophone Christians in Jerusalem (an anonymous Melkite monk), the Lebanon (Paul of Antioch, Melkite bishop of Sidon) and greater Iraq (Theodore Abū Qurra, monk

⁴⁵ Mark Swanson, “Beyond Proof-texting: Approaches to the Qurʾān in Some Early Arabic Christian Apologies,” *The Muslim World* 88 (1988): 297-319.

of Mar Saba monastery outside of Jerusalem, but also bishop of Harran, today in south-central Turkey) prior to the Mongol destruction of Baghdad in 1258 CE. It follows scholars such as Bulliet and Gutas in questioning the traditional lines of demarcation between ‘Islamic’ and ‘Christian’ civilizations. For, the writings of these ecclesiastical figures are seemingly without much fear of accusations of blasphemy⁴⁶ – or of the fate that befell the ‘martyrs’ of Cordoba in the middle of the third/ninth centuries when these Spanish Christians repeatedly, and publicly, insulted Muhammad and Islam, even after being warned and implored against doing so.⁴⁷ They demonstrate a willingness to engage ideas across communal lines, often in a remarkably non-defensive manner. As such, they are testimony to an Islamic society that was pluralistic (although our Christian authors are all from the same – Melkite – community, they evidence familiarity not only with Islam, but also with a number of other religions, including other Christian groups), fluid in its definitions of ‘Islam’ and its approaches to the Qur’ān, and in which there was a liberty of expression and free exchange of ideas, not only within the various communities – but also between them. Their knowledge, appreciation and use of the Qur’ān and Islamic tradition may also guide Christians of today as they formulate theologically and humanly appropriate responses in their own encounters with Islam.

⁴⁶ In 2007, an Afghan student was charged with blasphemy for circulating literature on the role of women in Islam. The initial death sentence was commuted to one of 20 years in jail (see Abdul Waheed Wafa and Carolotta Gall, “Afghan Court Backs Prison Term for Blasphemy,” *New York Times*, March 11 2009, on http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/12/world/asia/12afghan.html?_r=1, accessed February 4, 2011).

⁴⁷ See, e.g., Kenneth Baxter Wolf, *Christian Martyrs in Muslim Spain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), available on <http://libro.uca.edu/martyrs/cm2.htm> (accessed February 4, 2011).

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INTRODUCTION

Theodore Abū Qurra, the Anonymous Monk of Sinai Ar 434 and Paul: Reflections of “*Oriens Christianus*”

“In the name of God, the compassionate, the merciful”

(*bi-smi llāhi l-raḥmān al-raḥīm*)

Thus begins every chapter (*sūra*) of the Qur’ān¹, except for the 9th (*Sūrat al-Tauba*, “Repentance”). Given the traditional Islamic preference for using the original Arabic of the Qur’ān in prayer, this invocation also is found at the beginning of many scholarly works (theological, scientific, literary, etc.) and public addresses (academic or political, as well as religious) throughout the Islamic world – even if the speaker or author is not a native Arabic speaker. Termed the “*basmallāh*,” a conjunction of the first three Arabic words, ‘In the name of God’: *bi* (in)-*ismi* (name)-*al-ilāh* (the god, contracted to *allāh*, “God”), finally rendered as ‘*bi-smi llāhi*’, it calls to mind not only the ultimate reason for all existence, and the ultimate power behind all of our endeavors, but also the nature of this being: (the one) God, compassionate, merciful.

As such, it echoes – and anticipates – the first “pillar” of “Islam”: the *shahāda*, or witness – testimony – to the faith: “I testify that there is no god but God, and that Muhammad is his messenger.” While Christians might be able to

¹ The translations of qur’ānic verses in the following are my own, heavily informed by the translation efforts of both Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall and Abdullah Yusuf Ali.

profess the first part of the *shahāda*, they could not accede to the second. And, given Christian Trinitarian and Christological understandings of God (and qur'ānic, as well as later Islamic, refutations of such), could a Muslim accept a Christian profession of the first part of the *shahāda*?

One of the last chapters of the qur'ānic codex contains the following statement: “Say ‘He is God, the One (*qul huwa allāh aḥad*); ... He does not beget, nor is He begotten (*lam yalid wa-lam yulad*); There is none like him (*wa-lam yakun lahu kufuwwan aḥadun*).” This chapter (Surat al-Ikhlās; Q 112), or part thereof, is inscribed on the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, and on coins from the early Abbasid period – asserting the absolute one-ness of God, but also seeming to deny one of the central tenets of Christian belief, centering on Jesus of Nazareth: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.” (John 3:16). The nature of this ‘Son-ness’ and his relationship to the ‘Father’ was more precisely elaborated by the Church at the fourth century Council of Nicea and, then, *how* he could be both human and divine, in the fifth-century councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon. The Qur’ān knows very well that Christians were not united in their understandings (or definitions?) of *how* Jesus was both God and man (Q 19:37: “The various parties disputed among themselves [regarding the identity of Jesus]. Therefore, woe to those who disbelieve from the sight of a terrible day.”). But it also knows the Trinitarian claims, on which Christians were less divided – but to which the Qur’ān and Muslims could not accede (the aforementioned Q 4:171, discussed in detail below). The Qur’ān, and later Muslims, would have

varying estimations of Christians and Christianity (the comments of ‘Abd al-Jabbār, Ibn Taymiyya, Syed Qutb and the contemporary scholar, Abdulaziz Sachedina, to name only a few thinkers from different times and places, provide a sufficiently broad sample of the range of ideas found in the Islamic tradition²). But, rather than the variety of Muslim approaches to Christianity (on which there is already extant a substantial body of literature³), the following will focus on the approaches to Islam, particularly its scripture, on the part of some of the first Christians who wrote in Arabic.

In the words of Theodore Abū Qurra (the author of one of the texts under discussion here)⁴ “Do you not know that the soul, the spirit and the word are in the body, invisible to the eye, and sight cannot describe the mind, the soul, or the spirit, nor is anything of them visible as long as they are in the body? Yet the body is alive because of them...So also God, praised be He, the one named ‘Father’, and the Word, the one named ‘Son’, and the Holy Spirit are also a single God. The father is the mind and the Son is the word, generated from the mind, and the Spirit is the emanation from the mind and the word⁵.” He continues with evocations of various of the “99” names of God from Islamic tradition: “The

² See, for example, Gabriel Reynolds, *A Muslim Theologian in a Sectarian Milieu: ‘Abd al-Jabbār and the Critique of Christian Origins* (Leiden: Brill, 2004); Neal Robinson, “Sayyid Qutb’s attitude towards Christianity: Sura 9.29-35 in *Fī Zilāl al-Qur’ān*,” in *Islamic Interpretations of Christianity*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2001), 159-77; and, on Ibn Taymiyya, Thomas Michel, *A Muslim Theologian’s Response to Christianity; Ibn Taymiyya’s al-Jawāb al-Sahīh* (Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1984); Abdulaziz Sachedina, “The Qur’ān and other religions,” in *Cambridge Companion to the Qur’ān*, ed. McAuliffe, 291-309.

³ See, e.g., Ridgeon, *Islamic Interpretations*; Hugh Goddard, *Muslim Perceptions of Christianity* (London: Grey Seal, 1996); Jacques Waardenburg, *Muslims and Others: Relations in Context* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003); Jean-Marie Gaudeul, *Encounters and Clashes: Islam and Christianity in History*, 2 vols. (Rome: Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi e d’Islamistica, 2000).

⁴ Ignace Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abu Qurra avec les ulémas musulmans devant le calife al-Ma’mun* (Aleppo: n.p., 1999), 98.

⁵ Discussed in Chapter 3, below.

Father is the originator, the Son is the producer, and the Holy Spirit is the enlivener. He is the one-to-be-worshipped” - conflating them with traditional Christian theological categories “in three hypostases” – and concludes with an assertive defense of the validity of Christian faith against its Muslim detractors: “the one, eternal being, may He be blessed, who leads us to know Him and to worship Him and He furnishes us with information about Himself from His scriptures. Most highly exalted be He! You charge us with being opposed to Him, while we are the ones who are the believers...”

In order to understand the significance of this claim, it should be noted that the one qur’ānic verse that appears in all three of the Christian Arabic texts under examination here (discussed in Chapter 3, below) reads as follows: “O People of the Book! Do not exceed the limits in your religion, or say of God anything but the truth. The Messiah Jesus Son of Mary was a messenger of God and his word which he bestowed on Mary and a spirit created by Him. So believe in God and his messengers. Do not say ‘Three’. Stop! It is better for you. For God is one God. Glory be to Him – above having a son. To Him belong all that is in the heavens and all that is in the earth. And God is all-sufficient as a disposer of affairs”(Q 4:171). Explaining how Christian faith is, in fact, monotheistic (and disregarding the exhortation not to say “Three”) - our three authors invoke this verse as qur’ānic attestation of Christian Trinitarian and Incarnation theology (the Qur’ān itself says Jesus was the “Word” of God – and his “Spirit”).

Picking up on another qur'ānic exhortation: "And they say 'None shall enter Paradise unless he be a Jew or a Christian.' These are their own desires. Say 'Produce your proof (*burhān*) if you are truthful'" (Q 2:111), Arabophone Christians, mindful of the greater credibility (for a Muslim audience) of qur'ānic, rather than biblical, scriptural proof (*burhān*), would occasionally mine – at times, disingenuously – the Qur'ān for such "proof" of Christian theological claims. Particularly in the multi-confessional dynamism of the early Islamic centuries, "rational" rather than "scriptural" proofs of the "true" religion were evoked by Christians and Muslims – presumably precisely because Christians would not accept the Qur'ān as a valid revelation from God, and Muslims would not accept the Bible as known to the Jews or Christians as containing uncorrupted and definitive prooftexts. There is already a fine body of secondary literature on Arabophone Christian theology⁶, the Greco-Arab translation movement⁷, and the early interactions of Christians and Muslims in the Hellenized, yet Arabic-speaking, milieu of the early Islamic centuries.⁸ Relatively little attention has been devoted to the use that Christians made of the Arabic Qur'ān in these early centuries – either in terms of Christian theology, or in terms of qur'ānic studies. The present work will therefore examine the use that three early Christian Arab authors did make of the Qur'ān, in defending – or explaining – Christianity to

⁶ Sidney H. Griffith, *The Beginnings of Christian Theology in Arabic: Muslim-Christian Encounters in the Early Islamic Period*, vol. 746 of *Variorum Collecta Studies Series* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Variorum, 2002); Samir Khalil Samir and Jorgen Nielsen, eds., *Christian Arabic Apologetics During the Abbasid Period, 750-1258* (Leiden: Brill, 1994).

⁷ e.g. Gutas, *Greek Thought*.

⁸ N.A. Newman, ed., *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue: A Collection of Documents from the First Three Islamic Centuries (632-900 A.D.): Translations With Commentary* (Hatfield, PA: Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute, 1993) contains a sampling of primary texts in English translation; cf. also David Thomas, *Christian Doctrines in Islamic Theology* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2008).

Muslims. In particular, our attention will be drawn to the manner and form in which qur'ānic passages are invoked or cited, and how they are glossed. As such, particular attention will be paid to the texts in question: the three Christian Arabic texts that form the basis of the present discussion, as well as the textual history of the Qur'ān itself. Our focus will be on what the Christian Arabic texts might tell us not only about the form in which our authors knew the Qur'ān, but also the ways in which the Qur'ān was approached and handled, by Christians and Muslims, in the early Islamic centuries, as what would become the “normative” Islamic approach to the Qur'ān – particularly its inimitable and uncreated nature – was being formulated.

Note on theological concerns

Although our focus is on texts, both those which are before us and those whose memory tradition has preserved, we would be remiss not to bear in mind the contexts in which the texts emerged. While attempting to avoid the pitfalls of anachronistic and culturally inappropriate understandings of former ages and other civilizations, before we enter into the body of the work (i.e. our texts' uses of the Qur'ān, and the potential benefit of Christian Arabic texts to qur'ānic – and ecclesiastical, as well as Islamic - studies), let us – without too much rehashing of the work of others – introduce the texts and their authors, and the milieux in which they were composed. Taking our cue from typical Islamic introductory matter, let us allow the opening passages of the three texts central to our work set the tone for the subsequent discussion.

“In the name of the god (*al-ilāh*), Creator (*al-khāliq*), Living (*al-ḥayy*), Speaking (*al-nāṭiq*), the Most Holy Trinity (*al-thālūth al-aqdas*)” (Theodore Abū Qurra)⁹

“In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, the one God (*al-ilāh al-wāḥid*)” (scribal introit to Sinai Ar. 434)¹⁰

“In the name of God (*allāh*), the one substance (*al-jawhar al-wāḥid*), in his rational attributes (*bi-ṣifātihi al-‘aqliyya*) – living (*ḥayy*), wise (*ḥakīm*), speaking (*nāṭiq*), as distinct from the golden calf of the Banī Isrā’īl, one substance, but whose attribute is neither living nor wise nor speaking; rather God my lord and my god and my succor (*Allāh rabbī wa-ilāhī wa-mu‘īnī*), one in his substance (*al-wāḥid jawharuhu*), he has no associate (*lā sharīk lahu*) - except for every association (*idh kull sharīk*); he is contrary to opposition (*huwa ḍidda muḍādad*). Blessed be our lord God, compassionate and merciful his attribute (*wa-tabāraka rabbunā allāhu al-rahīm al-rahīm ṣifatuhu*), for all the ages (*ilā dahr al-dāhirīn*¹¹). Amen.” (The anonymous monk of Jerusalem’s own introductory invocation found in Sinai Ar. 434)¹²

“In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. The god (*al-ilāh*), united in his substance (*al-muwahḥad jawharuhu*), three in his hypostases (*al-muthallatha aqānīmuhu*).” (Paul of Antioch)¹³

These various introductions (and, in fact, the entirety of the texts under examination here) assert Christian truths against Islamic or qur’ānic truth claims. They do this while also resonating both with qur’ānic phrases, as well as with later Islamic theological discussions – such as, in the instance of the *basmallāh* presented here, the oneness of God and the relationship of the divine substance (*jawhar* – not a qur’ānic term, but one found extensively in later theological treatises) to its attributes (*ṣifāt* - or the qur’ānic *al-asmā’ al-ḥusnā*, ‘beautiful names’, of God: Q 7:180; 17:110; 20:8; 59:22-24) – particularly ‘speech’ (or wisdom, or justice). Is this merely a disingenuous appropriation of Islamic categories for their own – Christian - purposes? Or, as native or emerging Arabic

⁹ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 69.

¹⁰ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 171r, l. 1.

¹¹ Thus the orthography of the manuscript Sinai Ar. 434, f. 171r, l. 10.

¹² Sinai Ar. 434, f. 171r, ll. 5-10.

¹³ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, par. 1.

speakers, are they so well-versed and immersed in the Arabic of the Qurʾān (and much Islamic discourse) that the only (or primary) vocabulary available to them is that of the Arabo-Islamic lexicon?

Oriens christianus

Without exception, the Christians who came to write in Arabic (most of the so-called ‘eastern’ or ‘oriental’ Christians, as they lived in the ‘Eastern’ – oriental – province/ diocese of the Roman Empire) lived in the (classical heartland of the) “Islamic” world. There was, however, no single Christian community in *dār al-Islām*; while their adoption of Arabic was far from uniform, inter-Christian rivalries may even have been exacerbated by an ability to communicate in a common tongue.¹⁴ For, prior to the 700s, in addition to their theological divisions, these oriental Christian communities were linguistically diverse. And, from pre-Islamic times, each community had its own history¹⁵. The community that came to be termed ‘Melkites’ (e.g. those Christians living under Muslim rule who accepted the first six ecumenical councils as ‘orthodox’ and were in communion with Rome and Constantinople) wrote in Greek, while Jacobites and Nestorians of greater Syria used Syriac, and the Jacobites in Egypt used Coptic. Other Oriental Christian communities exist, some of whom also came under Muslim rule - e.g. the ‘Jacobite’ Ethiopians, whose early literary tradition is, unfortunately, no longer extant; another Jacobite community, the

¹⁴ See the discussion in Griffith, *Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*.

¹⁵ For the history of these communities, see Ronald Roberson, *The Eastern Christian Churches: A Brief Survey*, 7th ed., on <http://www.cnewa.org/default.aspx?ID=123&pagetypeID=9&sitecode=HQ&pageno=1>, accessed February 5, 2011.

Armenians, as well as the Chalcedonian Georgians, are two Oriental Christian communities who were never subject to Arab Islamic rule; the Maronites¹⁶ are yet another community – but they are not attested prior to the early Islamic period.

Melkites

All three texts under examination here are penned by individuals from the “Melkite” community. To use the definition of S.H. Griffith,

“...when the term first came to designate an identifiable, socio-ecclesial group in eighth- and ninth-century Syriac, Greek and Arabic texts, it marked them not simply as ‘Chalcedonian’ in theology, but as anti-‘Jacobite’ and anti-‘Monothelite’ in theology {the assertion that Christ had one – Divine – will; eventually rejected at the Council of Constantinople in 680}, Hellenophone and Arabophone in language, and as living in the cultural world of the commonwealth of Islam.”¹⁷

Even though (like ‘Jacobite’ or ‘Nestorian’) ‘Melkite’¹⁸ seems initially to have been a pejorative label (the ‘king’s men’ – that is, those who had, in pre-Islamic times, been associated with the Byzantine overlords) applied to them by outsiders¹⁹, the designees soon appropriated the term for themselves: the scribal prelude to the text of the anonymous monk from Jerusalem even states that

¹⁶ On the Maronites, cf. P. Dib, *History of the Maronite Church*, trans. S. Beggiani (Detroit: Maronite Apostolic Exarchate, 1971).

¹⁷ Sidney H. Griffith, “Arab Christian Culture in the Early Abbasid Period,” *Bulletin of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies* 1/2 (Autumn 1990): 25-44, p. 39 n.5.

¹⁸ This use of ‘Melkite’ is not to be confused with the Rūm Catholique, or ‘Melkites’ of the contemporary Levant, those Rūm Orthodox who, since the 1700s, have come into communion with Rome [as, since 1054 CE, communion had been officially fractured], and adopted the name ‘Melkite’ for themselves. See e.g. S. Descy, *Introduction a l’histoire et l’ecclesiologie de l’eglise melkite* (Beirut: Editions Saint Paul, 1986), on the history of the contemporary Melkites. For a brief historical overview, as well as their contemporary diffusion, see A. Pacini, ed., *Comunità cristiane nell’islamo arabo. La sfida del futuro* (Turin: Edizioni della Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, 1996), esp. the appendix.

¹⁹ For the anti-‘Melkite’ polemics found in the writings of their fellow Christians, see, e.g. Sidney H. Griffith, “Melkites, Jacobites and the Christological Controversies in Arabic in Third/Ninth Century Syria,” in *Syrian Christians under Islam: The First Thousand Years*, ed. David Thomas (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 9-55.

“light exalts the hand of [its] *ṣāḥib* and *kātib* and his ‘orthodox Melkite creed’.”²⁰ And, the ‘Melkites’ were the first to adopt the language of the conquerors as their own: liturgically and in the vernacular.

The texts

All three texts under close examination here are attributed to religious authorities in the Melkite community (two of whom are portrayed as bishops), and represent varying stages of Christian Arabic (and editing). Each is dialogic in nature: a Christian in conversation with a Muslim (or Muslims), defending his faith against the charges/inquiries of his Muslim interlocutor.

The early third/ninth century bishop of Harran, Theodore Abū Qurra, is engaged in a debate with Muslim notables on the veracity of the Christian religion. He had been summoned before the caliphal *majlis* by no less a figure than the early Abbasid caliph al-Maʿmūn (r. 204-18/ 819-33). 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 belief (e.g.; if God is just, what is the eschatological reward of the Muslim women, if their husbands are promised houris in paradise?). In this debate, the Muslim notables are vanquished - not only because of Abū Qurra’s familiarity with points of Christian doctrine and his ability to explain their validity, but also by his knowledge of the Qurʾān itself and his ability to employ it in defense of Christian doctrines, as well as to critique it. (In the words of al-Maʿmūn himself: “Abū Qurra is a sea of knowledge; it is impossible for anyone to withstand him

²⁰ Sinai Arabic 434, f. 171r, ll. 3-4.

in *kalām* or in the knowledge of religions“.)²¹ This debate presumably took place in 830 CE, in the vicinity of Harran (in the south of today’s Turkey) as the caliph was on his way to battle Byzantium.²² Due to its ready availability (and despite its textual infelicities), Ignace Dick’s edition of the account was the primary source consulted for the present discussion.²³

The second text under examination is preserved in a unique manuscript (Sinai Ar. 434, ff. 171r – 181v, copied in 533/1138-9), a microfilm copy of which (from May 31, 1950) is housed in the Library of Congress in Washington, DC. This manuscript contains the response of an anonymous Melkite monk of Jerusalem to three questions posed by a Muslim sheikh. The sheikh has read a “Refutation of the Christians” (presumably akin to the extant works of that title of al-Jāhīz [d. 255/869-70], al-Qāsim b. Ibrāhīm [d. 245/860] or ‘Alī Rabbān al-Ṭabarī [d. ca. 235/850]), and wants the monk’s expert opinion on the following questions raised in the text: the relationship of the eternal being of God to the three persons of the Trinity; the hypostatic union of god and man in the person of Christ; and the proof of this hypostatic union in the actions of Christ. In his response, this monk, who lived in pre-Crusader Jerusalem – and, as discussed

²¹ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 80.

²² For further discussion of this genre, see S.H. 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. On the historicity of the encounter between Abū Qurra and al-Ma’mūn, see S.H. Griffith, “Reflections on the biography of Theodore Abū Qurrah,” *Parole de l’Orient* 18 (1993): 143-70, esp. 156-58.

²³ I. 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, dating from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries, and in two recensions: Melkite and Jacobite, are known. For the manuscript history of the text, see Griffith, “Monk in the Emir’s Majlis,” 38-39. A student of S.Kh. Samir is currently working on a critical edition of this account at the Pontifical Institute for the Study of Arabic and Islam in Rome.

below, arguably as late as Fatimid times²⁴ - employs both biblical and qur'ānic 'proof' in support of Christian doctrines.

The third text is the response of Paul of Antioch, bishop of Sidon, to Muslim friends in his Episcopal see. Little is known of the life of Paul, but, as his writings draw on the works of Elias of Nisibis (d. 437-8/1046), and the first extant copy of the letter under discussion here is dated to the early seventh/thirteenth century, a sixth/twelfth century *floruit* period is not unreasonable.²⁵ Having voyaged to Byzantine and Frankish lands, including Rome and the Amalfi coast (?), Paul wishes to explain why these foreign Christians see no need to be/become Muslim. Like Abū Qurra and the anonymous monk of Sinai Ar. 434, Paul, too, is well-versed in the Qur'ān, and uses it to best any objections a Muslim might pose to the positions voiced by these 'foreign' Christians. This work is of particular interest to the student of contemporary Islamic history, as it (or a parallel tradition) may well have been the text to which Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), arguably the forefather of elements of the Salafiyya and Wahabbi trends in contemporary Islam²⁶, wrote his famous

²⁴ Robert Haddad, *La Trinité divine chez les théologiens arabes 750-1050*, vol. 15 of *Beauchesne Religions* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1985), p. 38 dates the text to 780 CE (cf. Robert Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It. A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam*, vol. 13 of *Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1997), 504-5). A ninth century date is suggested by Mark Swanson, "Beyond Proof-texting. Approaches to the Qur'an in Some Early Arabic Christian Apologies," *The Muslim World* 88 (1988), 301 and n. 25.

²⁵ For further discussion of Paul's life, see P. Khoury, ed. and trans., *Paul d'Antioche. Évêque melkite de Sidon (XIIe s.)*, vol. 24 of *Recherches publiées sous la direction de L'Institut de Lettres Orientales de Beyrouth* (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique Beyrouth, 1965).

²⁶ On which trends, see, for example, Ahmad Dallal, "Appropriating the Past: Twentieth-Century Reconstruction of Pre-Modern Islamic Thought," *Islamic Law and Society* 7/3 (October 2000): 325-58; Natalie J. Delong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

“Refutation of the Christians”²⁷. The following discussion is based on Paul Khoury’s critical edition of Paul of Antioch’s work, together with his French translation thereof.²⁸

Although these are the three primary sources for the present work, two other early Christian debates with Muslims in which the Qur’ān figures prominently should be mentioned, as they will occasionally be invoked for comparative purposes (although neither purports to be the work of a Melkite). The Nestorian Catholicos Timothy I is credited with a conversation with the caliph al-Mahdī (r. 158-69/775-85) that is preserved in both Arabic and Syriac.²⁹ This discourse, which is remarkable for its respectful tone towards the caliph, the person of Muhammad, as well as the Qur’ān itself, is among the earliest well-developed expositions of Christian thinking on Islam from within the Islamic world that both respects and reflects Muslim sensibilities. It may very well have set the tone/topics for later discussions (other such discussions include that of the Monk of Bayt Hala³⁰; as Timothy’s enjoyed a wide circulation, it was selected for comparative purposes here). The second comparative text is the al-Kindi-al-Hashimi correspondence, preserved in Arabic and attributed to a Nestorian

²⁷ See Thomas Michel’s edition and translation of Ibn Taymiyya’s work: *A Muslim Theologian’s Response to Christianity: Ibn Taymiyya’s al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ* (Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1984).

²⁸ Cited hereafter with the paragraph number Khoury assigned to Paul’s text, together with the page of the Arabic and French translation thereof, as follows: “Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, par. _”. See also David Thomas and Rifaat Ebied’s recent publication of a parallel text: *Muslim-Christian Polemic During the Crusades: The Letter from the People of Cyprus and Ibn Abī Ṭālib al-Dimashqī’s Response* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

²⁹ Alphonse Mingana, “Timothy’s Apology for Christianity,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 12 (1928): 137-298 is the primary edition consulted for this discussion.

³⁰ For discussion of these and other early Christian Arabic apologies, see Samir Kh. Samir and Jorgen S. Nielsen, eds., *Christian Arabic Apologetics During the Abbasid Period (750-1258)* (Leiden: Brill, 1994).

contemporary of Abū Qurra.³¹ Although the tone of this discourse is highly polemical, it does indicate a familiarity with Timothy's debate, and also touches on issues present in Abū Qurra's text. Texts such as John of Damascus' (d. ca. 749 CE) *De Haeresibus* (a Greek composition), which do not appear to have circulated among the Arabic-speaking communities, are beyond the scope of our discussion (even though John, who also spent time at Mar Saba, may have been among Theodore's teachers)³².

The authors

What is the defining – and unifying – characteristic of the three texts under discussion here? Religious authorities from the Melkite community figure prominently in the two letters and the dialogue/debate. While this is the Christian community from which we have the earliest attestation of Christians writing in Arabic, they were not the only Christians to come to write in Arabic. Rather, the language in which Muhammad received his revelations - preserved in the Qur'ān, and whose rules were discerned by Persians in the easternmost reaches of the Islamicate lands - came to be the lingua franca for Copts in Egypt, Nestorians in Iraq, Maronites in the Lebanon, Syrian Orthodox, etc.: in other words, all who came to live under Islam – Jews, Christians, Muslims and others – were Arabophone to a certain degree. While the Arabic language may have been

³¹ 'Abd al-Masīh al-Kindī, *Risāla b. Ismā'īl al-Hāshimī ilā 'Abd al-Masīh b. Ishāq al-Kindī wa-Risāla al-Kindī ilā l-Hāshimī* (London: Bible Lands Missions' Aid Society, 1912). See the English edition in Newman, ed., *Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, 365-545.

³² On the possible connections between Theodore and John, see Sidney H. Griffith, "John of Damascus and the Church in Syria in the Umayyad Era: The Intellectual and Cultural Milieu of Orthodox Christians in the World of Islam," *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 11/2 (Summer 2008), online at <http://syrcm.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol11No2/HV11N2Griffith.html>.

adopted rather universally (likely for pragmatic purposes), the responses to the Arab conquerors and subsequent Arabized/ Arabicizing Muslim rule, the Islamic religion, the Arabian prophet and the Arabic scripture, were far from uniform – either within a given community, or across communal borders. And, while those writing in Arabic may have been circumspect in their criticisms of Muslim rule or the Islamic religion, one should not dismiss the estimations of Islam found in Christian Arabic texts out of a presumption of polemical intent, diplomatic tact or obsequious deference. Up until the Crusading period, far from being an insignificant minority, Christians were the majority in many areas of the Arabic speaking Islamic world, even if the terms of the so-called covenant of Umar did indeed limit their social prominence and visibility, in varying degrees, according to the time and place.

While the author of Sinai Ar. 434 suspects that three questions challenging the veracity of the Christian faith were initially put forth out of malice, he indicates that he knows the Muslim who sought his views is fair-minded, and genuinely wants to understand the Christian position. He therefore addresses a respectful reply to a sheikh 'pre-eminent in his Islam', and whose 'noble lineage' prevents him from asking his questions about Christianity out of 'malice'. While this Jerusalem monk notes how he anticipates a fair reception to his reflections on Christian doctrines, Paul is intent upon demonstrating how Muslims should not expect – nor even want – Christians, especially non-Arab (Crusader?) Christians to abandon their religion and convert to Islam.

Although the anonymous monk laments and gives voice to reservations about the current situation in which Jerusalem finds herself, he is never explicit about any fears that the Muslims expect or want Christians to convert to Islam. Rather, he is intent on showing his Muslim interlocutor the truth of Christian beliefs about both the Trinity and Incarnation – truths that, in his reading, the books of God³³ (including the Qur'ān) support. Similarly, Paul's letter to his Muslim friends purports to explain why (non-Arab) Christians need not, but also *should not*, abandon their Christian faith. For, in his reading, the Qur'ān validates Christian beliefs and practices. In short, Christianity itself is vindicated by the Qur'ān. Writing during the Crusades, when Latin Christians were looking at their eastern co-religionists in puzzlement or confusion, was Paul's a genuine attempt to defend the religion of the foreign invaders? Was he trying to bridge the Latin Christians and Arabic-speaking Muslims? Was he trying to put forth a unique argument that the Muslims need not suspect the Christians in their midst (Arab or other) because the Qur'ān itself encourages Christianity? His true intent can only be the subject of speculation, for we have no indication of the reception Paul and his letter had in his lifetime (although later generations did, indeed, engage it).

Theodore and al-Ma'mūn: The *majlis* and the *miḥna*

Theodore and his disputants are not infrequently portrayed as adopting a strong, even combative tone, in their exchanges – but all sides are generally respectful towards the caliph. A tone of disrespect towards al-Ma'mūn does

³³ Cf. e.g. Sinai Ar. 434, ff. 174v – 175r.

creep into the discussion, when some of the Muslim participants imply that the caliph is allowing Theodore too much freedom – essentially thereby questioning al-Maʿmūn’s own ‘Islam’. This implicit criticism of al-Maʿmūn hints of *takfir*: the deeming of a ‘Muslim’ not properly ‘Muslim’ – generally by a fellow Muslim, on the basis of words or deeds (something generally frowned upon by normative Islam³⁴). Indeed, al-Maʿmūn is portrayed as extremely good-natured, even chuckling or laughing heartily³⁵ when Theodore is particularly witty, or makes an especially scathing remark to his Muslim interlocutors.

Dhimmi as debate partners?

What interests us here is that, even in their state of ‘dhimmitude’, Christians engaged in free and open theological debate with Muslims. This situation of “intellectual freedom” may be dated to the Qurʾān itself, in which the first auditors are exhorted to “debate with them in the best way” (Q 16:125). Along these lines, the Qurʾān recommends, as one method of solving disputes, to call the curse of God down upon one’s opponents (a method Francis purportedly suggested to his Muslim interlocutor at Damiata)³⁶. Such presumption and even encouragement of intellectual exchange on matters of faith with those outside of

³⁴ The repudiation of the Kharijites (who “left” the Muslim community after Ali’s acquiescence to arbitration after the Battle of Šiffin) by normative Islam demonstrates this position well; see *EQ*, s.vv. “Kharijīs” and “Šiffin, Battle of”; cf. Paul L. Heck, “Eschatological Scripturalism and the End of Community: The Case of Early Kharijism,” in *Archiv der Religionsgeschichte*, ed. Jan Assmann et al. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005), 137-52; Fred Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

³⁵ E.g. Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 70, 91.

³⁶ Louis Massignon, “La Mubāhala de Médine et l’Hyperdulie de Fātima,” in Louis Massignon, *Parole donnée* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1983), 147-67; Leonardus Lemmens, “De Sancto Francisco Christum Praedicante coram Sultano Aegypti,” *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 19 (1926): 559-78; cf. Griffith, *Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 161-62.

one's community may sound incredible to Western "Enlightenment" ears, for whom religion (together with politics) is one of the two "forbidden" conversation topics – the legacy of the strong punishments for religious and political dissidents in much of European history.³⁷ Again, the historical realities of European Christendom and *dār al-Islām* with respect to plurality (of faiths/confessions and peoples), and power structures cannot be forgotten. For, in the early Islamic centuries, Muslim Qur'ān exegetes would heed the exhortation Q 10:94 ("If you are in doubt, ask those who read the book before you"), and include accounts from the 'Children of Israel' in their own explanations of prophets and themes found in both Bible and Qur'ān.

This expectation of, even exhortation to, discussion is reflected in the very term for the discipline of theological discourse or inquiry: *'ilm al-kalām*, literally 'science of speech' (in which Theodore is said by al-Ma'mūn to be well versed: "Abū Qurra is a sea of knowledge; it is impossible for anyone to withstand him in *kalām* or in the knowledge of religions")³⁸. Termed the 'greater jurisprudence' (*al-fiqh al-akbar*) in the early centuries of Islam, Muslim scholars would discuss with one another (and also, seemingly, with non-Muslims) about those matters on which the Qur'ān was silent, or ambiguous (cf. Q 3:7): If God 'sits' on his 'throne' (e.g. Q 10:3), does that mean he has legs with which to sit? Here, it should be called to mind that the Islamic empire came to span areas that already were imbued with a Hellenic tone, and in which Christians, prior to the rise of

³⁷ See, for example, Baruch Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, trans. Samuel Shirley (1991; Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998), and Henry Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition: A Historical Revision* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997). Compare the relevant provisions in the 1917 and 1983 Codes of Canon Law.

³⁸ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 80.

Islam, had debated amongst themselves matters of Trinitarian and, more proximate to the Islamic period, Christological concern.³⁹ The art of skillful debate was, therefore, something that crossed communal boundaries. And, as with rhetoric in Greek education, dialectical disputation came to be among the disciplines of the educated in the Arab Islamic empire, Muslim or non-Muslim. Therefore, those who would engage in this discipline would know not only the acceptable methods of reasoning and forms of argumentation, but also the manners expected therein.⁴⁰

Thus, it should be of no surprise that accounts of *majlis* sessions - in which the participants represent a variety of theological views - abound, becoming a literary device for the conveyance of one doctrinal or confessional position or another. While the assessment of the 'outcome' of such sessions is likely colored by the confessional orientation of the relator, reports of the comportment and 'manners' exhibited therein are fairly uniform. Thus, Muslim and Christian, Sunni and Shia, accounts indicate that - in a formal debate -even though tempers would rise, there was always a certain assurance that all present would be treated with respect (a phenomenon familiar to anyone who has been hosted anywhere in the Mediterranean, or Arab, worlds - and not dissimilar to the contemporary Amos Oz' account of his encounters with Israelis of a wide range

³⁹ For an overview of the early Islamic expansion, see Berkey, *Formation of Islam*.

⁴⁰ For an excellent overview of medieval disputation in the Islamic world, see Sarah Stroumsa, "Ibn al-Rāwandī's *sū' adab al-mujādala*: The Role of Bad Manners in Medieval Disputations," in *Interreligious Encounters in Medieval Islam*, ed. Lazarus-Yafeh et al., 66-83.

of political and religious opinions: even when voices were raised, his glass was refilled and cigarettes replenished⁴¹).

The account of Theodore's debate, in fact, contains repeated reminders of qur'ānic exhortations of kind treatment towards those with whom its auditors were in dialogue. For example, one of the Kūfans, incensed at Theodore's presumption (and facility) in the debate, reprimands him thus: "You have spoken at length out of ignorance, O Abū Qurra, and the Commander of the Faithful has shown you great forbearance, to the point that you have come to replying to him as an equal." To this, al-Ma'mūn replies: "Abū Qurra has not treated us in a hostile manner, nor has he spoken in any but a genuine way, respectfully offering proof." He then turns to Abū Qurra, and encourages him to proceed with his argument.⁴² In this criticism, al-Ma'mūn seems to indicate that Theodore (rather than his Muslim opponents) heeded the proper spirit of debate, as would be outlined by the later al-Ash'arī, the eponym for what would become normative (Sunni) theology.

Such accounts dovetail with the "rules of debate" encouraged (but, judging by the reports of contrary behavior, not always observed) in the *majlis* sessions. For example, in the fourth/tenth centuries, despite their differing theological positions, the Karaite al-Qirqisānī commented:

When your opponent speaks rashly and yells, silence and abstaining from screams is a better response to him. It will silence him more effectively than the whip, and it will offer a more forceful demonstration of the weakness of his

⁴¹ Amos Oz, *In the Land of Israel*, trans. M. Goldberg-Bartura (New York: Random House, 1984).

⁴² Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 90.

argument. For when he observes that you do not heed his screams, that you consider him a fool, that you hold him in contempt because he must rely on yelling, and that you reprove him for that, then he will calm down, he will be embarrassed and will retract his claims.⁴³

In this, he echoes the sentiments of al-Ash‘arī:

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.⁴⁴

That such behavior was not unheard of is indicated by Ibn Ḥazm’s (d. 456/1064) including ‘bad manners’ as among the conditions for one participant ‘losing’ a round of a debate:

If one of the participants is making insinuations 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.⁴⁵

Might (the more respectful of) such sessions have contributed to the eventual prohibition of ‘Christians’ teaching the Qur’ān to their children’ - if Christians were, in fact, treated with such respect in these sessions that they might even ‘vanquish’, or be seen as on a par with, their Muslim disputants? For, shortly after al-Ma’mūn’s reign, there are reports of Christians being ‘prevented from studying/handling the Qur’ān’.⁴⁶

⁴³ Cited by Stroumsa, “Role of Bad Manners,” 69.

⁴⁴ Cited by Stroumsa, “Role of Bad Manners,” 70-71.

⁴⁵ Cited in Stroumsa, “Role of Bad Manners,” 73.

⁴⁶ Griffith, *Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*.

In fact, Muslim accounts of the liberties with the religion that al-Ma'mūn took⁴⁷ may represent the light in which al-Ma'mūn's *majālis* sessions were viewed by some of his Muslim contemporaries. For, contrary to the skepticism about debates before high officials (out of fear that they might not be serious, or that other concerns might prevail in the discourse of the disputants, or the assessment of the outcome)⁴⁸, al-Ma'mūn was reputed (and criticized) as having been (overly) indulgent to Christians (and others who did not represent 'normative' Islam) - as demonstrated by the accounts of Theodore's debates before him: it is never al-Ma'mūn, but always either Theodore himself, or the other Muslim interlocuters, who verge on rudeness.

Alternatively, was it the rudeness or arrogance of the Christian interlocuters that led to various prohibitions on Christian handling of the Qur'ān, and the eventual marginalization of Christians in Islamic societies? Or, was societal marginalization more a product of (a fear of) Christian alliance with their foreign co-religionists (from Theodore Abū Qurra's time to the present)? For, Theodore provides a marked contrast both to the resignation of the monk of Sinai Ar. 434 to Muslim rule (while attempting to maintain – establish – assert? – a foothold in Jerusalem as a Christian - rather than Jewish or Muslim ? – city), as well as to Paul's uncertainty about the incursions of crusading European Christians and the ensuing questions of identity. The premise of Theodore's debate text is that the Commander of the Faithful, the early Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mūn, enjoyed the company of the bishop of Harran and, on his way to battle

⁴⁷ On al-Ma'mūn's life and times, as well as his perception in Islamic history, see Michael Cooperson, *al-Ma'mun* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2005).

⁴⁸ Stroumsa, "Role of Bad Manners."

the Byzantines, invited Theodore Abū Qurra and a number of Muslim (and Jewish) scholars to his *majlis* – in order that they might ‘debate (*tunāzirū*) with [Theodore] and explain to him the veracity (*ḥaqīqa*) of the religion of Islam, and to show the falsehood “of the impotency” (*daʿf*) of the religion of the Christians (*al-naṣārā*).’⁴⁹ As the (Christian) account of this encounter unfolds, however, it becomes clear that Abū Qurra will be the definitive victor: he is easily able to thwart his opponents in their arguments against Christianity – on both theological and worldly grounds. And, not surprisingly, accounts of Theodore’s “victory” circulated among Christian Arabs, seemingly in conjunction with accounts of Bahira as Muhammad’s “informant”.⁵⁰

While Paul does not express an expectation of a response to his letter (except for clarification, as voiced in his final paragraph) – it is more a ‘state of the situation’ address – in later centuries, his letter was read, and responded to, by Muslims (the most noteworthy being that of Ibn Taymiyya, alluded to above). And, while the Muslim responses are scathing in their evaluation of Paul’s reading of the Qurʾān (which, as will be highlighted below, is quite facetious at times), the question remains: to what extent is a Muslim rejection of the continued validity of Christianity a necessary element in Islamic faith, or a result of historical, societal – geo-political – factors? For, if Ibn Taymiyya was writing after the Mongol destruction of Baghdad and at a time in which these same Mongols were converting to Islam, but in a less-than-pure way, the combination of political unrest and impurity of cult created an environment in which rejection

⁴⁹ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 69.

⁵⁰ My thanks to Barbara Roggema for bringing this manuscript tradition to my attention.

or dismissal, rather than acceptance and incorporation, of 'other(s)' might have appeared the better option. But, is this an essential, or necessary, facet of Islamic thought? How, then, ought the contemporary construction – by the (Muslim) Qatari government - of a complex of churches for the Christian inhabitants of Doha to be understood? Is that 'more' or 'less' Islamic than the restrictions that have, in various times and places, been placed – in the name of Islam - upon public Christian worship?

What, however, should be made of al-Ma'mūn's apparent delight at Theodore's facility in the art of debate, and of Theodore's ability to vanquish his Muslim opponents? Is this a mere 'politically correct' touch on the part of the Christian who transmitted the account, wishing to pay homage to the then-ruler, a caliph so beneficent, that he allowed inter-confessional debates, and was never ruffled, even when a Christian 'proved' the merits of Christianity before him? Is it a subtle jab at the hegemony of Islam: even in the face of real political power, even the caliph knows, in his heart of hearts, that Islam is not the true religion (but – even if he very well might wish to do so - is too weak to convert to Christianity)? Or, does it contain an indication of other undercurrents in al-Ma'mūn's reign – namely, the *mihna*, or 'inquiry' into the faith, that he instituted in 218/833 (on the heels of about twenty years of his sponsorship of the translation of Greek – and other – works into Arabic), and which would last for about 15 years?⁵¹

⁵¹ See, e.g., John Nawas, "The Mihna of 218 AH/833 AD Revisited: An Empirical Study," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 116/4 (1996): 698-708. As discussed below, al-Ma'mūn's delight could also have been at Theodore's vanquishing Arab – as well as Muslim - opponents.

The *miḥna*

The *miḥna* is perhaps the closest analogue to an ‘Inquisition’ the Islamic world has experienced – but, it was geared primarily at public officials, and was as much an attempt to (re)assert caliphal authority in matters theological (over against the scholarly experts or local authorities: *qāḍī* – ‘*ulamā*’ - *fuqahā*’)⁵² as it was a doctrinal assertion (of the temporal ‘createdness of the Qur’ān’ over against its ‘uncreatedness’). This latter position eventually came to be that of ‘normative’ Islam, and stems from an understanding of God’s attributes as coeternal with, but not separate from or subsequent to, His essence. Therefore, God’s speech, God’s Word, cannot be understood as having a beginning in time, any more than God’s eternal essence can. The Mu‘tazila (so named because they had “withdrawn” from the debate on the fate of the grave sinner: ‘*-z-l*’, in the VIII verbal form means to “withdraw”), whose understanding of the Qur’ān the *miḥna* supported, would argue that – mainly to maintain God as the one, unique, eternal being – the Qur’ān must have had a “beginning” in time. This understanding, however, does not extend to the physical corpus of the Qur’ān (or its subsequent reception and recitation), which was revealed to Muhammad over a span of 22 years (much as the Nicene definition of God the Son as ‘one-in-being’ with the Father does not compromise the temporal reality – and contingency – of Jesus of Nazareth).

Cf. the discussion of the *shu‘ūbiyya* trend below, and in Ignaz Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, ed. S.M. Stern (Chicago: Aldine Transactions, 2005), esp. 138-39.

⁵² See Ibn Khaldūn’s lucid discussion of these functions, particularly the distinctions among “caliph,” “imām” and *qāḍī*, in *Muqaddimah*, trans. Rosenthal, 154-75.

But, were there also political undertones to the *miḥna*? Al-Ma'mūn's reign came barely a half century into the Abbasid period. Like the Umayyads before them, the Abbasids were members of the Prophet's tribe (the Quraysh). But, unlike the Umayyads, a close relative of the Abbasid progenitor is understood to have been cursed in the Qur'ān (Q 111). Could a family be considered a legitimate ruler of the Islamic community if a member thereof had been cursed in the Qur'ān? It is in the exegetical traditions that Abū Lahab is identified as 'Abd al-'Uzzā b. 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib, brother of the Prophet's father ('Abd Allāh), as well as of 'Abbās, through whose son ('Abd Allāh) the Abbasids claimed direct descent. Similarly, in the exegetical tradition, the Umayyads came to be understood as the 'cursed tree' (Q 17:60) – Zaqqūm (a response to glosses of Abū Lahab as 'Abd al-'Uzzā, or an echoing of Alid discontent with Mu'awiyya and his successors?).

In an extreme understanding of the implications of understanding God's word/speech to have been 'created' in time, might there have been an eventual diminishment of the (Arabic) Qur'ān (and the Arabian traditions of Muhammad) – as, arguably, may be seen in Shiite traditions of interpretation (Shiites being the heirs of the Mu'tazila), or (Persian) Ḥanafite tendencies? Another danger would be the eventual dismissal of the Qur'ān – once viewed as (- or demoted from eternal, uncreated Word of God to) created word, the permissibility of probing not only into the meanings, but also the form, of the received text, could follow, leading quickly to a deconstruction thereof, akin to that which has been found in Christian discussions of the Bible in recent centuries (e.g. form, or historical,

critical analysis)⁵³. Although there were many discussions on the codex of the Qurʾān during the early Abbasid period⁵⁴, the inimitability of the Arabic Qurʾān, and the uncreatedness of the Word of God emerged as the dominant understanding of the scripture. Even though there was an eventual facility with Arabic in most places to which Islam spread, the relevance of Arab traditions, however, became less immediately evident. Examination of the process of the collection and compilation of *ḥadīth* indicates that, at times, *ḥadīth* were used as a means of preserving local (and even non-Arab) customs as ‘Islamic’ – by attributing them to the Prophet, with a sound chain of transmitters.⁵⁵ For, even though the Abbasids definitively routed the Umayyads (a surviving member of whom, however, fled to Spain, establishing the Umayyad dynasty there), they had a delicate diplomatic situation, negotiating amidst Umayyad (and Alid) sympathizers, combined with increasing numbers of non-Arab Muslims (especially the Syro-Persian Barmecads) in positions of power.

The multiple layers of Abbasid society are perhaps indicated (or represented) in the account of Theodore’s debate through the *nisbas* of the various Muslim discussants: al-Hāshimī (Muḥammad b. ʿAbdallāh), al-Khuzāʿī (Hārūn b. Hishām), al-Hamadhānī (Salām b. Muʿāwiyya), al-Basrī (Ṣaʿṣaʿ b.

⁵³ See, for example, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “The Biblical Commission’s Instruction on the Historical Truth of the Gospels,” *Theological Studies* 25 (1964): 386-408; Francis J. Moloney, *The Living Voice of the Gospels* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006), esp. pp. 307-42, Chapter 4: “The Gospels Today”.

⁵⁴ Hossein Modarressi, “Early Debates on the Integrity of the Qur’an: A Brief Survey,” *Studia Islamica* 77 (1993): 5-39; ʿAbd al-Masīḥ al-Kindī, “The Apology of al-Kindī,” in *Early Christian Muslim Dialogue*, ed. Newman, 355-546, esp. 452-470.

⁵⁵ G.H.A. Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition: Studies in Chronology, Provenance and Authorship of early ḥadīth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); cf. Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*.

Khālid), some notables of Quraysh⁵⁶ - the Banī Hāshim⁵⁷, al-Kūfī (Sāma ‘īl⁵⁸); as well as relatives of al-Ma’ mūn⁵⁹ (a vizier; also, his scribe⁶⁰), people of Damascus⁶¹, and Syria⁶², including ‘Alī b. al-Walīd and Abū Ḥasan b. Lāwī al-Fārisī (presumably a Jewish convert to Islam, together with al-Asadī⁶³), people of Iraq⁶⁴ and Abū l-Qāsim from al-Ghawr⁶⁵ (in the Jordan valley), as well as, finally, the *qādī* Yaḥyā b. Ḥākīm⁶⁶. Al-Ma’ mūn himself is variously addressed as ‘commander of the faithful’, ‘al-Ma’ mūn’, ‘uncle of the messenger’.⁶⁷ Are these names merely employed so as to affirm the utter dominance of Christianity over Islam in the minds of any who might hear the account of Theodore’s triumph (over men from Kūfa, Basra, Damascus, etc.)? Is there a second layer of meaning that might be discerned, as well: in his evident delight at their defeat, is al-Ma’ mūn (portrayed as) demonstrating his own dominance over, or displeasure with, these various regions?

Or, might the various names in Theodore’s debate be a tacit acknowledgment of the eastward shift of Abbasid times, encompassing increasing numbers of non-Arab Muslims (exemplified in the Shu‘ ūbiyya

⁵⁶ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’ Abū Qurra*, 69; cf. 117: A large company of Quraysh, the sons of Hāshim, and other notables of the Muslims were there; al-Ma’ mūn had caused them to be present for the debate with Abū Qurra. He said, ‘What is to be said has gone before, in the conversation that preceded. But tell me, O uncle of the messenger, if you want me to talk [to carry on the conversation?].’

⁵⁷ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’ Abū Qurra*, 116.

⁵⁸ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’ Abū Qurra*, 97.

⁵⁹ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’ Abū Qurra*, 118: ‘closest relative’.

⁶⁰ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’ Abū Qurra*, 119.

⁶¹ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’ Abū Qurra*, 89, where are also mentioned *ḥaldarīna*.

⁶² Dick, ed., *La discussion d’ Abū Qurra*, 92.

⁶³ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’ Abū Qurra*, 94.

⁶⁴ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’ Abū Qurra*, 107.

⁶⁵ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’ Abū Qurra*, 110.

⁶⁶ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’ Abū Qurra*, 125.

⁶⁷ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’ Abū Qurra*, 116.

trend)⁶⁸, in contrast to the highly Arab identity of the Umayyads (exemplified, perhaps by “Mu‘āwiyya’ Hamazānī, one of Theodore’s – and, by extension, al-Ma’mūn’s - opponents⁶⁹)? For, broadly speaking, one might understand the dominant concern in Umayyad times to have been “What to do with non-Muslim Arabs” - as evidenced in Umayyad tensions with the powerful Christian Banū Taghlib tribe⁷⁰, and the refusal to understand *Arab* Christians as Peoples of the Book “protected” by the Islamic state – despite a lack of *qur’ānic* distinction between Arab and non-Arab peoples of the book. Then, under the Abbasids, the paradigm shifted to “What to make of non-Arab Muslims” (as seen in the aforementioned Shu‘ūbiyya trend; the tolerant or inclusive nature of Abbasid - including al-Ma’mūn’s - reign is demonstrated by Sunni-Shia debate texts similar to that of Abū Qurra, whose setting purports to be the Abbasid caliphate.)

The political (and linguistic) union of al-Ma’mūn’s reign was fairly solid – at least, in the defense of the region under his control: *dār al-islām*. Therefore, that the Muslim disputants put before Theodore all come from the traditional heartlands of the Islamic world returns the dispute to a theological (and possibly cultural) level. Coming from the Arab heartland of Islam, it is likely that Theodore’s disputants would have preferred the position of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, al-Ma’mūn’s nemesis in the *miḥna* controversies. When pressed to profess the

⁶⁸ Cf. *EI*, s.v. “Shu‘ūbiyya.”

⁶⁹ Cf. Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 81.

⁷⁰ Cf. Ibn Taymiyya, *Iqtidā’ al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaḳīm li-mukhālafat aṣḥāb al-jaḥīm*, ed. Nāṣir b. ‘Abd al-Karīm al-‘Aql (Riyadh: Maktabat al-rushd, 1991), referenced by Yohanan Friedman, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam: Interfaith Relations in the Muslim Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 25-26.

createdness of the Qur'ān, Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal came to stand as the grand defender of Qur'ān and *sunna* (prophetic tradition). He could not bring himself to speak with certainty on matters of which he had no certain knowledge, or on which the Qur'ān and prophetic tradition were silent. Thus, he was unable to profess the required position (that of the createdness of the Qur'ān), and was imprisoned – and tortured - as a result⁷¹.

Paul and the Crusades

Like Theodore and al-Ma'mūn, Paul is facing a multi-ethnic reality and a turbulent political situation. Paul, although bishop of Sidon, was a native of Antioch, a northern Frankish state whose inhabitants were primarily Jacobite and Greek Orthodox. Tancred, the Frankish ruler of Antioch, had actively encouraged the Muslim population to remain – as allies against the non-Latin Christian majority? Or, perhaps indicating an Oriental Christian intervention – either out of ancient friendships forged with the Muslim minority community, or a desire to maintain their ancient privileges, as it were, through securing for themselves a Muslim 'underclass'?

In Sidon, however, as in Nablus and Beirut, the inhabitants were largely Muslim.⁷² Was, therefore, his boldness in asserting – in Arabic, and purportedly

⁷¹ Cf. the account of Ibn Ḥanbal's ordeal preserved by al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī. Vol. XXXII. The Reunification of the 'Abbasid Caliphate*, trans. C.E. Bosworth (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 199-221, and the narrative of al-Jāhiz, *The Life and Works of Jahiz*, (Fr.) trans. Charles Pellat, Eng. trans. (from the French) D.M. Hawke (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 48-50.

⁷² Benjamin Kedar, "The Subjected Muslims of the Frankish Levant," in *Muslims under Latin Rule*, ed. James Powell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 135-74, repr. in *The Crusades: The Essential Readings*, ed. Thomas Madden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002),

to a Muslim - the lack of necessity for *Latins* to convert to Islam reflective of the relative comfort of the *Oriental Christian* communities, even when they were numerically disadvantaged with respect to their Muslim compatriots? Or, does his tone indicate a (triumphal) hope on the part of Christians in the Arabic-speaking world, that their European coreligionists would deliver them from Muslim rule? Alternatively, might it reflect the comfort of Christians in his native Antioch – as a majority of the Arabic speaking population, regardless of whether their overlords were Latin or Turkish? While Paul’s true motives for writing may never be discerned, the contemporary reader is immediately struck by the confidence with which Paul wrote. His assertions – that Muhammad was sent to the Arabs, so non-Arabs should not follow the “Arab” prophet; and, furthermore, that Christians have no need to convert to Islam: for, if the Muslims were to examine their scriptures more closely, they would see that not only should Christians remain Christian, but that Christian and qur’ānic beliefs do not diverge – seem also to have impressed nearer contemporaries who came across his letter, Christian or Muslim. As noted above, a version of his letter even reached Ibn Taymiyya, who, in his most extensive ‘response’ to Christianity, refuted it. (In the light of recent attention to Ibn Taymiyya’s thought, in both Islamic and Western circles, Paul’s letter may be well worth re-reading.)

Whether or not Paul made a Mediterranean voyage that included Byzantium – Constantinople -, ‘Frankish lands’ (Norman Sicily?), the Amalfi

233-64, 245 – citing Saladin’s secretary in his account of the Muslim reconquest of Jerusalem in 1187 CE.

coast (an allusion to the homeland of the crusading rulers like Tancred?) and Rome (for the third Lateran council?), somewhere between 1046 CE (the year in which Elias of Nisibus died, upon whose works Paul drew) and 1200 CE (the date of the first known copy of his letter)⁷³, his letter to his Muslim friend was composed during the Crusader period, when Sidon and Antioch were under – or newly released from – Latin rule. As such, he was highly aware of the delicate position of Oriental Christians – Chalcedonian or non – and, as a public church official, would likely have wanted to protect his flock as best he could. It is not improbable that he served as a bridge between the Latins and the Muslims – guiding the former so as to minimize breaches of propriety when dealing with Muslims, and assuring the Muslims that the foreign Christian rule might be a not unsavory alternative to Turkish dominance.

One example of Oriental Christians' bridging the Latin invaders and the Muslim communities is seen in the account of the takeover of Nablus after the fall of Jerusalem, which is also the earliest instance of a bloodless surrender in which the Muslim population was not displaced. As Tancred, a southern Italian prince of Norman descent (eventually known as the "prince of Galilee") and Eustache of Boulogne scouted out Nablus just prior to the fall of Jerusalem, the Muslim inhabitants of the city fled to the Turkish-garrisoned castle, while the native Oriental Christians persuaded the Franks not to burn the town.⁷⁴ And,

⁷³ Rifaat Ebied and David Thomas, eds., *Muslim-Christian Polemic During the Crusades. The Letter from the People of Cyprus and Ibn Abī Ṭālib al-Dimashqī's Response* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 1-5; Paul Khoury, *Paul d'Antioche, évêque melkite de Sidon (xii^e s.)* (Beirut: n.p., 1964), 8-18; Samir Khalil Samir, "Notes sur la 'Lettre à un musulman de Sidon' de Paul d'Antioche," *Orientalia lovaniensia periodica* 24 (1993): 180-90; David Thomas, "Paul of Antioch's Letter to a Muslim Friend and The Letter from Cyprus," in *Syrian Christians under Islam*, ed. Thomas, 203-4.

⁷⁴ Kedar, "Subjected Muslims," 242.

after Jerusalem was captured, the largely Muslim population of Nablus was allowed to remain, under Frankish rule – likely along the lines of Norman rule of Sicilian Muslims. This same Tancred – a Norman from southern Italy - became the ruler of Antioch, where he “exhibited a marked, unequivocal interest in enlarging the Muslim manpower at his disposal...[persuading] Muslim workers to stay, and even [negotiating] the repatriation of their wives who had fled to Aleppo”⁷⁵.

The multiple realities of the Crusader states must be remembered when reading Paul’s letter. Besides the various confessional divisions (Christian and Muslim, Jew, but also divisions within each grouping), there was an ethnic pluralism, even among the ‘native’ and Arabic-speaking populations. In addition, the Latin ‘Crusaders’ (who, too, were not ethnically uniform) were not the only group vying for dominion in the region: (Shiite) Fatimids ruled Egypt (until the end of the 6th/12th century); (Sunni) Turks governed northern Syria. Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, who is known for his merciful capture of Jerusalem back from the Latin overlords in 1187 CE, was a Kurdish official in Syria who competed with the Latin crusader kingdom of Jerusalem for dominance of Egypt, the sole ruler of which he became in 1174 CE – as the first Ayyubid sultan. (The Ayyubids, however, were, within a century, overtaken by those who had served as their ‘slaves’– the literal meaning of ‘Mamlūk’ is ‘one who is owned’ – in both Abbasid and Ayyubid dynasties; the Mamlūks ruled Egypt until the early 10th/16th century, when the Ottomans came to ascendancy.) And, throughout these

⁷⁵ Kedar, “Subjected Muslims,” 243-44, citing an Arabic source contemporary to the surrender of Sidon to the Crusaders in 1110.

centuries, Mongols were periodically sweeping in from the east – dealing the final death knell to the Abbasids with the destruction of Baghdad in 1258 CE. In 1259 CE, at the battle of ‘Ayn Jālūt (in Syria), the Mongols were halted by their defeat at the hands of a united Egyptian/Persian front.

Although the “fury” that had “deplorably afflicted and laid waste the churches of God in the regions of the Orient” is variously described as of Arab, Turkish and Persian origin in the accounts of Pope Urban II’s speech at Clermont in 1095,⁷⁶ in retrospect (and also from a contemporary European perspective), these various forces may appear uniformly ‘Muslim’ (although European contemporaries would likely have termed them barbarians or infidels or Mohammadens, rather than Muslims⁷⁷). But, the Mongols would not adopt Islam until after the destruction of Baghdad. And, the Sunnis and Shiites, and various divisions therein, would not always view each other as equally ‘Muslim’. Furthermore, the ‘western’ (Latin) Christians did not take warmly to their ‘eastern’ (Oriental) counterparts as ‘co-religionists’⁷⁸ – any more so than did the ‘eastern’ Christians easily accept or adopt ‘Latin’ customs. In short, the Latin

⁷⁶ Five versions of this speech are available on the Web, at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/urban2-5vers.html> (accessed February 5, 2011).

⁷⁷ See the terms used in the various versions of Pope Urban II’s speech: pagans, Turks, Persians, Antichrist/Antichristians, etc.

⁷⁸ See, for example, the discussions of the ‘Oriental’ Christians at the Council of Florence in the middle of the 15th century CE in Joseph Gill, *The Council of Florence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961); and, in the 20th, e.g., Benedict XV’s *Motu Proprio Orientis Catholici*, Pius XI’s Encyclical *Rerum Orientalium*, and the decree of the Second Vatican Council *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, in Vatican Archives, available on http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_orientalium-ecclesiarum_en.html (accessed February 6, 2011).

Christian rule effected no greater 'unification' of the various eastern Christians than had the earlier, Arab Muslim rule.⁷⁹

For, while Latin Christians were encouraging a united front in support of their Greek brethren (in apparent disregard of the mutual excommunication of Rome and Constantinople only four decades prior to Pope Urban II's proclamation of the Crusades), their views of oriental Christians, those living in the 'Crusader kingdoms', was less amiable. And, the depth of Latin regard for their Greek coreligionists may be questioned in the light of the Fourth Crusade's sack of Constantinople in 1204. Calling to mind the ancient division of the Mediterranean along east-west (as opposed to contemporary north-south) lines, both the initial acceptance of Arab Muslim rule in Damascus, Jerusalem and Alexandria, including points further East, as well as the seeming preference for the 'Turkish turban' to the 'papal tiara' on the part of some (Christians) in Constantinople on the eve of the Turkish conquest in 1453, may reflect a cultural affinity among those living in what had been the eastern provenances of the Roman empire that cut across confessional lines.

Those Christians (especially those who were not theologically 'separated' from Rome or Constantinople at the pre-Islamic Council of Chalcedon) who had come to speak Arabic were, with the Crusades, put into an unusual position: would they identify with co-religionists of a foreign – western/Latin - culture, or with non-Christians (and Christians who had a different definition of *how* Christ was both God and man, divine and human) with whom, nevertheless, they shared cultural ties? In other words, how 'Arab' (or Semitic) were they? From

⁷⁹ See, for example, the discussion in Pacini, ed., *Comunita Cristiana nel medio oriente*.

an Islamic perspective – how ‘Arab’ could they be, if they knew Arabic, but refused to adopt Islam? Were cultural ties stronger than religious, or theological, bonds? Had, using Frend’s thesis regarding the ‘Monophysites’ in (pre-Islamic) Egypt, confessional lines been drawn along pre-existing cultural divisions? In short, during the Crusading times, were ‘Islam’ or ‘Christianity’ seen as ‘religions’, ‘truths’, ‘identities’, ‘cultures’, or ‘polities’?⁸⁰ Paul’s (Arabic) letter to his (Muslim) friend, on the heels of a trip to (European) Christendom provides some insight to these questions. But, before exploring the question of the extent to which Islam was viewed as religion/community (*‘dīn/umma’*), law (*sharī‘a*) or (polity) *‘dār al-Islām’* by our three authors, let us briefly turn to the city in whose name the Crusades were waged (and on the outskirts of which Theodore was schooled), but as it may have been known to our anonymous monk.

Jerusalem and Christian imagination

The tenth century geographer al-Muqaddasi describes a Jerusalem replete with Christians, but devoid of any significant Muslim scholarly presence. There does seem to have been an active Karramite presence, but Mu‘tazila were fairly silent – possibly the reason behind the careful emphasis on revelation over reason in Sinai Ar. 434? Given the even-handed tone of his response to the sheikh’s queries, it is possible that our anonymous author could have been living in such a ‘Fatimid’ Jerusalem (which may explain why the manuscript was

⁸⁰ Cf. e.g. Mitchell, “Religion is not a preference.”

copied – or, at least, preserved - at St. Catherine’s in Sinai a few centuries later)⁸¹. Comfortable enough in his demographic, if not political, dominance, he could have felt disinclined to waste his energy lamenting his lot. His allusion, however, to various Jewish groups accords with Ibn al-‘Arabī’s description of the rich intellectual life of Seljuk Jerusalem on the advent of the crusades, in the late eleventh century – in which Jews and Muslims engaged in frequent theological debates. But, if there had been an active Jewish presence in Seljuk Jerusalem, there would likely also have been one in the earlier Fatimid times (unless there were Fatimid persecutions of Jews, or reasons for a sudden Jewish influx to the city with the Seljuks, internal or external to their rule).

The anonymous monk details a series of charges the ‘(Jewish) wrongdoers’ (*zālimīn*) from among the Jews level against Jesus of Nazareth, denying that he is the Messiah, Son of God. Among them are those who mention him as a ‘secret’ (*sirr*)⁸²; others say he is a magician (*sāḥir*); yet others, that he took the names of God from the temple (*bayt*) and (mis)used them; still others, that he worked from the *shāmūth*, a ‘book of their magic for the sinful Jews’. But, according to the anonymous author of Sinai Ar. 434, there are others – ‘truthful’ and ‘believing’ – who ‘rejoice’ (in the knowledge of Christ). These are termed the *‘Isawīyya*. Alternatively, there are those who say he is the ‘messiah’, but as son of Joseph, not of Judah.⁸³ Ultimately, the monk concludes, their inability to agree

⁸¹ For further discussion of aspects of Jerusalem’s intellectual life under her various Muslim rulers, see Sabri Jarrar, “Suq al-Ma`rifa: An Ayyubid Hanbalite Shrine in al-Haram al-Sharif,” *Muqarnas* 15 (1998): 71-100.

⁸² See also the possible reference in Sinai Ar. 434, f. 173 v, to the *Sephirot “bali”* {“O Children of Israel, I am your lord, and my name I shall not give to you”}.

⁸³ Sinai Ar. 434, ff. 179r-179v.

amongst themselves as to the nature of Jesus' identity is 'proof against their knowledge'. But, what is of interest is the specific details of what various (Jewish) groups are – erroneously – claiming about Jesus (discussed in greater detail below). Is our monk alluding to groups of his day, with whom he was familiar? Or, is he reporting the traditions – current in Islamic/ Arabic, or pre-Islamic polemics - against the Jewish rejection of Jesus as the Christ?

Significantly, in 1092 CE a Jacobite was appointed administrator of the city. Could this have instigated a heightened awareness of the distinctions among the various Christian groups in the city (and perhaps have served as a backdrop to a notable sheikh's desire to read up on the *Refutation of the Christians* genre)? Might this situation also explain the allusions of the author of Sinai Ar. 434 to the 'confusion' of his day? Could it also be indicative of his awareness of the transition from Shiite Fatimid to Sunni Seljuk Jerusalem (a presence that continued throughout the subsequent centuries)? Does the careful attention to 'revealed' (over 'rational') 'proofs' for the Christian doctrines on the part of the monk of Sinai Ar. 434 reflect a tenth century 'reservation' about voicing heavily rationalist 'Mu'tazila'-esque arguments exclusively? Or is it indicative of the (favorable circumstances for) the introduction of 'Ḥanbalī' thinking into Jerusalem and Damascus by al-Shirāzī (d. 486/1093)?

The anonymous monk's laments on the past glories of his city may reflect – or foreshadow? – the 'virtues of Jerusalem' literature, which emerged in Muslim circles towards the middle of the eleventh century, and flourished during the Crusader 'captivity'. Akin to the Latin Christian texts, which would

highlight the place of Jerusalem in Christian devotion, the Arabic Muslim accounts of Jerusalem highlight its significance for Islamic history. As such, Christian Arabic accounts of the city are of particular interest: how do they compare to the accounts of their Latin coreligionists, or their Muslim neighbors? Our monk's discussions of Jerusalem in Sinai Ar. 434, tying it to biblical narratives and episodes in the life of Christ, may be an assertion of the Christian claim to the city (in the face of either Jewish or Muslim claims and/or the real presence of these non-Christian communities in the Jerusalem of his day). But, when he alludes to the Qur'ānic and biblical allusions to Zechariah or Mary, is he simply making scriptural claims – or might he also have in mind the various mihrabs (including the 'cradle of Jesus' – commemorating the place from which Jesus spoke in the Qur'ān) attributed to these scriptural figures, and present in Muslim Jerusalem?

But the challenge that is of particular interest to us here is the subtle criticism of his Muslim overlords seen in the assertion of the power of Christianity – which could 'take hold' *without* any physical coercion or promises of 'earthly' delights. After the initial apocalyptic understanding of the Arab Islamic conquests, Christians soon turned their pens to critiquing the methods of their overlords for the fact of the conquest (violence, but also persuasion), and also in an effort to explain conversions to Islam: tax benefits, marital rewards (both in marrying Muslim women, and the ability to divorce unwanted wives), the lack of an 'asceticism' within Islam, as well as the heavenly 'rewards' promised Muslims.

But, whether our monk of Sinai Ar. 434 lived in Fatimid (or pre-Fatimid) or Seljuk Jerusalem, he lived under Muslim rule, and likely also with a vibrant or visible Jewish presence, as well. As such, he frames his response to the sheikh's questions as a defense of Christianity, but primarily as justified against Judaism. This rejection of Judaism is seen in Theodore and Paul, as well – but Sinai Ar. 434 contains both a messianic hope of the ultimate victorious rule of Christ (rather than the actual rule of Christendom to which Theodore alludes), as well as allusions to specific aspects of Judaism, not found in either of the other works under discussion here.

“True” religion?

As professing Christians, our three authors would have agreed in large part with the ninth century ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī’s criticism of Islam for the unworthy, worldly motives by which it gained dominance and spread:

The sword

Bribes

Cajolery

Ethnic bigotry

Personal preference

Tribal collusion

Licentious laws and practices

The Christian ‘Ammār, living under Muslim rulers, and coming from one of the centers of Islamic intellectual life, al-Baṣra (today, in southern Iraq), maintained

that ‘intelligent people’ would confess that true religion is established here on account of God’s signs and could have no motives of this world⁸⁴. Only when a religion is free of earthly motives and means for propagation can it be said to be ‘true’. But, one of our authors, also living under Muslim rule, but on the border with Byzantium, before Islam had made much headway into Anatolia, defends the Christian veneration of the cross – as, among other things, ‘No army that went forth under the standard of the cross was vanquished.’⁸⁵ From a Christian perspective, as the ‘true’ religion, Christianity may use the sword – but it is not the use of the sword that justifies or establishes it. The establishment of Islam (which, in the eyes of a believing Christian, is not the true religion) can only be explained by these ‘earthly’ means/motives, or, in the words of one of our authors (discussed below), as a sign of God’s love for those Christians who come under its yoke, for God tries those he loves⁸⁶- and not through the grace of God as proof of Islam’s “truth” or Muslims’ “valor”. Akin to God’s warning to the Israelites in Deuteronomy 9:5 (“It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity that you are going in to take possession of their land but on account of the wickedness of these nations, the Lord your God will drive them out before you, to accomplish what he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.”

⁸⁴ Griffith, *Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 126.

⁸⁵ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 92. See John Lamoreaux’s translation of Theodore’s discussion of the “True Religion,” which is very similar to that of ‘Ammār: *Theodore Abū Qurrah*, trans. John C. Lamoreaux, vol. 1 of *Library of the Christian East*, ed. Daniel C. Peterson et al. (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2005).

⁸⁶Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 123.

), Islamic hegemony was generally interpreted by Christians who came under it as punishment for Christian sins (or as a heralding of the end of times).⁸⁷

Nevertheless, some Christians writing in Arabic before the Crusades appear to have considered the Qur'ān among the "books of God". To what extent might the Qur'ānic claim to be God's word in 'clear Arabic' have influenced the understanding of 'scripture' of those Christians who came to write in Arabic?

Given the sometimes acrimonious words that have been exchanged, and blows that have fallen, as we humans try to grapple with the ultimate mystery that is God, we may be tempted to heed the wisdom of St. Ephraim, who wrote in Syriac two centuries before the advent of Islam, and which is echoed in the account of Theodore's debate⁸⁸ (see also the discussion of the names of Theodore's opponents, below):

In his fourth *memre* on "Faith," St. Ephraim writes,⁸⁹

"Take life from [God's] majesty, but abandon the probe into [His] majesty (*rabutho*)

Love the goodness (*taybutho*) of the father, but do not investigate his being (*itutheh*)

Adore and love the blessing (*tobeh*) of the son, but do not investigate his generation (*mawladeh*)

Adore the descent of the holy spirit, but do not come near to probing into it
Father and Son and Holy Spirit, by their names they are apprehended

⁸⁷ For a general overview, see Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It. A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam*, vol. 13 of *Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1995).

⁸⁸ Cf. Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 96-106.

⁸⁹ Ephraim, *On Faith*, ed. Edmond Beck, vol. 212, tome 88 of CSCO (Louvain: Peeters, 1961), 32-36, ll. 121-34.

Do not ponder their *qnome*, meditate on their names

If you probe into the *qnome* you will vanish, but if you believe in the names, you will live

The name of the father becomes a boundary for you, do not transgress (by) searching his nature (*kyoneh*)

The name of the son becomes a fortification for you, do not transgress (by) searching his begetting (*yaldeh*)

The name of the spirit becomes a barrier for you, do not enter into inquiring about it

Might the Qur'ān itself be echoing this sentiment when it urges the People of the Book not to exaggerate in their religion (Q 4:171)? But, when the Qur'ān goes on to warn against saying 'Three', admonishing its auditors that it is 'better' for them to refrain from such sayings – even if there were polemical intent, might it also be read as a challenge to Christians to explain or reflect on their faith more deeply? This, in fact, seems to be exactly what our authors and other Christians who came to write in Arabic were doing, using not only the language, but also Qur'ānic words and concepts (including polemics) to solidify their own – Christian – arguments.

Messianic - Trinitarian - Incarnation theology ... in – Qur'ānic - Arabic

On some issues, the diverse Christian communities were united – for example, in their polemics against Jews, pagans and early heretics. But, from at least two centuries before the appearance of Islam, they also were developing arguments against each other. For, even if the debates over the Triune God and Arianism, the topic of the Council of Nicea (325) and beautifully captured in the following anecdote from Gregory Nazianzen (d. 389):

“If you went to a shop in Constantinople wanting to buy a loaf, the baker instead of telling you the price, will argue that the Father is greater than the Son. The money-changer will talk of the Begotten and the Unbegotten instead of giving you your money, and if you want a bath the bathkeeper assures you that the Son surely proceeds from nothing.”⁹⁰

were more or less resolved by the dawn of the seventh century, those centering on the second person of the Trinity were not. Despite the efforts of the Councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451), Zeno’s “Henoticon” (published 482) or Justinian’s (r. 527-65) “Three Chapters”, Christians until the present era differ among themselves as to how to explain that Christ was fully God and fully man: Is the second person of the Trinity a single hypostasis in which two separate natures (human and divine) are united (the definition ultimately arrived at by the Council of Chalcedon, and adhered to by the Latin and Greek Christians – and, in the Islamic world, the Melkites)?

But, did this talk of ‘union’ of the hypostases run the risk of compromising the divine nature (or divinizing the human)? Was it, then, preferable to understand the second person of the Trinity to contain two separate natures, each of which was in its own hypostasis? (The position of ‘Nestorians’⁹¹: as this is the common - albeit polemical - name by which this community is known in the writings of other Christian communities or Muslims, they shall be called such throughout the present work. It should be noted at the outset, however, that the name derives from a fifth century bishop of Constantinople to whom is ascribed

⁹⁰ See the account in Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. David Womersley, vol. 2, containing *Volume the Third and Volume the Fourth* (1781, 1788; London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1994), 28 (vol. 3, ch. XXVII).

⁹¹ See Sebastian Brock, “The ‘Nestorian’ Church: A Lamentable Misnomer,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 78/3 (1996): 23-35; Raymond Le Coz, *Église d’Orient. Chrétiens d’Irak, d’Iran et de Turquie* (Paris: Cerf 1995), for a recent overview of the Church of the East.

[erroneously?] the Christological formulation that there were two separate **'persons'** in the incarnate Christ.)

On the other hand, did these assertions of a separation (either of the natures or the hypostases) have the danger of misunderstanding the ultimate act of sacrifice essential for Christian salvation: the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth – God's only-begotten Son? If the divine and human were understood to be thus separated, was there not the danger of Docetism, and the belief that Christ did not 'really' suffer – thus negating the central thesis of Christian belief: that God so loved the world that he sent his only Son to die on the Cross (Jn 3:16). If God's son did not, in fact, die (Q 4:157) – how could death be understood to have been conquered, thereby erasing the binding effect of the Original Sin? Was, therefore, the unity of the human and the divine in this second person such that one could only properly speak of the union of divine and human in this Person as the result of the unity / oneness of the natures (*phousis*) in the single hypostasis, as the "Jacobites" would claim? This name derives from a sixth century bishop of Edessa – Jacob - who did not accept the teaching of the Council of Chalcedon on the person of Christ. He consecrated priests and bishops from Egypt to the Euphrates, establishing the groundwork for this non-Chalcedonian church with its separate hierarchy. This community is polemically [and inaccurately] termed 'monophysite', on account of their emphasis on the unity of the divine and human aspects of Christ in his one person. Miaphysite – "oneness" of the *phousis*, rather than one / single ("mono"-*phousis*), therefore, would be a more accurate designation. But, then again,

would such a formulation of the oneness of the natures run the risk of an understanding that a supposedly omnipotent divine being, God, could suffer?

Some of the early Christian polemics against Islam viewed it as a Christian heresy brought about by Jews or Nestorians, for example -- often in their role as 'informants' to Muhammad⁹² [in other words, Islam was among the arsenal of accusations employed against those with whose theological positions one was not in agreement]. But, Islam set up a paradigm for Christianity separate from that posed by Christian heresies⁹³, or even by Judaism: contrary to Judaism, Islam was a subsequent development -- and therefore not essential: Christianity had never existed without Judaism; it had flourished for six centuries without Islam. And, although the Qur'ān knows 'Jews' and 'Christians' (both of whom fall within the Qur'ānic categories of 'People of the Book' and 'Children of Israel'), and accords the 'Torah' and 'Gospel' the status of revealed 'books', prior to the rise of Islam, neither Christianity nor Judaism had place for Islam or the Qur'ān.

And, after the rise of Islam, many Christians and Jews who knew of this "religion of the Arabs" refused to consider it a "true" religion. Islamic tradition notes this recalcitrance of the Jews and Christians known to Muhammad himself: although initially encouraged by the monotheistic, "biblical" nature of his

⁹² See, e.g., *EQ*, s.vv. "Informants", as well as "Pre-1800 Preoccupations of Qur'ānic Studies". The Bahīrā legend as circulated among the Christian communities (R. Gottheil, "A Christian Bahira Legend," *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 13 [1898]: 189-242; 14 [1899]: 203-68; 15 [1900]: 56-102; 17 [1903]: 125-66), as well as John of Damascus' 'De Haeresibus' (cf. Daniel Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam. The "Heresy of the Ishmaelites"* [Leiden: Brill, 1972]), both exemplify this strain of thought. See also Barbara Roggema, *The Legend of Sergius Bahira: Eastern Christian Apologetics and Apocalyptic in Response to Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

⁹³ Cf. Dante's *Inferno*, Canto 28, in which Muhammad is portrayed as a cardinal who has divided the church.

message, the Jews of Medina and the Christians of Najrān⁹⁴, for example, never saw him as a prophet sent by God. As a result, a prophetic *ḥadīth* states that there should be no more than one religion on the Arabian peninsula – that religion being understood to be Islam⁹⁵. (And today, only Muslims are allowed in the vicinity of the holy sites of Mecca and Medina.)

Finally, it should be noted that some of the ancient theological differences do fall along ethnic and linguistic lines – especially among those communities at the “borders” of the Greco-Roman “heartland” (Georgians being a notable exception): with Copts (and, further south, Ethiopians) along the Nile, Armenians in the Caucasus, some Syrians in Mesopotamia (the “Jacobites”) finding greater favor with Cyril of Alexandria’s Christological formulations than that of Chalcedon, and other Syrians in Mesopotamia (especially the Persianate areas) favoring the understanding (incorrectly?) attributed to a Patriarch of Constantinople named Nestorius. (As discussed above, the former were termed “monophysites”, the latter “Nestorian” by those with whom they were not in communion.) But, the theory that attributes the ancient disagreements over Christological definitions among the oriental Christians to deep-seated linguistic misunderstandings and cultural differences⁹⁶ is somewhat weakened by the post-Islamic history of these communities. One of the strongest anti-Christian

⁹⁴ See, for example, *EQ*, s.vv. “Najrān,” “Jews and Judaism,” “Qurayza”, “Qanuqā” and “Naḍīr”.

⁹⁵ cf. A.J. Wensinck, *Concordance et Indices de la Tradition Musulmane*, 8 vols. in 4 (Leiden: Brill, 1992), ii, 168, s.v. *d-y-n: lā yabqayanna dīnān bi-arḍi al-‘arabi*.

⁹⁶ Cf. e.g. W.H.C. Frend, “Nationalism as a Factor in Anti-Chalcedonian Feeling in Egypt,” in *Religion and National Identity*, ed. S. Mews (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982), 21-38; id., *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

polemics found in the Qurʾān is the division of Christianity into sects⁹⁷, and, as the polemics found in the later Islamic tradition attest, even when a mutual adoption of an Arabo-Islamic cultural veneer erased the linguistic divide and, arguably, the cultural one, the Christian communal divisions remained⁹⁸. But even if this common language – Arabic – did not eliminate the age-old christological disputes (or, arguably, ethnic differences), it did enable Christians to examine the Qurʾān and enter into dialogue with those who accepted Muhammad as a prophet⁹⁹. For the Arab/ Islamic conquests of the eastern Mediterranean in the 600s of the Common Era united various Christian communities – and peoples - under one, Semitic-speaking banner, without, however, providing for theological unification. For the aforementioned questions circulating in Christian circles at the rise of Islam, and of which the Qurʾān is very much aware: “sects (*aḥzāb*) among them were at variance” (Q 43:65, read in conjunction with Q 43:57-64), have continued even into the present day. And, just like the Qurʾān, early Muslims were also aware of the debates that went on in Christian circles. While such divisions among the Christian communities provided fodder for Muslim anti-Christian polemics, the style of argumentation used by various Christian communities – dialectical debates/ disputations - provided a model for later Islamic theological discussions.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Cf. e.g. Q 5:14.

⁹⁸ Cf. Reynolds, *Muslim Theologian in a Sectarian Milieu*.

⁹⁹ For an introduction to Muslim perceptions of Islam’s Abrahamic siblings, see e.g. Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds: Medieval Islam and Bible Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

¹⁰⁰ Cook, “Origins of Kalām.”

But, if the Qurʾān and Muslims knew of Christian debates, so, too, did Christians who came to speak and write in Arabic, know of qurʾānic- and Islamic-themed debates. Beginning with an overview of Christian Arabic (Chapter 2), the following will explore the use of the Qurʾān in the three aforementioned texts: qurʾānic passages that Islamic tradition has understood to contain Christian-themed allusions (Chapter 3); passages that our authors, but not normative Islamic tradition, read as referencing Christian themes (Chapter 4); passages that our authors (and normative Islamic tradition) read as containing Jewish/Judaism-themed references (Chapter 5); and, finally (Chapter 6), the use made in these texts of passages that neither our Christian authors nor normative Islamic tradition read as referencing Judeo-Christian themes. As Christians, our authors would not have been subject to the dictates of normative Islam – but, as they composed in Arabic, our authors could have read the Qurʾān (and Islamic scholarship thereon) without need of a translator; and, as these texts were originally written and circulated in Arabic, it is to be presumed that they could have been read by the politically (if not demographically) dominant Muslim community. How might their insights (taking into account a presumed Christian, if not Melkite, ‘agenda’) inform our understanding of early (Arabophone) Christian approaches to Islam and the Qurʾān, the nature of early Muslim-ruled, Arabic-speaking societies, and early trends in Muslim understandings of, and approaches to, the Qurʾān (including the form[s] in which it might have circulated early in Islamic history)?

CHAPTER TWO

Qur'ānic Studies – and Christian Arabic

If you say there is nothing like the Qur'ān in point of style and ornamentations, we reply that the style of our great poets is genuinely poetical, their rhythm is so perfect that, however difficult and subtle the thought, it is never broken at any point. Their diction is pure and chaste and from the choicest Arabic; while the most beautiful ideas are woven together in a way not only perfect in conception but equally perfect in execution. The Qur'ān on the other hand, is broken in its style; hybrid in its diction and, while high-sounding, often destitute of meaning...¹

(‘Abd al-Masīḥ al-Kindī, *Correspondence with al-Hāshimī*, Baghdad, 3rd/9th cent.)

The above quotation is found in an early Arabic Christian polemic against Islam, the correspondence between ‘Abd al-Masīḥ al-Kindī and ‘Abd Allāh al-Hāshimī, a member of the court of al-Ma’mūn (the caliph in whose discussion session, or *majlis*, Theodore, one of our authors, appears). Unlike the three texts under examination here, al-Kindī’s criticisms of the Qur’ān and Muhammad are strongly worded. In the spring of 2008, students at Georgetown’s School of Foreign Service in Doha, Qatar read this Hāshimī-Kindī correspondence in a course on “Christian responses to Islam.” Rather than offense, or even surprise, at the language contained therein, Muslim students eagerly examined possible circumstances that could have occasioned both the creation and circulation of the text: The tribe of Kinda, being of far greater literary renown than the caravaners of Mecca, would naturally have been skeptical of God’s having chosen a lowly merchant as his messenger. One of the students commented that al-Kindī was

¹ ‘Abd al-Masīḥ al-Kindī, “The Apology of al-Kindī,” in *Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, ed. Newman, 461.

writing to his friend; as such, he would have felt free to put forth his views, without moderating his tone.

This human element is often overlooked in scholarly investigations into the literary legacy that has come down to us over the centuries. Our Christian Arabic texts are better understood when we remember that they were written by professing Christians who were also conversant with the Muslim scholarship of their day. As Arabs, or Arabic-speakers, they did not have the excuse of the European Christians of whom Paul of Antioch wrote²: “Why, when you heard of this messenger, and undertook to acquaint yourselves with the book that he brought, did you not follow him? Especially because in the book it says ‘Whoever follows a religion other than Islam, it will not be accepted from him and he will be among the losers in the after life’ (Q 3:85)?” They (responded): ‘For various reasons’. I (said): ‘Such as?’ They (said): ‘For one, the book is in Arabic and not in our language, as it is said: “We sent down the Qur’ān in Arabic” (Q 12:2; 20:113; 42:7), and because we also found: “We only send a messenger who speaks the language of his people” (Q 14:4)...’

As opposed to these “non-Arab” Christians, how, then, did our authors understand themselves – as Christians, living in a Muslim-ruled, Arabic-speaking society? As the heirs of Athens or Jerusalem – or Mecca or Baghdad? Were they viewing Islam as a political entity, a religion in its own right, a Christian heresy, a legal system³? Were they understanding their own Christian

² Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, pars. 5 and 6.

³ For some recent discussions on these themes, see Noah Feldman, *The Fall and Rise of the Islamic State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Molly Greene, “Goodbye to the Despot: Feldman on Islamic Law in the Ottoman Empire,” *Law and Social Inquiry* 35/1 (Winter 2010): 219-

faith in its soteriological sense, or were they hoping for, or struggling to (re)assert, an earthly hegemony, in the face of the Arab (Islamic?) conquests? Were they resentful of their (re-)equation with “vanquished” Judaism under Arab Muslims; wary of the limitations placed upon the practice of their faith - by the conditions of the Covenant of ‘Umar and the dhimmitude resulting from Islamic rule (discussed below) - out of worldly, or other-worldly, concerns? could these two concerns be distinguished? Ultimately, was it Arab/Semitic culture (in eventual combination with Hellenic, Persian and Turkic) or the Islamic faith/religion –if, indeed, culture and religion can be so easily distinguished, particularly when the Qur’ān asserts its own clear/clarifying Arabic (Q 16:103) - that posed greater concerns to the individual Christian, and Christianity, in *dār al-Islām*?

‘Scripture’ according to the Qur’ān

As early Christian Arab use of the Qur’ān is the focus of the current discussion, a brief overview of the Islamic scripture is in order here. Unlike its biblical counterparts, the Qur’ān has an explicit and self-referential “scriptology”: the Qur’ān is the word of God in clear Arabic, confirming (Q 4:136: “O you who believe! believe in God and His Messenger and the Book which He has revealed to His Messenger and the Book which He revealed before”; cf. Q 2:285) – but also, in some ways, abrogating⁴ -- that which came

242; Patricia Crone, *God’s Rule: Government and Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

⁴ On this theme see Jane D. McAuliffe, “The Abrogation of Judaism and Christianity in Islam: A Christian Perspective,” *Concilium* (1994/3): 154-63. For a general overview of the concept

before (cf. e.g. Q 46:12: “and this is a confirming scripture in an Arabic tongue”; Q 4:47: “O [you] who were given the scripture, believe in what we have sent down [i.e. the Qur’ān], confirming that which is with you”; Q 5:15: “O People of the Scripture, our messenger has come to you making clear for you much of what you used to conceal of the Scripture...”; cf. also Q 6:92; 10:37; 12:111; 46:30). And, in response to challenges from its detractors, the Qur’ān affirms its inimitability – the impossibility of anyone creating even a verse like unto those which were being recited: Say: “If the mankind and the jinn were together to produce the like of this Qur’ān, they could not produce the like thereof, even if they helped one another.” (Qur’ān 17:88; cf. 2:23; 10:37-38; 11:13; 52:33-34). And, if Christians were among the first auditors of the Qur’ān, to what extent might they have influenced, or been influenced by, (eventual) “Islamic” understandings of “scripture”?

Qur’ān in Islamic tradition

According to normative Islam, while the Torah and the Injīl are “books of God” (Q 3:84; cf. e.g. Q 87:18-19: books of Abraham and Moses; 53:36: books of Moses; 66:12; 54:43; 35:25; 34:44; 26:196; 20:133; 16:44; 3:184), and their adherents (Jews and Christians, respectively) hold a special place as “People of the Book [Scripture]”, the books as the Jews and Christians have them are thought to be fundamentally different from the original versions, which were given to Moses

of “abrogation” as relates to the Qur’ān, see *EQ*, s.v. “Abrogation”; cf. also John Burton, *The Sources of Islamic Law: Islamic Theories of Abrogation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990).

and Jesus⁵. For the Qur'ān alludes to religious authorities (Q 9:31) and scribal traditions (Q 80:11-16; and, possibly, alterations; cf. Q 6:91; 3:78), as well as the tools with which books would be written (cf. Q 18:109; 31:27; 52:3; 6:7), and is very aware of the mediating factor of human language in the revelatory process (Q 16:103; cf. e.g. Q 75:16; 46:12; 44:58; 41:44; 26:192-201; 20:27; 19:97). In a Qur'ānic, and Islamic, view – while there is something of value in all of God's books, as the Children of Israel – Jews and Christians – corrupted the scriptures, the Qur'ān came as a corrective. Furthermore, while a distinction is made between the physical Qur'ān here on earth and the heavenly prototype that is with God, normative Islam maintains that the Qur'ān has been preserved as Muhammad received it; it is therefore the best means through which humans can approach an understanding of God's word.⁶

Muṣḥaf: Collection–codification–rasm–readings–asbāb al-nuzūl- recitation

Islamic tradition maintains that within a generation of the Prophet's death, the scribal records of his recitations were collected and, eventually, codified. (As Muhammad is considered an *ummī* prophet: illiterate? Unlettered in the languages of Jewish or Christian scripture? A gentile?⁷, Islamic tradition maintains that he received the revelations from the angel Gabriel, which he

⁵ Cf. e.g. Jane D. McAuliffe, "The Qur'ānic Context of Muslim Biblical Scholarship," in *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 7 (1996): 141-58; Ignazio Di Matteo, "Il 'Tahrīf' od alterazione della Bibbia secondo i Musulmani," *Bessarione* 26 (1926): 64-111, 223-60; Jean Marie Gaudel and Robert Caspar, "Textes de la tradition musulmane concernant le tahrīf (falsification des écritures)," *Islamochristiana* 6 (1980): 62-63.

⁶ See e.g. EQ, s.vv. "Language and Style," "Preserved Tablet," and "Heavenly Book."

⁷ Uri Rubin, *The Eye of the Beholder: The Life of Muhammad as Viewed by the Early Muslims. A Textual Analysis* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 1998), 390-91.

would later recite, and that scribes would then transcribe his recitations – on whatever material was available: palm fiber, camel bone, etc.)

As the Qurʾān is arranged – generally speaking – from longest to shortest chapter (sūra), with the first sūra – the 7-versed “opening” of the Qurʾān (Sūrat al-Fātiḥa) being a notable exception, one of the first of the Muslim ‘sciences’ of the Qurʾān is that of the study of the occasions of its revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*). While the Qurʾān is considered to contain the eternal, uncreated word of God, it is also believed to have been revealed to Muhammad over a 22-year period (from 610 CE until shortly before his death in 632 CE). As such, the verses are understood to be revealed in relation to specific events in Muhammad’s life. Muslim and western scholars of the Qurʾān divide the periods of revelation into two main categories: Meccan verses, those revealed before the emigration from Muhammad’s hometown of Mecca to Yathrib – that which would be termed the “city” (*madīna*) of the Prophet: *madīnat al-nabiyy*, eventually shortened to Medina - and Medinan verses, those revealed after the *hijra* of 622 CE, when Muhammad was in Medina. These verses are further divided into early, middle and later Meccan, and there are stylistic, as well as thematic trends that categorize each period.⁸ While the collection, codification and current presentation of the Qurʾān (in the present ordering of the 114 chapters) has classically been understood to have been finalized a generation after Muhammad’s death, Muhammad himself

⁸ For further discussion of the arrangement and division of the sūras and verses, see, e.g., EQ, s.vv. “Form and Structure of the Qurʾān,” “Sūra,” “Rhetoric of the Qurʾān,” “Verses”; Michael Sells, *Approaching the Qurʾān: The Early Revelations* (Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press, 1999); for contemporary general discussions of the Qurʾān, see, e.g., Jane Dammen McAuliffe, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Qurʾān* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai, Michael Marx, eds., *The Qurʾān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qurʾānic Milieu* (Leiden: Brill, 2009); Andrew Rippin, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to the Qurʾān* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006).

is believed to have overseen the arrangement of the Qurʾān into its present form.⁹

A generation after the Prophet's death, ʿUthmān, the third caliph ("successor" to the messenger) is credited with the codification of the text in its authoritative form – the form in which it circulates until today. The historical record also preserves the memory of his having destroyed other codices, but no record of the contents of these destroyed codices. In his collection and codification, ʿUthmān erred on the side of caution: he did not include any passage that was remembered by only one person, or passages for which there was a memory of the content, but not the exact wording (accounting, at times, for a discrepancy between qurʾānic wording – or silence - and later Islamic tradition)¹⁰.

The *muṣḥaf* (written scroll) of this codex was ordered according to the tradition in which books were arranged from longest to shortest chapters, rather than in the chronological order in which Muhammad received or recited the passages. This ordering would give later exegetes leeway in interpreting which passages were abrogated - based on the qurʾānic assertion that God "replaces" verses (cf. Q 16:101; 13:39; 2:106; 87:6-7; 17:86), without, however, specifying which verses are replaced. This interpretation would, classically, take into account the traditions concerning the "occasions of revelation" of a given verse (where was the Prophet when the verse was revealed? What were the

⁹ For further discussion of these debates, see, e.g., Burton, *Sources of Islamic Law*; Modarressi, "Early Debates"; and Angelika Neuwirth, "Structural, Literary and Linguistic Features," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qurʾān*, ed. McAuliffe, 97-114.

¹⁰ For an example dealing with adultery, see Michael Cook, *The Koran: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 140.

circumstances surrounding its revelation? Was there a particular situation the verse addressed?), as the doctrine of abrogation generally presumes a chronological order: an earlier ruling might be “replaced” by a later one that is more in accordance with a new situation. Thus, it is often later, Medinan, passages – even if they are found at the beginning of the Qur’ān – that “replace” the earlier, Meccan passages, which – due to their shorter length – are generally located towards the end of the *muṣḥaf*.¹¹ (Similarly, the qur’ānic assertion in Q 3:7 that it contains clear and ambiguous verses – again, without specifying which verses are clear or ambiguous, and the non-qur’ānic interpretive categories of verses with general vs. specific applicability, would lend themselves to the various understandings of the received text.)

As the Arabic script was originally written without vowels and diacritical marks distinguishing among certain consonants – i.e. the so-called ‘*rasm*’ – and as, from the earliest years, the Qur’ān was recited in different places according to slightly differing recitational traditions¹² (the pace and tone with which the Qur’ān is read aloud), a – limited - variety of accepted ‘readings’ of this ‘Uthmānic codex are extant. With the publication of the first widely-circulating printed Qur’ān in Cairo in the 1920s, in the “Ḥafṣ-‘an-‘Āṣim” reading, there is

¹¹ Well-known examples center around the permissibility of fermented beverages/drunkenness, and the direction of prayer (*qibla*).

¹² On the complexities of Arabic script, and qur’ānic trends towards “orality,” in conjunction with its own allusions to “scripture” (*kitāb*), see Alan Jones, “The Word Made Visible: Arabic Script and the Committing of the Qur’ān to Writing,” in *Texts, Documents and Artefacts: Islamic Studies in Honour of D.S. Richards*, ed. Chase F. Robinson (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 1-16; William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1987); Daniel A. Madigan, *The Qur’ān’s Self-Image: Writing and Authority in Islam’s Scripture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

decreasingly active preservation of others of these accepted readings.¹³ (In the early centuries, respect was accorded to those who had memorized the Qur'ān – sing. *ḥāfiẓ*, and who could recite it; until today, it is recommended that one recite a *juz'* (section: 1/30th) of the Qur'ān each day during Ramadan and, particularly during that month, “Qur'ān recitation contests” are held throughout the ‘Islamic’ world.)

Religious – and qur'ānic - sciences

A contemporary Muslim understanding of the Qur'ān is that the Arabic text of today is what Muḥammad received from the angel Gabriel. In this view, the collection and codification of the text – from the records of Muḥammad's scribes – did not take place until a generation after Muḥammad's death. Nevertheless, despite this admitted ‘human’ element, the doctrine of the Qur'ān's inimitability, solidified in the third/ninth century, and admitted as the predominant view in the fourth/tenth, dominates later discussions of normative Islam concerning the sacred text. Not its collection or codification, but rather its language and style, become the focus of theological discussions. Remnants of the intra-Muslim discussions about the details of the collection and codification of the Qur'ān are evident in Shī'ite claims that certain portions of the text were eliminated – and that some passages should be read and understood as alluding specifically to ‘Alī and his family, rather than to the community of believers at

¹³ See *EQ*, s.v. “Printing of the Qur'ān”, and Gabriel Said Reynolds, “Qur'ānic Studies and its Controversies,” in *The Qur'ān in its Historical Context*, ed. Gabriel Said Reynolds, *Routledge Studies in the Qur'ān*, ed. Andrew Rippin (London: Routledge, 2008), 1-26.

large. But, today, there is no passage of the codified, Arabic text whose authenticity – as having actually been revealed to Muḥammad, and accurately transmitted - is disputed by any party within Islamic orthodoxy - Sunnī or Shīʿī.

Kalām – ḥadīth – fiqh – tafsīr – grammar – ḥāfiẓ

Our authors were writing as Muslims were debating the merits of *kalām*, *ḥadīth* and *fiqh*. The basis, however, for these subsidiary disciplines of qurʾānic study is the very exegesis of the Qurʾān itself. The *mufasssīrūn*, therefore, provide an entrée for an understanding of the how the Qurʾān has been read throughout the ages.

The sciences of the Qurʾān were not limited to *tafsīr* and its (generally) verse-by-verse exegesis. Indeed, the ‘*ulamāʾ*’ employed a wide range of arts - e.g. jurisprudence, *ḥadīth*, recitation, memorization, grammar, readings of the Qurʾān, occasions of revelation, theology - in their interpretation of the Qurʾān – and application to the daily lives of Muslims. But, an overview of the traditional Muslim approach to the interpretation of qurʾānic verses will provide a necessary background against which to view the methods employed by our Christian theologians in their utilization of qurʾānic passages. As concerns of a theological nature (and applied jurisprudence) were closely tied to the text itself (supporting, and supported by, particular grammatical considerations), the exegetes set themselves the task of explaining each verse, and, often, each word, of the Qurʾān. The classical works of exegesis often run to more than 30 volumes of hundreds of pages of fine Arabic script – some sūras needing a few volumes,

others only a few lines. While the emphases vary, they frequently are a composite of traditions from earlier authorities, with the chain of transmission often going back to a close Companion to Muhammad. Exegetes from the second or third Islamic centuries onward, like the compilers of *ḥadīth* (the reports of what Muhammad said or how he conducted himself in daily life), would travel far and wide in search of reports and interpretive traditions. In this way, some of the classical works read more like a summary of the state of the discipline than an assertion of the definitive interpretation of the meaning of the Qurʾān. Earlier exegetes, like Muqātil (d. early 3rd/10th cent.), tended to give simple glosses of terms or passages, without reference to his authorities. Later exegetes, however, like al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) and al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210), would list the authorities from whom a given tradition derived. Often – although not always – they would also give assessments of the strength of a tradition¹⁴. Although viewpoints with which a given exegete differed were often reported, the full circumstances that gave rise to a minority or divergent opinion is often lost. As will be seen below, however, the works of Christians who wrote in Arabic and engaged the Qurʾān and Muslim theologians and exegetes, may shed light on some of these lacunae.

In addition to the authoritative interpretations (note the plural) of a given verse, the exegetes – particularly from the third/ninth century on, when Arabic grammars were beginning to be formulated – engaged in intensive grammatical explanations of individual words and phrases. The grammatical discussions

¹⁴ For an excellent overview of classical *tafsīr*, see Walid Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition: The Qurʾān Commentary of al-Thaʿlabī* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

extended to the possibility of foreign derivations of terms, as well as the exceptions to the rules of Arabic grammar that the Persian grammarians were in the process of systematizing.¹⁵ The exegetes commented on the influence of the dialect of the Quraysh (Muhammad's tribe) on certain qur'ānic terms, the various acceptable readings of a given passage,¹⁶ and the recitational guidelines that should be followed (where a pause was permitted, recommended, forbidden, etc.). And, not surprisingly, their own theological views, as well as the overall theological, social, political climate in which they wrote, were evidenced in their commentaries. For example, the early exegete Muqātil evidences a strong familiarity with the so-called 'Isrā'īliyyāt' – the tales of Christians and Jews about biblical figures, as well as numerous narratives concerning the larger history of ancient Israel. In recent times, his exegesis has been banned – or edited – in some 'Muslim' countries due to its incorporation of material that some trends in later Islamic tradition deemed un-Islamic and therefore extraneous to any 'proper' understanding of the Qur'ān.

Uncreated and inimitable

If, then, the divine element in this all-too-human process of collecting and codifying the physical evidences of the original revelation - which could so easily be subjected to the ravages of time, and to human fallacies – was recognized by the earliest Muslim community, how could the divine element still be upheld? The 'occasions of revelation' paralleled the discussions of the revealed, Creative

¹⁵ On the role of Persian grammarians in the formation of Arabic grammar, particularly in the early 'Abbāsid period, see Versteegh, *Arabic Language*.

¹⁶ Cf. e.g. *EQ*, s.vv. "Readings of the Qur'ān" and "Recitation of the Qur'ān."

(?) Word's eternity. And, its inimitability countered charges of linguistic imperfections.

For, especially in a majority Christian milieu, Muhammad's lack of an evident miracle had to be explained in the face of the Qur'ān's own testimony to Jesus' many miracles (as well as those of Moses and other prophets familiar from the biblical traditions). Furthermore, the relationship of the Qur'ān to the books of the Jews and the Christians had to be clarified. Did it abrogate them? If Christians and Jews really had corrupted their own scriptures, and if they were not to be taken as friends, how should the Qur'ānic exhortation (Q 10:94) to ask "those who read the book before you" for clarification when you (presumably those who heard – and heeded – the Qur'ān) are "in doubt"? Furthermore, in the light of a seeming Qur'ānic distinction between *islām* and *īmān*, and the mixed Qur'ānic evaluation of Jews and Christians (and their books), could or should they be viewed as "believers"? These were among the questions the early Muslim community addressed in Damascus and Baghdad, Kūfa and Basra, Fuṣṭāt/Cairo, Mecca and Medina. And, in so doing, they found a balance between human reason and revelation, the words of God and the actions of man - in history - in the conveyance and preservation of those words. And, as Christians also came to write in Arabic, they, too, came to grapple with these very same questions.

In historical retrospect, these discussions may be said to have come to a head during al-Ma'mūn's time, when Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal was imprisoned for his defiance of the caliphal order to profess the 'createdness' of the Qur'ān - a

theological debate concerning the relationship of God to God's word, akin, in Christian circles, to the 'Arian' discussions on the relationship of God the father to God the son, addressed – and dismissed – at Nicea. Like its Christian analogue, normative Islam eventually pronounced that, like God himself, God's word, too, was eternal and uncreated – in other words, that God's word, as an eternal attribute of the eternal being, did not have a 'beginning in time'. If one were to put the Islamic debates during al-Ma'mūn's time into 'Christian' terms, the caliphal position, to which he demanded all public officials adhere, was the 'Arian-esque' understanding of the Word of God as 'created in time' – in order to preserve the unique eternity of God.

Drawing upon the wording of Q 43:3 ("we made / placed it an Arabic Qur'ān so that you might be able to understand"), proponents of the "createdness" of the Qur'ān argued that the Qur'ān itself testifies to there being a distinction between God and his speech, and to there having been a time when the Qur'ān was not. Akin to Arius' attempted defense of the unique eternity and unicity of God the Father, those who would come to be termed Mu'tazila (as they had "withdrawn," from the Arabic root *ʿ-z-l*, from debates over the fate of a Muslim who was a grave sinner) also came to be proponents of God's 'unity and justice'. As such, they maintained that, in order to preserve an understanding of God's unicity, God's attributes were part of his (all-merciful, all-powerful) essence. Thus, while God was eternally a 'speaking' God, the product of this speaking, his speech (the Qur'ān), could not also be deemed 'eternal'. The logical progression of this argument, that of the 'contingency' of the (created)

Qurʾān, is the fluidity of its interpretation – with the possibility of eventual serious questioning of the substance and message of the transmitted text. In addition to these theological concerns, the insistence on the contingency of the Qurʾān could also relate to known debates over the transmission history of the Qurʾān (as well as politics: to what extent did the caliph wish to assert – enforce? – his authority over public officials, such as judges? Or to exert his prerogative as “leader” – of prayer / the community (*imām*), “Successor to the Messenger of God” (*khalīfat rasūl Allāh*) – and “commander of the faithful” (*amīr al-muʾminīn*) – in the interpretation of matters theological?).

Their opponents – who would come to be the voice of ‘normative’ Islamic thought - would maintain that God’s essence was distinct from the eternal attributes – such as his speech - associated with it. And, as the Church Fathers at the Council of Nicea had been wary of attempts to subordinate the second person of the Trinity to the first, ‘normative’ Islam cautioned against potentially irreverent understandings of the nature of the Qurʾān. Thus, the normative position on the Qurʾān came to be its eternality / uncreatedness (*qadīm al-Qurʾān*), as well as its inimitability (*iʿjāz al-Qurʾān*), with the concomitant understanding that the ʿUthmānic codex (the form in which the revelations to Muhammad have been preserved) was an accurate record of what had been revealed to Muhammad (with varying understandings about whether or not it contained everything that Muhammad had received).

But, before the voice of their opponents would become normative, there was first to be an attempted state-imposition of the Muʿtazila position on those

in the public service of the caliphate. The caliph who would attempt to enforce the profession of belief in the “createdness” of the Qur’ān through a “*miḥna*” (Inquisition, in which those who refused to profess the official position were stripped of their offices or jailed) was al-Ma’ mūn, at whose *majlis* our Theodore is debating. And, not surprisingly, out of the three texts under examination here, it is Theodore’s that makes most frequent use of Islamic discussions of the Qur’ān as ‘Word of God’ in his defense of Christianity.

In the end, normative Islamic belief came to be that of those who had been persecuted by those caliphs who had, for 15 years, instituted the *miḥna* trying to force public officials to uphold the createdness of the Qur’ān. The doctrine of the uncreated – and also inimitable – nature of the Qur’ān prevailed; as with Arianism in Christianity, an assertion of the createdness of the Qur’ān eventually faded into the background of theological discussions.

As the eventual termination, suppression – and reversal – of the *miḥna* would indicate, popular opinion as to the proper approach to the Qur’ān did not fall on the side of the “rational debaters”. Rather, the letter of the Qur’ān itself, and the traditions of Muhammad, came to hold pride of place in the discernment of “Islamically appropriate” behavior. But, as the words of the text (rather than its “spirit”) came to be closely scrutinized, variations therein had to be accounted for: the alternative “readings” to a single *rasm*. How, then were discrepancies in this very *rasm* accounted for?: its collection – and ‘codification’, under ‘Uthmān.

While bearing in mind their own (Christian) polemical/ apologetic (or political?) agendas, due to their presumed distance from a given ‘Islamic’

theological agenda, Christian Arabic texts that employ the Qur'ān may provide a heretofore under-explored entrée to a deeper understanding of the early debates over the form (style and structure) and nature of the clear/clarifying Arabic recitation (*qur'ān*) that normative Islamic tradition would eventually deem inimitable and uncreated. For, as the Islamic state was structured in accordance with sectarian divisions, Christians (unless they violated the laws of larger society) were largely left to their own – Christian – jurisdiction. It is this fact that makes the use of the Qur'ān in these Christian Arabic texts most notable. For, on the one hand, the Christian authorship may have exempted them from official – Muslim – scrutiny (as, for example, that of the *mihna*: the Christian religious authorities who authored them would likely not have been public officials in the employ of the Islamic state); but, that these texts were written in Arabic, had they come into the hands of Muslim officials, they could have been read and understood. What, then, are we to make of seemingly non-“politically correct” discussions of the Qur'ān (and larger Islamic tradition) in the texts at hand? What are we to make of the seeming deviations from the accepted 'Uthmānic codex in some of the qur'ānic citations found in these early Christian Arabic texts? To what extent might Arabophone Christians who lived in the early Islamic centuries help shed light, not only on the various trajectories of Christian theological discourse, but also on early trends in Islamic theological discourse?

***Imān* and language: Islam as the new ‘*aṣabiyya* in Arabia (and beyond)?**

From at least the 500s of the Common Era, there were movements afoot to ‘unite’ the various peoples of the Arabian peninsula – peoples of different tribes and places (cf. Q 49:13), wandering Arabs and town-dwellers¹⁷. The Qur’ān’s own linguistic allusions –e.g. “We know that they say ‘A man teaches him’ – the tongue of the one to whom they allude is ‘*ajamī*, and this is a clear/clarifying Arabic tongue” (Q 16:103) – and its criticism of the “hypocrites” among both the Bedouin and city-dwellers (Q 9:101), those who pray in order to be seen by men, but who remember God but little (Q 4:142), those who refused to fight (Q 3:167-168), as well as in its distinction between “submission” (*islām*) and “faith” (*īmān*) – with a seeming requisite obedience to God and his messenger for the latter - in its admonition to the Bedouin (Q 49:14: “The Bedouin say ‘We believe’; say ‘You do not believe. Say[instead] “We surrender”’, for faith has not entered your hearts. But if you obey God and his messenger, He will not reduce anything for your deeds. Indeed God is forgiving, merciful”), may indeed reflect larger socio-political realities known to its first auditors. The close, yet complicated, connection between “Arabness” and “Islam” (rather than faith, *īmān*) are reflected in the initial understandings of the early community of believers, the *umma*, as found in the Constitution of Medina (in which – Arab? - Jewish tribes appear to be included in the “community”) or the so-called “wars of apostasy” at

¹⁷ Cf. Robert G. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs: From the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam* (London: Routledge, 2001) for a comprehensive and accessible overview of the pre-Islamic Arabian peninsula.

the Prophet's death, and the prophetic tradition that no "two religions" would be "established" on the "Arabian peninsula."¹⁸

But, as these Arabs – and the Qur'ān, and Islam – spread beyond the confines of the peninsula, and into Persianate and Roman lands, the paradigm shifted: non-Arabs came to speak Arabic and, eventually, to become "Muslim". Need one be 'Muslim' to be truly 'Arab' (witness the difficulties of Christian Arab tribes in Umayyad times, a Damascus-based dynasty that favored 'Arabs', particularly those from the peninsula, and in which, despite Qur'ānic commendation of Christians and inclusion of them as 'Peoples of the Book', Arab Christians were treated not as protected/respected People of the Book, but as 'polytheists')? Could one be 'Muslim' without being 'Arab' (witness the *shu'ubiyya* – "people's" - movement, and the preponderance of *ḥadīth* collection under the Abbasids, as the center of governance shifted to Baghdad and the administration became increasingly Persianate, with the eventual determination that the Arabic Qur'ān and model lifestyle - *sunna* - of the Arabian prophet were the best guides for a good 'Muslim' life, although the extent to which prophetic *ḥadīth* reflect the norms of 1st/7th century Medina or Mecca, or those of the 2nd/8th or 3rd/9th century Baghdad of the *ḥadīth* compilers is the subject of debate¹⁹)? What of Arabs who were Christian (e.g. the Banu Taghlib in Umayyad times)?

¹⁸ For various perspectives on the conjunction of 'Islamic' "religious" injunctions with Arab and/or other traditions, see Graham E. Fuller, *A World Without Islam* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2010); Donner, *Early Islamic Conquests*; Reuven Firestone, *Who are the Real Chosen People? The Meaning of Chosenness in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths, 2008); Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs*; Michael Cook, *Forbidding Wrong in Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

¹⁹ See Juynboll and Goldziher on the compilation of *ḥadīth*.

As non-Arabs, both Muslim and non-, came to speak the language in which the Qur'ān itself had been revealed, and as the first (Persian) grammarians of the Arabic language looked to the Qur'ān as the standard for the language, at times, the distinction between "Islamic" (or "qur'ānic") and "Arabic" blurred.

Christian Arabic texts, therefore, are of particular interest for the student of Islamic or ecclesiastical history. In Western academic scholarship, Arabic is traditionally understood as a key language for Islamic studies, and not ecclesiastical history. But, as discussed above, for much of the early centuries of 'Islamic' history, Christians were a significant, if not dominant, demographic presence in Arabophone, Muslim-ruled 'Islamicate' lands. Thus, the exclusion of Arabophone Christians from ecclesiastical history, and the assumption that "Arabic" is identical with "Islam", does an injustice to the richness and variety of the Christian and Arabic tradition. (Additionally, while Arabs and Arabic were most certainly essential to the formation of 'Islam', any limiting of Islam to Arabic overlooks the rich variety of the larger 'Islamic' world.)

The writings of Arabophone Christians indicate a familiarity with 'Islam' remarkably deeper than that of their Latin or Greek (or other) coreligionists. And, while a 'Christian' polemic or apologetic agenda is certainly present, Christian Arabic texts may well be mined for (unintended?) light they might shed on the larger Islamic society out of which they emerged. In particular, when Christian Arabic texts are mined for their use of the Qur'ān, heretofore under-explored early approaches to the sacred text of Islam may indeed be revealed. Christian Arabic uses of the Qur'ān may be divided into the following

categories: 1) Qur'ānic passages that Islamic tradition understands as directly referencing Christians/Christianity; 2) re-reading of qur'ānic passages for allusions to Christian themes; 3) qur'ānic passages that have been understood to reference Jews/Judaism; 4) qur'ānic passages that neither Islamic tradition nor Christian Arab authors read as referencing Judeo-Christian themes.

Even the casual reader of Christian Arabic texts is likely to note the appearance of terms that often have a particularly 'Islamic' connotation, but which appear to have been used by Christian authors in a 'Christian' context: *tafsīr* (often translated as 'exegesis', it is generally the term for encyclopedic, verse-by-verse commentaries on the Qur'ān; the anonymous monks speaks of the '*tafsīr*' of "Emmanuel"²⁰ and "Israel"²¹ and "Sabaoth"²² in the Bible), *ḥāfiẓ* (generally a technical term designating one who has memorized the Qur'ān²³; Theodore uses it as such²⁴, but the anonymous monk of Jerusalem uses it as a generic term for one well-versed in the "books of God"²⁵), *ḥawariyūn/ansār Allāh* (the qur'ānic designation of Jesus' disciples, the apostles, as God's helpers, used numerous times by Christian Arab authors²⁶, perhaps also reflective of an Ethiopic forelogger²⁷), *minbar* (term for the "pulpit" from which the *khaṭīb* traditionally would deliver the Friday sermon, or *khuṭba*; Theodore speaks of Iblis' *minbar*²⁸)

²⁰ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 176v.

²¹ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 180r.

²² Sinai Ar. 434, f. 173r.

²³ Cf. e.g. Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 96.

²⁴ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 96.

²⁵ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 175r.

²⁶ e.g. Sinai Ar. 434, ff. 178v, 181v.

²⁷ cf. Alphonse Mingana, "Syriac Influence on the Style of the Kur'an," *John Rylands Library Bulletin* 11 (Manchester, 1927): 77-98, p. 87, available on <http://www.answering-islam.org/Books/Mingana/Influence/index.htm> (accessed February 7, 2011).

madhhab (generally the term for a particular ‘school’ of Islamic jurisprudence – *fiqh*; the anonymous monk speaks of the “difficult *madhhab*” – Christianity – which managed to attract followers without the coercive power of the state²⁹), *dunya/ākhirā* (Qur’ānic designations for, respectively, this world and the next; the anonymous monk of Jerusalem speaks of the apostles, God’s helpers, bringing the Christian *madhhab* to take its adherents from the *dunya* to the *ākhirā*³⁰), *yawm al-dīn* (“day of judgment”, frequently referenced in the Qur’ān; the Jerusalem monk uses it as such³¹), *jāhiliyya* (the term for the “ignorance / rashness” of the Arabian peninsula, prior to the revelation of the Qur’ān; the anonymous monk speaks of the Jews as existing in such a state³²), *umma* (generally used for the community of Muslims, although the early Constitution of Medina seems to include non-Muslim monotheists as a part of the Muslim *umma*; Theodore speaks of the Banī Isrā’īl as ‘*ummat Allāh*’³³; the anonymous monk from Jerusalem speaks of the Christians³⁴ – and Jews³⁵ – as the ‘*umma*’ of Jesus b. Maryam: the latter as that from which he came; the former as those who followed him), *sunna* (literally, “way” or “path”, it is often used for the practices of Muhammad; Theodore uses it to designate the practices of the Messiah, Jesus³⁶),

²⁸ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 113.

²⁹ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 178r.

³⁰ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 178r; cf. f. 176r.

³¹ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 181r.

³² Sinai Ar. 434, f. 181r.

³³ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 123.

³⁴ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 181v.

³⁵ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 179r.

³⁶ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 95.

kalām (literally ‘speech’, it came to designate ‘dialectical theological discourse’; *‘ilm al-kalām*, “science/knowledge of the word/speech” - often translated as ‘Theology’ – was labeled the ‘greater jurisprudence’, and is one of the classical disciplines of the “Religious Sciences” in traditional curricula in the Islamic world; Theodore Abū Qurra is praised by al-Ma’mūn for being versed in *‘kalām*³⁷), *al-asmā’ al-ḥusna* (the “beautiful names” of God, mentioned in Q 59:22; cf. 20:8; 17:110; 7:180; Paul of Antioch explicitly compares the plurality of Christian Trinitarian designations of God to the various ‘names’ of God in the Qur’ān and Islamic tradition³⁸).

Similarly, the nomenclature found in our three texts: In the Qur’ān, Jesus is consistently termed ‘al Masīḥ ‘Isā b. Maryam’: “The Messiah, Jesus, Son of Mary” (the Arabic form of Jesus’ name being the subject of dispute in both classical works of qur’ānic commentary penned by Muslims, as well as in non-Muslim qur’ānic scholarship³⁹). The anonymous author of Sinai Ar. 434 notes the qur’ānic designation⁴⁰, but speaks primarily of ‘al-Masīḥ’ (as does Theodore), alluding to him as ‘Emmanuel’⁴¹, ‘the crucified’⁴² and ‘Yasū‘ al-Masīḥ’⁴³ (termed thus by the disciples), ‘Yasū‘ b. Allāh’⁴⁴ (addressed as such by the demons whom

³⁷ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 80.

³⁸ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, par. 32.

³⁹ Cf. Mingana, “Syriac Influence,” and Andrew Rippin, “The designation of ‘foreign’ languages in the exegesis of the Qur’ān,” in *With reverence for the word*, ed. Jane McAuliffe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 437- 44.

⁴⁰ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 174v.

⁴¹ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 176v.

⁴² Sinai Ar. 434, f. 178r.

⁴³ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 174 v.

⁴⁴ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 178v.

he put into the swine at Tiberias), *'kalimat Allāh'* ("word of God")⁴⁵, as well as 'our Lord' (*sayyidunā*)⁴⁶, 'our God' (*ilāhunā*)⁴⁷ and 'our Savior' (*mukhlašunā*)⁴⁸. The anonymous monk also speaks of King Solomon and John the Baptist as, respectively, "Sulaymān b. Da'ūd"⁴⁹ (also found in Theodore's text⁵⁰) and "Yuḥannā b. Zakariyya"⁵¹ – Arabized forms denoting kinship relations using the Arabic "*ibn*" (instead of a Syriac/Aramaic "*bar*") for "son" (cf. the qur'ānic 'Īsā b. Maryam') – but, in the case of John, the Hellenized/Aramaic form "Yuḥannā," rather than the qur'ānic Arabic "Yaḥyā" (cf. e.g. Q 19:7, 12; 21: 90; 6:85; 3:39) is used (additionally, while the Qur'ān knows of both John's and Solomon's kinship relations {see the aforementioned qur'ānic allusions to Yaḥyā; cf. for Solomon Q 27:16; 38:30}, when they are mentioned, it always names them solely by their given names, never by their *nasab* – i.e. "son of *fulān*"). Paul's edited text also speaks frequently of 'the Messiah' as the 'Son of God' (*ibn Allāh*)⁵², but also of 'the Lord Messiah' (*al-sayyid al-masīḥ*)⁵³ and the 'Word of God' (*kalimat Allāh*)⁵⁴, the 'Son' (*ibn*) as the 'spoken Word' (*nutq*)⁵⁵, but only the qur'ānic Arabic form of "Jesus" appears ('Īsā, rather than *Yasū*'), and in the qur'ānic nomenclature: 'Īsā b. Maryam'⁵⁶. And, in addition to discussions of the 'word of God' (discussed

⁴⁵ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 179r.

⁴⁶ Sinai Ar. 434, ff. 181r, 181v.

⁴⁷ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 181r.

⁴⁸ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 181r.

⁴⁹ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 177r.

⁵⁰ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 123.

⁵¹ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 178v.

⁵² Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, pars. 33, 35.

⁵³ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, pars. 8, 12, 30, 37, 47.

⁵⁴ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, pars. 12, 36.

⁵⁵ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, pars. 29, 33, 61.

⁵⁶ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, pars. 10, 23, 31, 40.

below) and the qur'ānic 'Īsā / 'Īsā b. Maryam⁵⁷ – or 'Īsā al-Masīḥ⁵⁸, Theodore's text also terms Jesus "Yasū' al-Masīḥ, Our Lord" (*rabbunā'*)⁵⁹ or "Our Master (*sayyidunā*), Yasū' al-Masīḥ"⁶⁰ or, finally, "my Master, Yasū' al-Masīḥ, my lord and my God, Creating Word of God" (*sayyidī yasū' al-masīḥ wa-rabbī wa-ilāhī kalimat Allāh al-khāliqa*)⁶¹.

Book(s) – prophet(s) of God?

God, mighty and exalted be He, blessed be His holy name, and esteemed be the recollection of Him, was not pleased to leave mankind in the servitude of the satans. So He dispatched prophets to them to summon them to him and to His worshipful service. But they did not obey them, and Iblis held their hearts back from responding. So God, in the magnitude of His compassion and pity, and in the nobility of His nature, thought it good for His splendor to appear and to save the work of His holy hands from the deviant enemy. He came down from the height of His glorification into the virgin Mary and by means of the Holy Spirit He became incarnate from her, in a body like to her form, in order to acquaint us with the weakness of our enemy, since the likeness of a man had confronted him. And just as a bad slave, when he runs away from his master, does not take his stand in a place to which his master comes, so the Word of God and His Spirit became incarnate in order to put our enemy Satan to shame in our behalf. When he saw the two of them he would flee, and his authority would vanish. Whoever resists the Word of God and His Spirit becomes their manifest enemy. Your own scripture testifies that the Messiah made likenesses of sparrows from clay, breathed of his spirit into them, bade them to fly and they flew away. Anyone who makes a division between God, his spirit and his word, has perished in this world and in the hereafter. You are passing judgment against God when you say that the Messiah raised the dead at the bidding of God, whereas your scripture says that the Messiah is the Spirit of God and his word⁶².

In the above quotation, Theodore deftly weaves together elements of Christian and Islamic theology: rather than the Qur'ān, the *Incarnation* is God's ultimate

⁵⁷ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 84, 88, 89, 121.

⁵⁸ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 110.

⁵⁹ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 83, 93.

⁶⁰ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 93.

⁶¹ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 124.

⁶² Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 114-15.

mercy to mankind. While the anonymous monk of Jerusalem may have been intent on affirming Christian messianism, and Paul, the supremacy of the law of Christianity, and Theodore, the fallacies of the political power of his day, each used – to varying degrees, and in various ways – God’s revealed scriptures in support of his point. What now interests us, therefore, is the relationship between God – prophets/messengers – books in the writings of our three authors. In particular, how might *Christian Arab* authors have understood *tanzīl* (the “descent” of scripture) and *wahy* (“revelation” / “inspiration”)? Would they have accepted the Qur’ānic categories or definitions? Would their – Christian – interpretations have engaged (even impacted) Muslim understandings of such?

A classic Christian understanding of the value of the Jews and their scripture(s?) is the testimony they provide to the veracity of Jesus as the promised Messiah, as well as to the Triune nature of the One God.⁶³ The Qur’ān speaks of belief in the “books” of God as among the requisites for “faith” (cf. e.g. Q 4:136; 3:84); it also knows of Jewish and Christian scriptures (e.g. Q 5:43-48), as well as Jewish and Christians arguments over the identity of the true “son of God” (‘Isā? ‘Uzayr?: Q 9:30) and their competing confessional claims to Abraham (Q 3:67), as well as their exclusive, and competing, claims about entry to paradise (Q 2:111) .

In addition to the Torah, our Arabophone Christian authors appear to reference the “Prophets”⁶⁴ and the “Psalms” as earlier (divine) “books” that attest to the veracity of Christian claims about the nature of God and Jesus as the

⁶³ Cf. e.g. Sinai Ar. 434, f. 172 v (Torah attests to the oneness of God); 173r (Torah and Prophets attest to the Triune nature of God).

⁶⁴ e.g. Sinai Ar. 4343, ff. 173r, 179r.

Messiah. But, as seen from the above quote from Theodore's text, they also employ the Qur'ān as a "book" - of God (?) - that attests to Christian understandings of Jesus as the Messiah – seemingly against Jewish and Muslim claims to the contrary. While the monk from Jerusalem mentions the books of God (*kutub Allāh*)⁶⁵ more than once, and Theodore only once references the "books of God" – but seems to include only the Gospels therein⁶⁶, and once heavenly books⁶⁷ ("the Torah, Injil and other heavenly books", *al-kutub al-samāwiyya*).

The later Paul, however, does not speak of the "books" of God in the plural, but does make numerous mention of "scripture" or "the book" or "this book"⁶⁸ – including the Qur'ān therein. And, while our authors do speak of the "books of God" or the "heavenly – revealed – books", what are the nuances of these glosses? Although the most frequently attested in Paul's own text as a designation for the Qur'ān, "the book" is not to be confused with "The Book" – that is, "the Gospel" (although it should be noted that Arabic, unlike English, does not have capital and lower-case letters with which to make this distinction). For, when Q 57:25 says that "We sent our *rusul* with *bayyināt* with the book", it intends Christ's apostles (his *rusul* - the *ḥawāriyyūn*): had it intended "Abraham, David, Moses and Muhammad", it would have said "the books", rather than "the book" – which is the Gospel; similarly, Q 36:20-21 {"follow the *mursalīn*, follow those who do not ask of you a wage; they are the rightly guided"} is also

⁶⁵ Sinai Ar. 434, ff. 171r; 181v; 174r: *kutub allāh ta'āla*; 175r: *kutub allāh al-munazzala, kutub allāh rabbī*.

⁶⁶ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 98.

⁶⁷ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 102.

⁶⁸ Khoury, ed. and trans., *Paul of Antioch, Risāla*, pars. 13-20, 24, 31, 32, 36, 45-48.

understood to refer to Christ's apostles (*ḥawariyyūn*), for it did not say "*al-rasūl*" – the designation for Muhammad.⁶⁹

Our Christian authors' references to "scripture(s)" are more clearly understood when read in context, both with regards discussions of "religions" (or "laws") and various lexemes – especially when the distinction between (the) "book" or "books" or "your book/your prophet" are explored. Are their seeming inclusions of the Qur'ān in the "books of God" an example of disingenuous rhetoric or prooftexting⁷⁰? or their immersion in *Islamic* and/or *Arabic* culture? Can or should "Islam" and "Arabic" be thus distinguished?

Perhaps a lexical observation might help refine this last point. While the Arabic "prophet" (*nabiyy*) has two different plural forms in the Qur'ān – *nabiyyūn* and *anbiyā'* – the latter, the "broken plural", accounts for 4 of the 24 qur'ānic occurrences of "prophet" in its plural form. If a linguistic speculation may be permitted: as the former form (*nabiyyūn*) is more closely related to Semitic cognates than the "broken plural" (a form peculiar to Arabic, or South Semitic language⁷¹), might the Qur'ān attest to a fairly recent "Arabization" of *nabiyy*? For, the two plurals seem to be used interchangeably in the Qur'ān (three of the five qur'ānic passages mentioning the "slaying of the prophets" use the broken plural: Q 2:91; 3:112; 4:155; cf. 2:61; 3:21; the other use of the broken plural - Q 5:20 - is in the context of God's appointing "kings" and "prophets"). But,

⁶⁹ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, par. 13.

⁷⁰ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, par. 45; Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 78.

⁷¹ cf. M.M. Bravmann, *Studies in Semitic Philology*, vol. 6, *Studies in Semitic Languages and Linguistics* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1977), 137; cf. Robert R. Ratcliffe, *The "Broken" Plural Problem in Arabic and comparative Semitic: Allomorphy and Analogy in Non-Concatenative Morphology* (Amsterdam: J. Benjamins, 1998).

while in the Qurʾān, there is a great preponderance of the plural that is close to the form of other Semitic languages, the texts of our later, Christian, authors appear to use only the Arabic broken plural.⁷² Like Theodore, the Jerusalem monk who authored Sinai Ar. 434 mentions “prophets” as foretelling the Messiah, even specifying their number as “24”⁷³, evoking the twenty-four⁷⁴ prophets named in the Qurʾān, in addition to Muhammad, cf. Q 4:163-5 (Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Jesus, Job, Jonah, Aaron, Solomon, David, Moses); 6:84-86 (Isaac, Jacob, Noah, David, Solomon, Job, Joseph, Moses, Zechariah, John, Jesus, Elias, Ishmael, Elisha, Jonah, Lot); 21:85-88 (Ishmael, Idrīs, Dhū l-Kifl, Dhū l-Nūn); 7:73 (Ṣāliḥ); 26: 123-125 (Hūd); 7:85 (Shuʿayb).

This allusion to qurʾānic prophetology, and the dual understanding of “prophets” as a category of people, as well as of scripture, evokes the qurʾānic distinction between “messenger” (*rasūl*) and “prophet” (*nabiyy*), a distinction elaborated upon in later Islamic tradition⁷⁵. But, might qurʾānic terminology also indicate a larger Late Antique familiarity with scriptural categories known also to our Jerusalem monk? For, while the Qurʾān exhorts belief in God, his books, angels, “messengers” and the Last Day (Q 4:135), it also mentions the “Prophets” in conjunction with a “book”, and as individuals who should be heeded (e.g. Q

⁷² Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, par. 19; Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 75, 95, 110, 112, 114, 118, 123; Sinai Ar. 434, ff. 173r, 175v, 179r-v.

⁷³ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 175v.

⁷⁴ Might this number have any relation to the – twenty-four – books of the Jewish canon, first attested in the first half of the second century in 2 Esdras 14:45-46? If, however, Adam, is considered a prophet (*nabiyy Allāh*, according to Ibn Kathīr, for example, in his *Kitāb al-Anbiyāʾ*), the number is twenty-five.

⁷⁵ For an overview of these categories, see the *EQ* articles, s.vv.

2:213, 177). The Jewish “canon” was not fixed until the second century of the Common Era, up until which time, the Torah and Prophets (rather than the Tanakh – Torah, Prophets and Writings – familiar to us today) would have been the accepted scriptural “divisions” (with, intriguingly, 24 books), familiar to the early Christians and, as our author of Sinai Ar. 434 attests, also to later Christians who would write in Arabic. Might the Qur’ān, also, have known of the “Prophets” as a scriptural category separate from the “Torah” or the “Psalms” or “Gospel”? Q 4:163-164 mentions that God “inspired” (*waḥy*: *awḥaynā*) Noah and the “prophets” (*nabiyyīn*) after him, as well as “Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the Tribes and Jesus and Job and Jonah and Aaron and Solomon” and “gave David the Psalms.” This litany of those whom God inspired is followed, in the very next verse (Q 4:164) by an assertion that, in addition to Moses, to whom God spoke directly, there were messengers (*rusul*) that God mentioned, and those he has not. When read with the qur’ānic diction in mind, that our Jerusalem monk of Sinai Ar. 434 speaks of the “*anbiyā*”, rather than the “*nabiyyīn*”, when speaking of the biblical “Prophetic” books, one may find an indication both of the degree of “Arabization” of the Islamic world (a Christian monk’s greater comfort in Arabic, than in Syriac - or Hebrew; recall the earlier discussion of “qur’ānic” and “Islamic” Arabic terminology extended beyond a strictly Islamic context, especially in Sinai Ar. 434 – such as *umma*, *tafsīr*, etc.), as well as a reminder of the Qur’ān’s intimate familiarity with Jewish and Christian discourse.

Similarly, the singling out of the “Psalms” as a book of David indicates a Qur’ānic familiarity with trends in the Jewish and Christian communities: the use of the Psalter as a book of devotion, for both private and public prayer – something with which Christian Arab authors would also have been familiar. And, if further speculation as to the Qur’ān’s “scriptural literacy” (and the larger scriptural categories of the Late Antique and early Islamic worlds, especially in the Syriac-speaking milieu, with which Theodore and our monk of Sinai Ar. 434 were likely familiar, in translation, if not also as their primary language) may be permitted: Both Theodore and the monk of Sinai Ar. 434 reference “Solomon” (again, in an “Arabized” form: Sulaymān b. Da’ūd; see above), but with quotations that do not easily conform to passages known in the received canonical Hebrew Bible – either Psalms or Wisdom. As there are both Odes and Psalms attributed to Solomon, of a Jewish provenance, with Hebrew (but also Greek/Syriac) circulation by the sixth century of the Christian Era⁷⁶, might not our authors have been intimately acquainted with these texts? And, might the later Arab Christian familiarity with these “Solomonic” texts, and their invocation in the context of a response to Muslim challenges to Christianity, be indicative of an early Islamic (and possibly Qur’ānic) familiarity therewith? For, although Solomon is not one of the Qur’ānic prophets explicitly named as having come with a “book”, both he and David are said to have been given “knowledge” (*‘ilm*) in Q 27:15. The Qur’ān’s allusion to Solomon is not surprising, given an Arabian provenance, and vicinity to Sheba. Thus, the

⁷⁶ cf. the various articles in Robert L. Wilken, ed., *Aspects of Wisdom in Judaism and Early Christianity* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975).

circulation in Syriac of writings attributed to Solomon, and their echoes thereof in early Christian responses to Islam that are familiar with the Qur'ān may indicate a similar qur'ānic/Islamic familiarity with those very writings.

This discussion points to the complexity of the qur'ānic, but also early Islamic/Late Antique notions of scripture and prophecy, and the need to pay close attention to the texts before us.

As we proceed, bear in mind the following questions: Would Christians and Muslims intend similar meanings in their employment of the same Arabic words (including names)? Similarly, would a Christian and a Muslim read the same meaning in the Arabic Qur'ān? In other words, is it accurate – even if it is customary – to speak of the society ruled by Muslims as 'Islamic', rather than 'Arabophone'⁷⁷? But, most of all, are the categories and definitions in which 'Islam' or 'Qur'ān' are spoken today those that would have been known to our authors?

Theodore, the anonymous monk and Paul and “Qur'ānic Studies”

While demonstrating intimate familiarity with the details of Islamic theological discussions (such as that on the 'createdness' of the Qur'ān), which he selectively uses for the purposes of his own argument, the account of Theodore's debate before al-Ma'mūn is remarkable for its heavy reliance on arguments from reason. This calls to mind the criticism of the *majlis* sessions found in an account of a fourth/tenth century Andalusian visitor to Baghdad:

⁷⁷ In February 2011, the National Museum of Natural History on the National Mall in Washington, DC, will be showing *Arabia-3D* in its IMAX theatre, which reflects a tendency to conflate 'Arabic' with 'Islamic'.

...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.”⁷⁸

While reason and the process of argumentation are indisputably important for jurisprudence (*fiqh*), but especially for the ‘greater *fiqh*’, *‘ilm al-kalām* (speculative theology), is there not the danger that too heavy a reliance on (human) reason and the disallowance of scripture – God’s own words – in the articulation of the faith will lead believers astray? Might not theologians (and jurists) become too taken with the process of argumentation, even arguing for the sake of arguing – and forget God in the process? Especially in a confessionally plural milieu, in which all the participants might not give equal credence to the same scriptures, the danger of forgoing scriptures altogether was great.

This, in fact, is exactly what the eponym of the fourth of the major Sunni schools of jurisprudence, Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241 / 855), would maintain. The doctrine of the ‘createdness’ of the Qur’ān - public profession of adherence to which was required of all state officials in his (and our Theodore’s) day, combined with the argumentative tendencies of jurists and theologians. These two trends convinced Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal that Muslims would, if they had not already done so, stray from the Qur’ān and the *sunna* – Muhammad’s own way of life, which, in the end, served as the best guide for how a Muslim should lead his (or her) life – and, instead, follow their own desires in attempting to

⁷⁸ Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Ḥumaydī, *Jadhwat al-Muqtabis*, ed. Muḥammad b. Ṭawīl al-Ṭanjī (Cairo: Dār al-Miṣriyya, 1953), 101-102. Emphasis mine.

understand what 'Islam' meant. He was thus unwilling to adjure a doctrine on the nature of the Qur'ān when the Qur'ān itself was silent on the matter, suffering at the hands of state officials for his refusal to pronounce his support for the position of the caliph.⁷⁹

Subsequently, al-Ash'arī, the eponym for the majority theological school of Sunni thought, would not renounce dialectical debate. He would employ the methods of the Mu'tazila, Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal's theological (and political) opponents, but in so doing, al-Ash'arī emphasized that such debates should always be conducted with God in mind (quoted in the Introduction, above):

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.⁸⁰

Christians had, prior to the Arabic Qur'ān, debated with one another, using Greek categories to make sense of what they understood to be scripture (inspired by God), particularly in matters on which it was silent. How would they then respond to a scripture that claimed to be the inimitable word of God, in clear Arabic, and which esteemed (uncorrupted) Christianity and its scripture – but which appeared directly to counter some of Christianity's central beliefs? Would they engage their – ruling minority of – fellow Muslims in debates on the merits of the various scriptures? Would they leave scripture out of such discussions, given the varying estimates of the merits of the different 'scriptures'? Or, as an alternative to discarding scripture altogether, would they

⁷⁹ See the discussion in the Introduction, above.

⁸⁰ Cited by Stroumsa, "Role of Bad Manners," 70-71.

adopt the Qurʾān's own language, and deem that very Qurʾān as among the 'books of God' – only to solicit this 'book of God' in the service of their own arguments? Would they interpret the Qurʾān on its own terms, in its own language, only to level at it the very critique it leveled at the Bible (Gospel and Torah): namely, that of its "corruption" in the hands of the early community?

Reason and revelation

While the author of Sinai Ar. 434 addresses all three questions posed to him with two lines of reasoning: both intellectual/rational (*ʿaqlī*) and from revelation (*sharḥī*), far more space is devoted to the arguments from the 'books of God' (note the plural) than those from 'reason'. Of additional interest is the assertion that the revealed proofs should, in fact, appeal also to reason.⁸¹ The 'rational' response to the first question barely covers both sides of a single manuscript folio⁸², while the response from revelation covers more than two full folios, recto and verso⁸³. A similar distribution of folio space is found in his response to the second question (on the reality – *siḥḥa* – of the hypostatic union)⁸⁴. And, finally, the third question (the proof – *dalāʾil* – for this *siḥḥa* {i.e. of the hypostatic union} from the *siḥḥa* of the actions – *afʿāl*- of the Messiah), outlines the very deeds of the Messiah, as attested to in Scripture, rather than proffering a 'rational' argument:

Concerning the rational argument, we do not claim that; rather, the deeds of the Messiah verify the Word of God, our Lord, the (hypostatic union) definitively,

⁸¹ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 177v; cf. also the response to the third question posed to the monk.

⁸² Sinai Ar. 434, ff. 171v-172v.

⁸³ Sinai Ar. 434, ff. 172v-174v.

⁸⁴ Sinai Ar. 434, ff. 175r-176r (reason); 176r-178r (revelation).

spread throughout the world – when he sent the apostles (*ḥawāriyyūn*), God’s *anṣār*, and brought to very ignorant nations, without sword or rod or money or men, a difficult *madhhab*, leading them from this world (*dunya*) to the next (*ākhirā*), and they responded obediently, in their life and after their death. And, in the name of the *crucified*, they raised the dead and worked every miracle. That shows the divine power – that of the Messiah, to whom was testified.”⁸⁵

Of further interest is that the response to this third question devoted to revelation contains supporting evidence from Greek philosophy and other ‘non-divine’ sources, in addition to the proofs from the ‘books of God’.⁸⁶

What is the significance of the reliance on both rational and revealed “proofs” in support of Christian truths, voiced in an Arabic-speaking, ‘Islamic’ world? In particular, what can be discerned about the underlying understanding of ‘scripture’ from such discussions? The terminology “books of God” has a distinctive qur’ānic ring, as the Qur’ān is far more aware of itself as a ‘scripture’ than is any of the books of the Christian Bible, Old or New Testament⁸⁷, and not infrequently references the “books” brought by previous prophets, as a parallel to Muhammad and the Qur’ān: David’s Psalms, Moses’ Torah, Jesus’ Injīl, the *ṣuḥuf* of Abraham.⁸⁸ But, in its allusion to divine ‘books’, was the Qur’ān echoing sentiments already present in its milieu, of various ‘books’ of God, or was it putting forth a new category? Which are these divine ‘books’ for our Christian authors, writing in Arabic?

⁸⁵ Sinai Ar. 434, ff. 178r-178v (discussed above), although he mingles “rational” and “revealed” proofs; cf. 177v.

⁸⁶ Sinai Ar. 434, ff. 178v-181r; the arguments from non-divine “revelation” are found on folios 179v-180r.

⁸⁷ Stefan Wild, ed., *Self-Referentiality in the Qur’ān*, vol. 11 *Diskurse der Arabistik*, edited by Hartmut Bobzin and Angelika Neuwirth (Berlin: Harrassowitz-Verlag, 2007).

⁸⁸ For a comprehensive list of all such qur’ānic references, see See Hanna E. Kassis, *A Concordance of the Qur’ān* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 1218-19 (*tawrāt*), 1322-23 (*zabūr*), 903-14 (*qur’ān*), 1185 (*ṣuḥuf*), 836 (*injīl*), 807-8 (*nabiyūn/anbiyā’*), 663-68 (*kitāb/kutub*), 748 (*lawḥ*), for an overview of some of the nuances of the Qur’ān’s own view of “scripture”.

Hāfiẓ, ‘aql and kutub Allāh

And, behind these theological and jurisprudential questions was the issue of the place of Greek philosophical trends in Islamic discourse (see the work of Gutas on the commissioning of the translation into Arabic of Greek and other works by the early Abbasid caliphs⁸⁹). As al-Ghazzālī (d. 505/1111) highlights in his “Deliverance from error”⁹⁰, some of the “errors” of the Greek philosophers are: refusal of bodily resurrection; denial of God’s knowledge of particulars, and the eternity of the world (notably, this same al-Ghazzālī’s “Refutation of the Philosophers” was, in turn, “refuted” by that famous “Commentator” on Aristotle, Ibn Rushd, in which form it came to Thomas Aquinas). Keeping these trends in mind, it should be noted that Theodore’s tendency towards logic is diametrically opposed to an assertion the Jerusalemite author of Sinai Ar. 434 makes in his response to the first of the Sheikh’s questions (Whether the eternal ‘being’ is one of the *aqānīm*): “

Whoever does not read the revealed books of God will, out of ignorance, put forth, and thus be confused, by which he does not know. But as for the intelligent, reasonable, cultured *hāfiẓ* (a scripturally literate man – as opposed to *ummī*, one of the traditional Islamic understandings of Muhammad: an illiterate gentile, unfamiliar with {previous} scriptures, perhaps? – but also a technical term for one who has committed the Qur’ān to memory), he will understand: for I did not arrive at anything from my own intellect (‘aql), but, rather from the kutub Allāh, my Lord, and its teaching as came to me from his anṣār (literally, “helpers”, but also a Qur’ānic term designation for the disciples – “helpers” in the service of God).⁹¹

⁸⁹ Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*.

⁹⁰ Conveniently available online, in English translation, at: <http://www.ghazali.org/books/md/index.html>.

⁹¹ Sinai Ar. 434, ff. 174v – 175r.

Ḥāfiẓ may be understood on a number of levels. It can be opposed to *ummī*, one of the traditional Islamic understandings of Muhammad: an illiterate gentile, - unlettered – and/or unfamiliar with {previous} scriptures. For the Qurʾān responds to the challenges that Muhammad was only repeating the ‘tales of the ancients’, or that an ‘informant’ was responsible for his scriptural knowledge with the assertion that he is an ‘*ummī*’ prophet (cf. Q 7:157; 62:2) – and that the alleged informant speaks an unclear Arabic. If understood in this light, might this be a subtle jab at Muhammad’s message by the monk of Sinai Ar. 434? Anyone (including Muhammad) who knew the scriptures (*kutub Allāh*) would recognize the truth of the anonymous author of Sinai Ar. 434’s arguments.

Does this passage imply that the monk’s interlocutor was known as a *ḥāfiẓ*, one who had memorized the Qurʾān (recall Theodore’s challenge to one of his own interlocutors, cited above)? Does it indicate a level of discourse that was, in fact, directed at the scripturally literate – and in which scriptural references were not only permitted, but encouraged? And, if so, what, exactly, is intended by ‘scripture’? The Bible for Christians, and the Qurʾān for Muslims? Or, the Bible and Qurʾān – for Christians AND Muslims? Would this ‘pro-scripture’ trend be a reaction to, or reflection of, the atmosphere of the larger Islamic world? Would it be a ‘politically-correct’ (or intellectually disingenuous, but astute) move on the part of the Christians living under Muslim rulers? Does it indicate a Christian category of scripture perhaps broader than that commonly accepted today – and similar to the Islamic/qurʾānic understanding of ‘books of God’?

But, when read in conjunction with his assertion that it was the books of God, rather than his own intellect, on which his substantiating proofs rely, the Jerusalem monk's choice of '*ḥāfiẓ*' may indicate his respect for the position of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal and the 'people of *sunna* and community' who emerged triumphant after the suppression of the *miḥna*. In this reading, the monk may be acknowledging his interlocutor's familiarity with scriptures – or, specifically, his role as a *ḥāfiẓ*: someone who had committed the entire Qur'ān to memory (the more specialized of whom could also recite the text, according to a variety of 'readings'⁹²), and, as such, who might have served in a variety of functions for the Muslim community of Jerusalem.

Unless he were familiar with alternative versions of both the Bible and the Qur'ān than those that have come down to us, it is unlikely that the anonymous author of Sinai Ar. 434 (or his scribe) would have claimed the technical (Islamic?) understanding of the term for himself, as the manuscript is replete with instances of infelicities in biblical and qur'ānic citation (touched on below). But, if understood with the more general sense of 'scripturally literate', our monk of Sinai Ar. 434 is certainly well-versed in both Bible and Qur'ān. While Theodore's debate seems to reflect a heavily Mu'tazilite-influenced milieu, the Jerusalem monk of Sinai Ar. 434 has either been isolated from the debates (and their aftermath) over the 'created' or 'uncreated' nature of the Qur'ān, or he is studiously avoiding such discussions. Rather, he seems interested in drawing on

⁹² See *EQ*, s.vv. "Readings" and "Reciters" of the Qur'ān, for the nuances of these distinctions; cf. also *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. 'Kira'a'; also, W. Brinner's discussion of 'story tellers' and Qur'ān 'reciters' in his introduction to his translation of al-Tha'labī's *Arā'is al-majālis* ("Lives of the prophets").

scriptural testimony in support of the logical challenges to Christian Trinitarian and Incarnation theology. He is particularly concerned with showing how the Torah, Prophets and Psalms – as well as the Qur’ān – and, eventually, even non-prophetic works of the ancients, substantiate the Christian doctrine of a Triune and Incarnate God. This concern, coupled with various messianic allusions, indicates that he may have been acutely aware of the declining Christian presence (or influence) in Jerusalem – and thus seems intent on asserting not only Christian theological veracity, but also Christian claims to the city over and against (certain) Jewish arguments to the contrary – all the while in the face of actual Muslim domination of the earthly Jerusalem.

Paul’s is an argument in elegant rhetoric (likely articulated in a milieu devoid of a significant Jewish population? Or, perhaps by his day, the Arab Christian tension with Judaism had been resolved – in part because of the numerical insignificance of Jews in *dār al-Islām*?), very well aware of well-formulated criticisms of Christianity emerging from the Islamic milieu, but without any real effort to read the text as Muslims would. Perhaps the Crusades, and the presence of foreign Christians who ruled themselves, brought back long-forgotten hopes that were very present in Theodore’s day, as a bishop on the border of Byzantium. The author of Sinai Ar. 434 alludes carefully to life under Muslim rule, but seems to accept the Qur’ān in the form in which he knows it – an already-well-established, and commonly circulating, work – but, intriguingly, seems to expect the Muslim recipient of his letter to accept the biblical proofs he proffers, just as he is willing to accept the Qur’ān.

There is also a more lively engagement not only with the Qurʾān as Muslims read it, but also with arguments-in-process, in Theodore's tract, than in those of the monk of Sinai Ar. 434 or Paul. When, however, Theodore's text alludes to Ṣaʿṣaʿa b. Khālīd of Basra who has "studied scripture (*darasa l-kitāb*) and become a devotee of the religion of Islam (*dīn al-islām*) and understood the weakness of the opinion of the Christians"⁹³, or to ʿAlī b. Walīd as among those most proficient in the readings of the books (*min man akthar fī qiraʾāt al-kutub*), the study of the Gospel and the Psalms (*dars al-injīl wa-l-zabūr*), and knowledge of the secrets of religion (*ʿirf sirāʾir al-dīn*)⁹⁴, is Ṣaʿṣaʿa's study of "scripture" a generic category, or solely the book of Islam – the Qurʾān? Theodore himself is noted as an "expert in his religion and doctrine"⁹⁵ (*ʿālim khabīr fī dīnihi wa-madhhabihi*), a "sea of knowledge, against whom it is impossible for anyone to withstand in *kalām* or the knowledge of religions",⁹⁶ and who "shoots arrows from [his opponent's] quiver"⁹⁷. What is the significance of the assertion that Theodore's religion is "genuinely old", whereas that of "Salām" 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 [his] intellect falls short..."⁹⁸?

⁹³ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 82.

⁹⁴ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 92.

⁹⁵ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 69.

⁹⁶ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 80.

⁹⁷ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 91 Here, it should be noted that, while al-Maʾmūn praises Theodore for his mastery of *kalām*, such praise could be a double-edged sword, in the light of theological and political trends concerning the suitability of *kalām* vs. *ḥadīth* in approaching the Qurʾān.

⁹⁸ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 80.

The 'Arabic' Scripture and Arab Christian Scriptology

Of our authors, only Paul of Antioch argues against the need for Christians to convert to Islam on the basis of ethnicity: the Qur'ān came in clear Arabic; Christians who do not speak Arabic are therefore not obliged to become Muslims. Although, particularly in the early years of Islam, 'Arab' and 'Muslim' seem to have been fairly interchangeable, once the Abbasids ruled from Baghdad, many non-Muslims spoke and wrote in Arabic, and many non-Arabs had converted to Islam⁹⁹. Although ethnic Arabs, particularly the relatives of the prophet Muhammad, did hold an elevated status within the Islamic community¹⁰⁰, Islam quickly became a self-proclaimed religion (*dīn*) and a unique community (*umma*) that stretched beyond any ethnic or racial borders: far closer in this respect to the universalistic claims of Christianity than the people-specific understanding of Judaism, Islam nevertheless recognized both Christianity and Judaism as religions – and shared with Judaism a respect for the laws laid out in its scripture. And while this scripture acknowledges the previous scriptures, it – and later Islamic tradition – also comments upon their distortion – at the hands of the Children of Israel, both Jews (*al-yahūd*) and Christians (*al-naṣāra*), whom the Qur'ān and Islamic tradition terms “Peoples of the Book”.

⁹⁹ For discussion of the importance of this trend in Islamic history, see, e.g., *El*, s.v. “al-Shu‘ūbiyya.”

¹⁰⁰ For the complexity of this issue, see e.g. Moshe Sharon, “The Umayyads as *ahl al-bayt*,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 14 (1991): 115-52. See also Moshe Sharon, “The Development of the Debate Around the Legitimacy of Authority in Early Islam,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 5 (1984): 121-41; Paul Cobb, “Al-Maqrīzī, Hashimism, and the Early Caliphates,” *Mamlūk studies review* VII/2 (2003): 69-81; Asma Afsarruddin, *Excellence and precedence. Medieval Islamic discourse on legitimate leadership* (Leiden: Brill, 2002); Antoine Borrut, “Altérité et adversité. La construction de l’image des Omeyyades et de la Syrie dans les chroniques arabes et syriaques?,” forthcoming in *Actes du colloque international. Lectures historiques des chroniques médiévales (mondes arabe, persan, syriaque et turc)*.

It is the [Arab] Christian reception of this Arabic scripture that is the focus of this discussion, which is developed on two levels: what do our authors say about the text of the Qur'ān itself (including its interpretation), and how do they conceptualize this 'recitation', this 'book of God'? For this latter term appears in both the text of the anonymous Melkite Sinai Ar. 434 and that of Abu Qurra as a designation for the scripture of the Muslims. This is not unlike the case of Jews who wrote in Arabic in the classical period of Islam and who are known to have called the Torah "*qur'ān*"¹⁰¹: are these mere conventionalities, i.e., using the term in common parlance to designate one's own sacred text (akin to the use of "church" for a mosque or synagogue in European languages), or, does the Christian terming of the Qur'ān as among the 'books of God' indicate a deeper theologically-charged understanding of the Qur'ān? Alternatively, as Christians were accustomed to debating with Jews and other Christians on the basis of a common scripture (and – at least in the early Islamic centuries - as Muslims themselves were not unused to delving into the Jewish and Christian scriptures in search of biblical supports for Islamic positions¹⁰²), was this a mere conventionality to bring a foreign object into a more familiar category or context?

Covenant of Umar and the Rights of *dhimmi*s

It is perhaps not surprising that the "king's men" [even in pre-Islamic times, these "Synodists" were considered as collaborators with the (unwanted?) Roman rulers] early on adopted the language of their new overlords. Their

¹⁰¹ My thanks to Prof. Mark Cohen of Princeton for bringing this point to my attention.

¹⁰² Ibn Ishāq, Ibn Ḥazm and al-Ya'qūbī being only among the more well-known examples.

seemingly respectful treatment of the Qur'ān may also have been a politically expedient move – especially when one bears in mind the conditions for treatment of Christians stipulated in various recensions of the so-called 'Covenant of 'Umar'.¹⁰³

According to the classical Muslim exegete and historian, al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), for example, 'Umar's Covenant accorded "the people of Jerusalem" "safe-conduct for their persons, their property, their churches, their crosses, their sound and their sick, and the rest of their worship". It further stipulated that "no Jew shall live with them in Aelia." Also, the Christians were bound to "expel the Romans and the brigands from the city."¹⁰⁴

Two centuries later, the *Christians* are reported as the initiators of this Covenant, and the communal borders (and rankings) are more clearly defined: Christians promise, among other things, not to build new monasteries, churches, convents or monks' cells, nor to repair any that are in disrepair; not to manifest their religion publicly, nor convert anyone to it; not to prevent their kin from entering Islam if they wish; not to seek to resemble Muslims by imitating their garments or hairstyles; and not to teach the Qur'ān to their children.¹⁰⁵

Such provisions of Christian acceptance of Islamic rule – protection of cultic and personal rights and exemption from military service, in exchange for their payment of a "poll tax" (*jizya*) – indicate a society that had clear

¹⁰³ E.g. A.S. Tritton, *The Caliphs and their non-Muslim Subjects: A Critical Study of the Covenant of Umar* (London: F. Cass, 1970).

¹⁰⁴ Arabic text in al-Ṭabarī's *Tārīkh al-rusūl wa-l-mulūk*, ed. de Goeje, vol. 1, 245-6, Eng. trans. B. Lewis, *Islam from Prophet Mohammed to the Capture of Constantinople*, vol. 1, 235-6, repr. In Gaudeul, *Encounters*, vol. 2, 47.

¹⁰⁵ Arabic in al-Ṭurūshī, *Sirāj al-mulūk*; Eng. in B. Lewis, *Islam from Prophet Mohammed...*, vol. 2, 217-19; repr. In Gaudeul, *Encounters*, vol. 2, 48-49.

demarcations among its religious communities. But, that Islamic tradition preserves a memory of Christians' being banned from "teaching the Qur'ān to their children" indicates that Christians had done, or were beginning to do, just that. For, prohibitions generally arise in response to actual situations deemed potentially harmful to society (or the individual). While the circumstances of Christians teaching the Qur'ān to their children are not well known, Christian leaders would likely not have favored such activity, and a potential reduction in the numbers of their flocks. But, the facility with the Qur'ān exhibited in our three texts, coupled with the occasional evidence of disrespect for the Qur'ān and Islamic tradition, may also indicate some of the rationale behind such a prohibition. And, until today, there are various estimations of the permissibility of non-Muslims' handling the Qur'ān. (In Spring 2007, a Caucasian Christian attempted to purchase a Qur'ān in the Yemen, and the proprietor refused to sell it to her, based on her religion. On the other hand, the Saudi Embassy in DC distributes copies of the Qur'ān free of charge to anyone who asks, and any visitor to the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul – regardless of religion - will be barraged with vendors attempting to sell key-chains with miniature Qur'ān charms.)¹⁰⁶

The very prohibition of Christians' "teaching the Qur'ān to their children" found in the so-called Covenant of 'Umar speaks to an awareness – and wariness – of the extent of Arabophone Christian familiarity with the text of the Qur'ān. A variety of reasons could have sparked such a regulation: the general success Christians enjoyed in the various inter-confessional debates; disrespect towards

¹⁰⁶ Such readings should be read in conjunction with Q 5:5's deeming of both the 'women' and the 'food' of the People of the Book licit for the believers.

the holy book on the part of Christians, or Christians' ready criticism of Muslim 'hypocrisy' regarding the Qur'ān (cf. e.g. Theodore's challenge to the question of one of the notables of Quraysh: 'Is not the Messiah the Word of God and His spirit?' – Theodore says: 'Yes. And in your scripture, your Qur'ān, it is so, if you have memorized the Qur'ān: *na' m. wa-fi kitābika wa-qur'ānika kadhālika in kunta taḥaffuz al-qur'ān'*¹⁰⁷); a desire to stem the tide of Christian conversions to Islam (a desideratum both for the Islamic tax coiffeurs¹⁰⁸ and the Christian authorities); a simple desire to preserve the Qur'ān – as the word of God – for those who regarded it as such. This last hypothesis is particularly relevant to the present discussion, as the three texts under examination here shed light on the variety of tones that Christian discussions of the Qur'ān took in different time periods, likely in response to both the political and theological realities of the Islamic milieu in which they were taking place. For the discussion of Theodore, unlike those of Paul and the anonymous author of Sinai Ar. 434, purports to take place in the caliphate of al-Ma'mūn, who would impose the doctrine of the "created" nature of the Qur'ān as the official position of the Islamic state. While Christians remained a strong presence, and debates between Christians and Muslims occurred throughout the centuries in which our three texts are situated, the official position of the Muslim authorities on the nature of the Qur'ān did not remain constant. As unconstrained by the demands of "normative" Islam as

¹⁰⁷ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 96.

¹⁰⁸ On taxation in Islamicate civilizations, see, e.g., Paul L. Heck, *The Construction of Knowledge in Islamic Civilization: Qudāma b. Ja'far & his Kitāb al-kharāj wa-ṣinā'ar al-kitāba* (Leiden: Brill, 2002); Norman Calder, Jawid Mojaddedi and Andrew Rippin, eds., *Classical Islam: A Sourcebook of Religious Literature* (London: Routledge, 2003), 36-53, gives a sense (in Eng. trans.) of a range of classical views on *zakāt* and *khums*. Norman Itzkowitz, *Ottoman Empire and Islamic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972) esp. chs. 2 and 4, is an excellent and concise overview of Ottoman policies, including various forms of taxation.

they might have been, what might our three Christian Arabic texts tell us of the various approaches to the Qurʾān – by Christians, but also possibly by Muslims - in *dār al-Islām*, prior to the “closing of the gates of *ijtihād*” and the Mongol destruction of Baghdad?

For, in early Christian *Arabic* discussions of the Qurʾān nuanced knowledge of Muslim traditions about the Qurʾān do appear. Even highly polemical accounts, such as the Hāshimī-Kindi correspondence, demonstrate a solid knowledge of “Islamic” understandings of the Qurʾān.¹⁰⁹ And, in these Christian Arab writings are also found intriguing phrases such as ‘books of God’ and “God said in your book [i.e. the Qurʾān].” Are these mere rhetorical devices – reflective of the qurʾānization of the Arabic language¹¹⁰, even among Christians, possibly also employed so as not to anger their Muslim adversaries? Or, do they reflect an understanding of scripture [“book of God”, *kitāb Allāh*] that extends to “books of God” [*kutub Allāh*], and includes the Qurʾān (or parts thereof), as well as the Christian and Hebrew Bibles? While the implications of these phrases for Christian theology and prophetology are great, and merit serious reflection, the present investigation will be restricted to the implications for the understanding of “scripture” in Christian tradition, particularly its Arabic manifestation.

¹⁰⁹ cf. Georges Tartar, *Dialogue Islamo-Chretien sous le calife al-Maʾmūn (813-34)* (Paris: Nouv. Editions Latins, 1985); Georges Anawati, “Polemique, apologie et dialogue islamo-chrétiens. Positions classiques et positions contemporaines,” *Euntes docete* [Rome: Urbaniana] 22 (1969): 375-452, 380-92.

¹¹⁰ Cf. e.g. Stefan Dähme, “Qurʾānic Wording in Political Speeches in Classical Arabic Literature.” *Journal of Qurʾānic Studies* 3 (2001), 1-14; Wadad al-Qāḍī, “The Impact of the Qurʾān on Early Arabic Literature: The Case of ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd’s Epistolography,” in G. Hawting and A. Shareef, eds., *Approaches to the Qurʾān*, edited by Gerald Hawting and Abdul-Kader Shareef, *Routledge/SOAS Series on Contemporary Politics and Culture in the Middle East* (London: Routledge, 1993), 283-313.

The questions and contexts

Did the first Christians to write in Arabic think of *kitāb Allāh* (Scripture, i.e. 'Bible') or *kutub Allāh* (scriptures)? If the latter, was the entire Qur'ān among the *kutub Allāh*? If so, how did they reconcile themselves to passages such as Q 5:72-3: "They have certainly disbelieved who say 'God is the Messiah, the son of Mary' ... They have certainly disbelieved who say "God is the third of three""?¹¹¹ If only parts of the Qur'ān attained to the rank of *kitāb Allāh*, then which parts – and on what basis (the problem of "prooftexting", to which Paul alludes, and which Theodore demonstrates – discussed below)? And, upon whose understanding of the Qur'ān did they base their arguments: normative or alternative Islamic understanding, or non-Muslim interpretations?

After examining the qur'ānic language in our three texts, and comparing the use our authors make of the sacred text of Islam, the implications these Christian Arab texts have for contemporary qur'ānic studies – particularly regarding their familiarity with Islamic interpretations of the Qur'ān - will be explored. How did Christian Arabs approach the Qur'ān – and scripture in general? What lessons might Christians (and Muslims) in the 21st century draw from these texts?

¹¹¹ For a compelling discussion of a possible Syriac referent behind the qur'ānic "*thālithu in*" of Q 5:73, see Sidney H. Griffith, "Answers for the Shaykh: A 'Melkite' Arabic Text from Sinai Doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation in 'Arab Orthodox' Apologetics," in *The Encounter of Christianity with Early Islam*, edited by Emmanouela Grypeou, Mark N. Swanson, David Thomas Brill, 2006), 277-311; cf. also Sidney H. Griffith, "Syriacisms in the Arabic Qur'ān: Who were "those 'Allāh is third of three'" according to al-*Mā'idah* 73?" in *A Word Fitly Spoken: Studies in Mediaeval of the Hebrew Bible and the Qur'ān; presented to Haggai Ben-Shammai*, edited Meir M. Bar-Asher et al. m: The Ben-Zvi Institute, 2007), 83-110.

In discussions of ‘scripture’ (or any canonized text), there are at least two potential dangers: first, the temptation to retroject one’s own, contemporary understanding of scripture to ages past; and, second, accepting without question the dominant account of the origins, compilation and dissemination of the text in question. But, when there are competing views of the formation of a given canon (especially if minority views have been suppressed, and – for theological, political or other historical reasons – judged incorrect or even seditious), the reading of texts closer in time to the revelatory moment may clarify the various assertions of the formation of ‘canon’. Such texts, especially if they come from a community other than that which adheres to the scripture, or from one that does not maintain the dominant view, may highlight an early fluidity and richness in the understanding of a given text. For example, the Qur’ān can inform a Latin Christian of the martyrs of Najrān (the *aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd* of Q 85) or Sleepers of Ephesus (the *aṣḥāb al-kaḥf* of Q 18), accounts that are part of the Christian patrimony, but of greater currency in eastern, than western, Christian circles. Similarly, allusions to Solomon’s Odes by Theodore and a Jerusalem monk (the author of Sinai Ar. 434), may cause western scholars to revisit their assumptions about the extent of the circulation of these texts among Christians.

But, for the purposes of the current discussion, the significance of the inclusion of the Qur’ān in the *kutub Allāh* in these Christian Arabic texts is of particular interest. While Theodore will cite the Qur’ān in support of his discussion of the veracity of Christianity, he does not explicitly term the Qur’ān as a “book from God.” He does, however, note on numerous occasions how it

would not accord with the dignity of Muhammad as a prophet, nor the glory and majesty of God, to term the Qurʾān – both in the form in which it is known to him, and in its reading and interpretation at the hands of Muslims – as from God, or as reflecting what Muhammad did, in fact, convey to his followers. This line of argumentation is familiar to us from the Hāshimī-Kindī correspondence, another spirited defense of Christianity which claims to situate itself in the caliphate of al-Maʾmūn. ʿAbd al-Masīḥ al-Kindī’s text is notorious among Christian Arabic writings for its forthright polemical nature, as well as its intimate familiarity with a range of traditions about early Islamic history. (Notably, it was also among the first Arabic texts that were translated into Latin, along with the Qurʾān, forming the “Toledo Collection”, the first compilation for anything approaching “qurʾānic studies” in Europe.)¹¹²

While taking into consideration the ethno-linguistic and tribal realities of the early Islamic period, it would be remiss to ignore the theological realities that were also present, with similar divisions. Such theological differences became increasingly apparent as the Islamic empire spread, and united disparate peoples with the Arabic language, based on the Qurʾān. As they were coming under Arab Islamic rule, Christians were still heatedly debating Christology (not least because the theological orientation of the Byzantine emperors strongly impacted the lives of believers, heterodox or orthodox).

The Qurʾān is well aware of Jewish-Christian differences; it is also aware of intra-Christian divisions – but it does not claim to put forth a systematic theology (Islamic or other). That was to be the task of later generations. And, as

¹¹² see *EQ*, s.v. “Translations of the Qurʾān.”

these later Muslims were called upon to understand the Qur'ān, they did not seem to hesitate to do as the Qur'ān urged, and asked “those who were given the book before” (Q 10:94; cf. 16:43) for clarification on matters of which they were in doubt. One of the earliest surviving works of exegesis – that of Muqātil b. Sulāymān – is, in fact, primarily a *tafsīr* of those verses which may have some connection to the ‘People of the Book’.¹¹³ As the centuries went on, and properly ‘Islamic’ interpretations of such verses were established, such consultation with non-Muslims came to be deemed unnecessary, if not improper. But, these early works of exegesis, as well as later ones that saw fit to include the thread of previous arguments regarding a given verse, also reflect traces of early theological discussions: as, potentially, do the Christian texts under examination here.

In the first centuries of Islam, there was not only one view of the Qur'ān, or Islamic tradition. Additionally, the confessional divisions among the Christians living under Islamic rule were also in the process of attaining their ‘historically definitive’ forms. In this context, then, to what extent did ‘orthodoxy’ figure – either within, or across, confessional boundaries? While Christians did indeed write as believers in a Triune and Incarnate God, and Muslims as believers in The One God, of whom (the Arab) Muhammad was his final prophet, these scholars, aware of social realities, were also apprised of the various intellectual currents of their day. And, just as in our own day, intellectual currents crossed communal borders. (What theologian or scholar of

¹¹³ A.H. Johns, “Muqātil b. Sulaymān,” in *The Qur'ān: An Encyclopaedia*, edited Oliver Leaman (New York: Routledge, 2006), 428-29.

religion today is not somewhat versed on the concepts of theodicy, the attributes of God, nihilism, creationism, secularism, atheism, sectarianism, relativism, religious plurality, or religious liberty?) The lists of teachers and disciples in the Arabic-speaking world of the first Islamic centuries attest to a fluid scholarly atmosphere, in which Christians and Muslims, of a variety of beliefs, would attend lectures or discussions led by the same masters. As such, 'Arabic', rather than 'Islamic', may better designate the intellectual milieu in which they functioned.¹¹⁴

Although the Qur'ān came to be seen as the prototype of the Arabic language, various interpretations (if not codices) thereof remained in circulation in the first Islamic centuries.¹¹⁵ Additionally, Christians were teaching the Qur'ān to their children, as indicated by one of the stipulations of the so-called 'Covenant of 'Umar', which set forth the proper behavioral guidelines for Christians living under Islamic rule. While the precedence, or exact delineation of the contributions of Christians or Muslims to each other's thinking is impossible to determine, the golden, or formative, age of Islamic theological discourse took place when Muslims were not the majority of the Arabic speaking, Muslim ruled world. And, despite certain social strictures, Christians had a visible function in both government and academic circles. Further, while Muslims were fleshing out the details of what would be the defining tenets of

¹¹⁴ On the technicalities and nuances of the Arabic language (and the role of the Qur'ān in establishing Arabic grammar), see, for example, Richard Frank, "Hearing and saying what was said" [Presidential Address, American Oriental Society, 19 March 1996], *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 116:44 (1996): 611-18; *EQ*, s.v. "Grammar and the Qur'ān."

¹¹⁵ Claude Gilliot, "Creation of a Fixed Text" and H. Motzki, "Alternative Accounts of the Qur'ān's Formation," in *Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān*, edited by McAuliffe, 41-58 and 59-78, respectively.

various trends within Islamic intellectual circles, Christians were asserting their respective communal identities both against Islam, and the other sects of their coreligionists.¹¹⁶ While the various intra-Christian debates of Arabophone Christians have been studied, as have the various relations of Arabophone Christians to earlier, contemporaneous and later Christian groups, Christian Arabic texts still represent an as-yet-underexplored resource in Qur'ānic studies.

One of the most popular genres of Christian Arabic apologetic literature takes the form of dialogues between Christians and Muslims: written correspondence between representatives of the two traditions (e.g. our anonymous monk of Sinai Ar. 434, as well as the Hāshimī-Kindī correspondence and Paul's letter to his Muslim friends); as well as oral, face-to-face debates between two individuals (Timothy and al-Mahdī), or debates in which there were multiple participants (Theodore Abū Qurra and the Muslim notables). The dialectic arguments that emerge in the Christian tradition evidence an intimate familiarity with the Qur'ān: both explicitly and implicitly. Like Arabic writings – both secular and religious – by *Muslims* from the emergent Islamic community, qur'ānic idiom is prevalent: although the Qur'ān is paraphrased or even misquoted, and rarely explicitly attested, the governing language is that of the Qur'ān. And, as Christians would not have been bound by the dictates of normative Islam, might they have preserved (and possibly preferred) 'variant' understandings: alternative readings or understandings of various qur'ānic passages (as elaborated upon below), as well as accounts of the very formation of the Qur'ān (e.g. al-Kindī), that are occasionally at variance with the account that

¹¹⁶ See Griffith, *Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*.

normative Islam has preserved? Or, does the very fact of the looseness of their referencing the Qur'ān – in Arabic – point not so much to an awareness of “alternative” *codices* (or *readings*) to those that have survived the centuries, as to a different *attitude* or *approach* to the extant text (by Christians and, arguably, also Muslims) than that current in later centuries? Here, the distinction between the – albeit edited – text of Paul and those of Theodore and Sinai Ar. 434 are striking. All three of our authors are equally facile in their “prooftexting” abilities – selectively curtailing Qur'ānic references to fit Christian theological categories (most notably Q 4:171, discussed below). But, whereas Paul's (edited) text has precise Qur'ānic citations, in versions that directly map onto the *rasm* in wide circulation today (and preserved by the Cairo printed edition of the early 20th century CE), Theodore and the anonymous monk of Jerusalem evidence greater signs of paraphrasing, or imprecise citations.

The problem

Were a common, Semitic – yet, arguably, non-Christian – language: Arabic¹¹⁷, and a common religious adversary and political ruler: Islam, the necessary catalysts for sharpening *Christian* theological discussions in the ancient Oriental provinces of the Roman Empire? Some Christian texts from the Mashreq – be they Melkite, Jacobite or Nestorian – are frequently remarkably free of the type of polemical discourse found further west, in writings from the Coptic or Andalusian communities. (The Nestorian Catholicos' Timothy I's

¹¹⁷ For the evidence for pre-Islamic 'Arabic' Christianity, see Irfan Shahid's multi-volume work, *Byzantium and the Arabs* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1995-).

discussion before the caliph al-Mahdi is a particularly poignant example of this.) The fact of close Christian-Muslim interaction in the philosophical schools of Baghdad may have had something to do with this sympathetic portrayal and detailed knowledge of Islam, and, at times, even confessionally indeterminate writing¹¹⁸. But, in addition to the various and varying Christian responses to Islam, the degree of Christian cross-pollination in the Arabic-speaking, Muslim-ruled world – be it at the level of ideas or copyists -- also needs further study; see, e.g., the orthographic peculiarities of Dick's edition of Theodore's debate that also appear in Mozarabic texts¹¹⁹ (such as "sūra" spelt with a *ṣād* rather than a *sīn* – possibly indicative of Syriac interference?), as well as the similarities among Christian interpretations of the "mysterious letters" of the Qur'ān (e.g. 'l-m of Q 2:1 as "*al-masīḥ*" by our authors, as discussed below¹²⁰).

Aspects of the Arabic Christian response to Islam have been discussed in some detail by various scholars - e.g. unique elements of Christian Arabic theology¹²¹, and Christian "influence" on normative Islamic theology¹²². But a comprehensive history of Christian Arabic approaches to the Qur'ān –

¹¹⁸ cf. Sidney H. Griffith, *Yahyā ibn 'Adī: The Reformation of Morals* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2002).

¹¹⁹ Cf. Thomas E. Burman, *Religious Polemic and the Intellectual History of the Mozarabs, c. 1050-1200*, vol. 52 of *Brill's Studies in Intellectual History* (Leiden: Brill, 1994).

¹²⁰ For an overview of contemporary discussions of these "mysterious" or "disjointed" letters, see *EQ*, s.v. "Mysterious Letters."

¹²¹ E.g. Sidney H. Griffith, "Comparative Religion in the Apologetics of the First Christian Arabic Theologians," *Proceedings of the Patristic, Medieval, Renaissance Conference* 4 (1979): 63-87; Shlomo Pines, "Some Traits of Christian Theological Writing in Relation to Moslem *kalām* and to Jewish Thought," *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities* 5 (1976): 105-25; Samir Kh. Samir, "The Earliest Arab Apology for Christianity (c. 750)," in *Christian Arabic apologetics during the Abbasid period (750-1258)*, edited by Samir Khalil Samir and Jorgen Nielsen (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 57-114.

¹²² For the hypothesis of a Syriac stylistic influence on the *kalām* texts, see M.A. Cook, "The Origins of *Kalām*," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 43 (1980): 32-43. See also Sidney H. Griffith, "'Ammār al-Baṣrī's *Kitāb al-Burhān*: Christian *kalām* in the First Abbasid Century," *Le Muséon* 96 (1983): 145-81.

“recitation” or “reading”, but also both as a document, or scripture/writing/book (*kitāb*), in its own right, as well as in relation to the Bible - has yet to be written. This aspect of Christian Arabic theology demands attention for two reasons: 1) as all the monotheistic, Abrahamic religions believe in a personal God who communicates with his creation through prophets and messengers, scripture is the primary means to enter into an understanding of God’s word in any of these traditions; 2) the Qur’ān – and later Islamic tradition – speak of “books” of God (*kutub Allāh*), and include in this category the Gospel and Torah, as well as the Psalms and the “scrolls” of Abraham (albeit not necessarily in the form in which the Jews and Christians know them). While Christians and Jews – the ‘Children of Israel’ – consider themselves peoples of a “covenant” (or, perhaps more properly, peoples of the “word”¹²³), the Qur’ān terms them “People(s) of the Book”: how, therefore, did Christians writing in Arabic address this Qur’ānic concept of scripture? Was the Qur’ān (literally, “recitation” or “reading”) considered “book” – or “scripture”? If so, was it the Qur’ān as Muslims had/understood it, or another permutation thereof? And, Christian Arabic discussion of the Qur’ān may prove of interest not only to the historian of Christian theology (Church historian or historical theologian), but also to the student of Islamic history: for, the Arabic-speaking Christians living under the protection of the Islamic caliphate were – at least until the Crusades – a culturally significant force within *dār al-Islām*. Therefore, careful study of their writings may enhance our understanding of aspects of the *Islamic* theological

¹²³ Daniel A. Madigan, "People of the Word: Reading John's Prologue with a Muslim," *Review and Expositor* 104/1 (2007): 81-95.

discussions that were not preserved in the 'normative' annals of Islamic history. The following represents an initial entrée into the examination of Christian Arabic approaches to the Qur'ān. Chosen for the familiarity with both the qur'ānic text and Islamic tradition thereon, as well as a – generally – respectful attitude to the Islamic scripture, this preliminary study will, hopefully, demonstrate the potential merits of serious exploration of Christian Arabic texts, on the part of Muslims and Christians, Islamicists and Church and secular historians, alike.

Concluding introductory remarks on the texts to be examined

Each work under examination here exhibits a distinct tone and reason for composition. (Although the manuscript traditions are much later than the settings the texts evoke, as will be discussed below, there is internal evidence that substantiates the claims to a provenance much earlier than the later manuscripts from which the texts under discussion were culled.)

Although Paul's letter and Theodore's debate are more likely literary devices than word-by-word transcripts of a conversation or correspondence, these Christian compositions are of use not only to the student of Church History, but also to those interested in Islamic studies, particularly if read in conjunction with classical Muslim works of *tafsīr* (Qur'ān commentary) or theology. While bearing in mind polemical distortions on the part of the Christian author (or later scribes), as Christian texts, albeit in Arabic, they would not have had the same concerns for accommodating what came to be the

accepted scriptural interpretations or theological positions of the ruling – Muslim – party, as would texts authored by a Muslim.

In contrast, the ‘letter’ to the ‘Sheikh pre-eminent in his Islam’ of Sinai Ar. 434 does read as a Christian well-versed in colloquial Arabic and possibly also Hebrew, living under Muslim rule, might have written to a Muslim scholar who had stumbled on a text ‘refuting the Naṣārā’, and who – exemplifying the spirit of fairness and intellectual freedom for which the early Islamic centuries have often been praised – wished to hear a Christian authority’s response to the challenges posed therein. In this, it is closer to the tone of the famous account of the meeting between the Nestorian Catholicos Timothy I and the caliph al-Mahdī than to the more aggressive/defensive tone of either Paul or Theodore. There is no disingenuous Christianizing of qur’ānic verses, and the Bible is cited as heavily as the Qur’ān. Whether this is a function of the author’s gentle personality, a healthy respect for the sensibilities of his Muslim correspondent (and benefactor?), the stage of Christian-Muslim (or intra-Muslim) *kalam* at the time of composition, or a reflection of his own comfort in an Islamic milieu, is a matter of debate and speculation.

That the letter of the anonymous monk of Sinai Ar. 434 seems to have survived in only one manuscript indicates that it may have enjoyed less popularity than accounts of Paul’s letter or Theodore’s debate (although elements of its argument do seem to have circulated, as will be discussed below). Why this might have been so is also a matter of speculation: was it too ‘scriptural’? too ‘cerebral’? Did it not set up a premise that was sensational

enough to hold the attention of many? Or, did its irenic, calm and scholarly tone not accord with the situation that Christians engaged in conversation with (or polemics against) Muslims frequently found themselves?

What are the implications of the adoption of the language of a sacred text by various cultural and religious communities, but without necessarily adopting the religion that is derived from that very text? To what extent was the *language* of the Qur'ān tied to the *religion* of Islam? Why did Christians who could understand the Qur'ān not adopt Islam? (Conversely, how meaningful could be the conversion of a non-Arab / Arabophone to Islam?) Alternatively, was there a place in Arab Christian theology for a sympathetic approach to this Arabic scripture? In short, how were the Qur'ān, Islam and Christianity understood in Arabophone circles during the early "Islamic" centuries? The following represents an initial attempt at a systematic exploration of these questions, through a close examination of a sampling of our three texts' use of Christian-, ambiguous-, Jewish- and non-Christian-themed qur'ānic verses, building, at times, on the work of others who have touched on these themes.

When scholars today discuss qur'ānic verses, there is a general tendency to cite any passage with clear attention to the Arabic text as it has come down to us. The words of a scholar who does not have facility with Arabic may have less weight than those of someone who is able to read the text in the Arabic. To a certain extent, this is reflective of trends within Muslim circles: native Arabic

speakers, or those who have mastered the language of the Qur'ān (particularly if they have had occasion to study in Mecca or Medina) are often held in higher esteem than those who are not versed in Arabic – provided, of course, that they merit respect in other areas of their lives, as well. But, non-Muslim scholars of the Qur'ān, while – ideally – being mindful and respectful of Islamic tradition, are not expected to hold, or to be held to, the same doctrinal understandings of the Qur'ān as are Muslims. But, just because scholars today are mindful of the importance of the wording of the Qur'ān – as dictated by normative Islamic understanding of the inimitability of the language and style of the text – does that mean that scholars of an earlier age, when the doctrine of the Qur'ān's inimitable linguistic stylistics had yet to be definitively articulated, would have been as attentive to the precise wording of the text? Or, in that earlier age, might scholars of the Qur'ān (Muslim or non-) have been comfortable paraphrasing the text, focusing on its meaning – as much as, if not more than – the words themselves?

As we embark on our examination of these qur'ānic passages found in our three Christian Arabic texts, beginning with those passages that our authors and Islamic tradition have understood as referencing Christian themes, let us bear in mind two important points: first, these texts were written in Arabic, and circulated in an Arabic-speaking, Muslim-ruled world. And, second, until today, the *majlis*, or *dīwān*, is a common feature of this world. These sessions of council – but also debate – bring people together, and are occasions in which topics of interest are discussed. There are rules of engagement, in which good manners,

proper etiquette and appropriate speech are to be observed. But, the disputants or participants also expect a space in which to put forth their own beliefs.

The frankness with which al-Kindī wrote is not in keeping with contemporary 'PC' culture, nor with some popular images of the "oppressive" nature of an Islamic society. But, again, the history of one civilization is not that of another. Unlike Christianity, which was an illegal and/or persecuted sect for its first three centuries, by the death of Muhammad, Islam was intricately linked to the institutions of state – conditions which impacted their respective theologies of power and earthly rule. And, unlike Christian Europe, the Islamic world did not burn 'heretics' at the stake; it was also not confessionally (or ethnically) homogeneous. Christians, Jews, Muslims, Zoroastrians – and various denominations thereof – coexisted. This very plurality created a model of society and social interactions different from that which obtained where and when Christianity achieved its 'historically definitive' character, as identified in the Regensburg address of Pope Benedict XVI – i.e., European Christendom.

But, all too often the 'victor' has the prerogative of 'preserving' or 'defining' history for later generations. Our texts come from a 'golden age' of Islamic civilization, before it was seriously challenged from without; it was also a time in which a variety of schools of thought were flourishing within the Islamic world, schools of thought that, in later generations, would wane in influence – particularly as the Islamic world came under attack, and, in response, attempted to solidify a doctrinal identity. (One of the most successful architects of an

identifiably 'Islamic' identity or way of life is Ibn Taymiyya, whose writings have been studied by a number of modern 'Islamists', such as Mawdūdī¹²⁴ - as well as Muhammad 'Abduh, Rashīd Riḍā, and Syed Qutb; he also wrote an influential and memorable response to a version of one of our texts – Paul of Antioch's letter to his Muslim 'friends'.¹²⁵ When this occurred, some of the other 'schools' of thought within the Islamic world came to be preserved not so much in their own words, but in the words of those who disagreed with them. Our Christian authors, not subject to the same criteria that Muslim authors might have used, might therefore preserve memories of debates within Muslim circles, but the details of which are lost in the "normative" Islamic tellings of history.

Finally, whether it was in a formal *majlis* session, or the free exchange of ideas among friends or collegial scholars, be they of the same or different religious convictions, the writings under discussion are not merely academic texts. They have an author, scribes who took the time to copy them – presumably prayerfully, as a form of devotion, and an audience at which they were directed, and the people who did read or hear them. But, while the details of their authorship, and the precise contexts in which they were composed, are subject to debate and will likely never come entirely to light, the texts themselves speak to us. And if we can hear and understand what they say, we may gain insight to the circumstances that may have prompted their creation – both the inner Christian

¹²⁴ Cf. e.g. Rizwan Hussain, *Pakistan and the Emergence of Islamic Militancy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 117.

¹²⁵ See the excellent translation and commentary by Thomas Michel (*A Muslim Theologian's Response to Christianity*), as well as the comparative study of Rifaat Ebied and David Thomas (*Muslim-Christian Polemic during the Crusades*).

dynamics, as well as the larger Arabic or Islamic milieu in which they were composed.

CHAPTER THREE

Christian-Themed Qur'ānic Passages

O People of the Scripture, do not commit excess in your religion or say about God except the truth. The Messiah, Jesus ibn Maryam, was but a messenger of God and his word which he directed to Mary and a soul from him. So believe in God and his messengers. And do not say, 'Three'. Desist - it is better for you. Indeed God is but one God. Exalted is he above having a son. To him belongs whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth. And sufficient is God as disposer of affairs.

(Q 4:171)

As seen in this passage, Christian Trinitarian and Incarnation theology encounters a direct Qur'ānic challenge. Challenges to Christian doctrinal articulations are not, however, unique to the Qur'ān. The first ecclesiastical councils were summoned because of doctrinal disagreements among the Christian faithful, and, from their earliest centuries, Christians encountered Jewish and pagan challenges to their most central beliefs. But, while, in pre-Islamic times, Hebrew Scripture and Greek philosophy were employed by Church Doctors in Trinitarian and Christological discussions, with the advent of an Arab prophet and an Arabic scripture six centuries after the Christ, Jesus of Nazareth, how would Christians respond?

Our authors (and Arabophone Christian apologists, generally) use at least three methods in this endeavor: assertion of Christian monotheism, affirming that Trinitarian and Incarnate Logos theology do not compromise the transcendence of the divinity (Christians do, in fact, maintain the oneness of God; when they say “three”, it is not three gods of whom they speak, but, rather, attributes of the one God – echoing Muslim discussions of God and his attributes, particularly the “beautiful names” and, most particularly his Word – the Qur'ān; and, in this, they no more detract from God's

transcendence than do Muslims when the Qur'ān speaks of God's hand¹, etc.), invocation of non-Christian "support" of Christian Trinitarian theology (particularly Genesis and the Psalms and pre-Christian Hellenic philosophy, but also the Qur'ān) and, finally, demonstration of – non-Christian, especially qur'ānic - validation of the Christian doctrine of the incarnate logos (the Qur'ān calls Jesus a "word from God": Q 3:45; it also speaks of God's creative Word: Q 3:59), again echoing intra-Muslim discussions of the uncreated Qur'ān: Christians are, in fact, more faithful to God than are Muslims, in that they honor God and his Word, without falsely separating them, or saying that God's word is 'created in time'.

As the Qur'ān has a number of passages that Islamic tradition – and our Christian authors – understand as referencing Christians and/or Christianity, it is to a selection of such passages that we will first turn in this exploration of "early Christian Arabic uses of the Qur'ān". As the Qur'ān does not always distinguish between Jews and Christians, such passages may include those that contain references to the Children of Israel and the People of the Book (those who were given the Book before you), as well as passages alluding explicitly to Christians/Christianity (*naṣāra/ahl al-injīl*), and/or themes or figures from the New Testament (i.e. Jesus, Mary, Zechariah) or Christian tradition (i.e. monks or churches)². Examination of the use our authors make of a selection of these passages will aid in the understanding of their use of other passages, which Islamic tradition has not (or not so clearly) understood as containing Christian-related themes (discussed in chapters 4-6, below). The following is not intended as a comprehensive

¹ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 176r; Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, par. 54.

² See, for example, *EQ*, s.vv. "Church"; "Christians and Christianity"; "Monasticism and Monks"; "Jesus"; "Mary"; "Zechariah"; "John the Baptist"; "Gospel"; "Apostles"; "Baptism."

overview of the qur'ānic allusions or theological assertions found in the three texts at hand; rather, it should be read as an indication of the variety of both the themes and methods of argumentations employed by Arabophone Christian apologists.

Trinity

As Trinitarian discussions preceded the précising of Christological definitions, let us first examine our authors' responses to the qur'ānic exhortation not to "say three". In pre-Islamic times, Christian authors would note Old Testament indications of the Trinity³, both in the testimony of the Prophets and even in the knowledge of the Patriarchs themselves. For example, the divine messenger (Gen 16:7, 18, 21:17, 31:11; Ex 3:2) was understood to be God the Son – rather than God the Father, and the "Spirit of the Lord" was read as a reference to the Holy Spirit. The distinction of the Son from the Father, but their equally partaking of the Godhead was early on asserted in the refutation of Arius at Nicea (325 CE); the distinction between God's Word and Spirit (and Wisdom) remained, however, a matter of discussion. For this distinction - of the second and third person of the Trinity - was not unanimously agreed upon by Christian thinkers: while Paul (Heb 1:3) understood Wisdom (cf. Wis 7:25-6) as referring to the Son, other early Christians (Irenaeus, Theophilus, Hippolytus) considered this an allusion to the Spirit. And, by and large, Patristic authors (e.g. Gregory Nazianzen, Epiphanius, Basil, Cyril of Alexandria) would maintain that, under the Old Covenant, no clear articulation of Trinitarian theology was to be found. Rather, passages such as the attestation in Psalms 33:6 to God's "Word", Isaiah 61:1 to his "Spirit", and Proverbs 9:1, to his "Wisdom", as well as the

³ For a concise overview, see *Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. "The Blessed Trinity."

messianic discussions of Isaiah 7:14 (“Emmanuel”) and Isaiah 9:6 (“God the Mighty,” rendered as “angel of great counsel” by Septuagint translators), taken as Old Testament affirmations of the divine nature of the promised “deliverer”, were understood as (necessary) preparation for the final revelation of the Gospel. Even the seeming personification of Wisdom of Proverbs 8: 22, 23 (cf Eccl 24: 8-13) and the distinction of Wisdom from Jehovah in the Wisdom of Solomon (7:21, 25-26; cf. Heb 1:3) was not taken as Hebrew Bible articulation of a Trinitarian doctrine, for nowhere in the Old Testament is there clear allusion to a third ‘person’ of God. In the words of Epiphanius: “the one Godhead is above all declared by Moses, and the twofold personality (i.e. Father and Son) is strenuously asserted by the Prophets. The Trinity is made known by the Gospel.”⁴

Early Arabophone Christians, in conversation with Muslims whose Qur’ān knew of Christian divisions, employed a variety of defenses/explanations, both for Nicene Trinitarian monotheism, and for (in the case of our authors, Chalcedonian) Christology. And, their defenses ranged from Bible (Old and New Testaments) to Greek philosophy to the Qur’ān itself. Our authors have a three-pronged approach to their Trinitarian discussions: a) Christians do not, in fact, say ‘three’ gods and b) external support for Trinitarian theology, from pre-Christian times – both Bible and Greek philosophy – and from the Qur’ān and c) parallels with Islamic theological categories: namely, the ‘beautiful names’ of God (*al-asmā’ al-ḥusnā*).

⁴ *Haer.*, lxxiv; cited in Catholic Encyclopedia, “The Blessed Trinity”, available at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15047a.htm#II> (accessed February 13, 2011).

One God, not three: Explanatory defense of Nicene orthodoxy

The assertion of Christian monotheism – with Trinitarian language - is perhaps most clearly emphasized in the introductory antiphons (discussed above, in the Introduction). Our authors’ defense of this Trinitarian monotheism draws upon Greek philosophy, biblical prooftexts and – most important for our purposes – qur’ānic affirmations.

Rather than, or in addition to, the ‘father’ ‘son’ ‘holy spirit’, our Arabophone authors use categories familiar to a reader of the Qur’ān (and a student of Greek philosophy), insisting that the Creator God has attributes that distinguish him from the God of the *mushrikūn* (polytheists: those who do not believe in the one, living, God of Abraham): his are living, wise, speaking – unlike the stone, or gold, or silver, whose attributes (*ṣifāt*) are NOT living, wise or speaking.⁵ The anonymous monk, in fact, starts his treatise with an assertion of Christian praise of this living, reasonable, wise God, in contradistinction to the Israelites’ worshipping of a golden calf⁶ - a theme Theodore, too, early on mentions:

The reason why God abandoned the Israelites is that when Moses went up into the mountain to receive the Torah from his Lord, he delayed and did not come down from the mountain before the Israelites had worshipped the golden calf in the desert instead of their Lord who had created them. We had no doubt about him, that he is the god of Abraham and of Isaac, and of Jacob, and that he is God, the son of God, the word of God and a spirit from him, without any division between them (*baynahum*),

⁵ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 173r; cf. Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, pars. 25-28.

⁶ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 171r; cf. Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, par. 10.

an emphatic assertion of Nicene orthodoxy.⁷ That the plural, rather than the dual, of the third person ‘them’ (*baynahum*) is used, indicates that Theodore is referencing Trinitarian rather than Christological theology (no division among the three persons of the Trinity, rather than between the divine and human natures of Christ, united in a single hypostasis).

While Theodore both reflects and engages Islamic tradition on discussions of God’s knowledge⁸ in his refutation of the Qur’ānic charge that some have mistakenly understood Jesus to have said “Worship me and my mother as two gods besides God” (Q 5:116): “You know that our Master did not say that to the people ‘Take me and my mother as two gods’; Rather, he said, ‘Take me [as] God’”,⁹ Paul and the anonymous monk bypass such Qur’ānic statements that (potentially awkwardly) misrepresent Christian teachings (why Theodore might be less hesitant to engage such passages is discussed below). Theodore’s approach to Q 5:116 merits further study, as it both reflects an awareness of Islamic theological questions regarding the extent of God’s knowledge and the nature of the Qur’ān (if God is, in fact, omniscient, why would he ask Jesus a question in the Qur’ān? And, if the Qur’ān reflects the eternal speech of God, when was such a question posed?), and indicates that Theodore’s Muslim interlocutors

⁷ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 71.

⁸ For a general introduction, see Goldziher, *Introduction*.

⁹ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 84-85: Did God know that Jesus would give him an answer in these words, an audible answer? Or did He not know until He asked him and he informed Him? If you say He did not know, you will have made Him ignorant...And if He already knew, what meaning did His query have, about a matter the truth of which He had already apprehended. I am asking you to apprise me of when this question was put – before your prophet or after him...[After, on the Day of Resurrection] ... Your prophet knew what was in the soul of God ... before that hour, but He did not know that a lie was told about Jesus until He would ask him about it on Resurrection Day? [God knew that Jesus had not said it, but He wanted people to hear it].

were familiar with ‘orthodox’ Christian Trinitarian teachings (Father – Son – Holy Spirit), rather than a seeming heterodox vision to which the Qur’ān appears to allude in this passage (God – Jesus – Mary).¹⁰

Instead, our Arabophone authors are chiefly intent on exposing Greek philosophical Trinitarian understandings. Indeed, the first question the anonymous monk sets out to answer is whether the *jawhar* of God is comprised of – and identical to – the *aqānīm*.¹¹ As with Paul and Theodore, a series of arguments from Greek philosophy are employed, alluding therein also to Islamic discussions of God and his attributes (*ṣifāt*) – the so-called ‘beautiful names’ of the Qur’an (*al-asmā’ al-ḥusnā*; cf. Q 17:110), an allusion that Paul makes explicit¹² (see Chapter 4, and the Conclusion, below). Christian Arabic use of earlier Christian employment of Greek philosophical categories in support of Trinitarian arguments has been discussed elsewhere, so a brief overview of our authors’ discussion will suffice here.¹³

Like other Arabophone Christians, our authors insist¹⁴ that the *aqānīm* (‘hypostases’) of the *jawhar* (‘substance’) of God are the *asmā’* (‘names’) and *ṣifāt* (‘attributes’) of the *dhāt* (being) of the one God - whose *jawhar* is not three gods - neither ‘divided’ (*mutajazziya*) nor ‘distinct’ (*mutaba‘īda*). Rather, they are like three names for one king, akin to the *rūḥ* and ‘*aql* and *kalima*: the spirit (*rūḥ*) is the essence (*dhāt*) for man (*insān*); the intellect (‘*aql*) born from it, and the word (*kalima*) proceeding from the

¹⁰ Perhaps an awareness of the Collyridians – women in Arabia who worshiped Mary as God (a memory of which is preserved as the 79th ‘heresy’ of Epiphanius’ *Panarion*) - on the part of the Qur’ān?

¹¹ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 171v.

¹² Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, par. 32; cf. Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 98.

¹³ See, e.g., the works of Gutas, Frank, Thomas and Griffith.

¹⁴ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 172r.

intellect (*'aql*) and spirit (*rūḥ*) – there is only the distinction in names (*asmā'*), not essence (*dhāt*), in these attributes (*ṣifāt*): none is before, or distinct from, the other. This is like the sun – light emanates from this *jawhar*, and heat is generated from it, but, as with God, the sun – the *jawhar* – is one being (*dhāt*) known by various attributes (*ṣifāt*)¹⁵; or, it is like the convergence of the waters of 3 seas: the seas are known by their separate names, but when the waters come together, there is no distinction in this “watery *jawhar*” – except that the person who gathered the waters from the seas knows the names of the seas from which the waters were gathered, and which now are together in the one *jawhar*.¹⁶ In the words of Theodore:

God, the one named ‘Father’, and the Word, the one named ‘Son’, and the Holy Spirit are also a single God. The Father is the mind (*'aql*), the Son is the word (*kalima*), generated from the *'aql*, and the Spirit is the emanation (*al-munbathiq*) from the *'aql* and the *kalima*. The Father is the originator (*al-mubdi'*), the Son is the producer (*al-munshi'*), and the Holy Spirit is the enlivener (*al-muḥiyy*). He is the one-to-be-worshiped (*al-ma'būd*) in three *aqānīm*, the one eternal *jawhar*, may he be blessed, who leads us to know and worship Him, and He furnishes us with information about Himself from His scriptures. Most highly exalted be He! You charge us with being opposed to Him, while we are the ones who are the believers (an assertion discussed below).¹⁷

In short, rather than engage in an extensive refutation of Qur'ānic and later Islamic charges of Christian ‘tri-theism’, our Arabophone Christians skirt the question and (re)iterate the arguments of their forefathers, evoking conceptual parallels to the 3-in-1 of Christian Trinitarian doctrine: is Christian Trinitarian theology an assertion of multiple manifestations of one being? Or, are the three persons of the Trinity various aspects of one essence? Our authors employ both devices: an ember that kindles multiple fires does

¹⁵ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 172r; cf. Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, par. 43.

¹⁶ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 172v; cf. Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 102.

¹⁷ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 98.

not mean the *jawhar* of fire is now multiple; rather, each fire is still properly ‘fire’; a piece of gold can be melted and divided, yet the “goldness” is not thereby made multiple.¹⁸ On the other hand, just as the body is alive because of the ‘*aql*, *rūḥ* and *nafs* (intellect – spirit – soul), which nobody can see, yet one would not say they are 3 bodies¹⁹, or as one can speak of the ‘hand’ of the tailor making clothes, and not intend 2 craftsmen: the hand and the tailor, one can speak of the actions of the ‘Spirit’ or ‘Word’ of God, and not intend multiple gods. Similarly, the orb, light and heat of the sun, or the flame, light and heat of a fire, or the intellect, reason and spirit of a man do not indicate 3 suns, fires or men.²⁰ In the words of Theodore:

O Muslim, your heart is like the flint stone from which fire is struck, white it is cold as snow. And your request that I differentiate for you the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is, by my life, a cold request, due to the blindness of your heart, the paltriness of your intelligence and the insufficiency of your argument. For, God and His Word and His Spirit are a single God, a single One to be worshipped, a single Judge, a single Lord, may His splendor be glorified. He is mighty, indescribable, indefinable, incomprehensible, and not to be characterized.²¹

Paul further refutes charges of tritheism by saying that these assertions of the various *aqānīm* no more imply comparison of God to humans (*tashbīh*) and multiplicity (*shirk*), than do Muslim understandings of God as having a leg, or face, etc. imply *tashbīh* – or anthropomorphism (*tajassum*;²² an argument the anonymous monk employs in defense of the union of the divine and human natures in Christ: God’s ‘spirit’ and ‘word’, as

¹⁸ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 99; cf. Houry, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, par. 39.

¹⁹ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 97-98.

²⁰ Houry, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, pars. 42-43.

²¹ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 100-101.

²² Houry, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, pars. 49-54.

embodied in the person of Christ, and affirmed by the Qur'ān itself in Q 4:171 and 3:45, are likened to God's "hand" and "arm" and "pinky" from elsewhere in Scripture)²³.

As for scriptural *support* for Christian Trinitarian claims: "These names²⁴ [i.e. Father – Son – Holy Spirit], it is not we Christians who ascribed them to him on our own, but it is God Most High who thus named his divinity." Paul then cites Moses, David, Job, Isaiah and Jesus (Deut 32:6, Ps 51:13, 33:6, Job 13:4, Is 40:7-8, and Mt 28:19-20) as speaking of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as well as citing the 'Spirit' or 'Word' of God. Paul goes on, however, to include qur'ānic passages as proof of Christian Trinitarian theology²⁵:

For it also says in the Book: ... 'When God said: O Jesus, Son of Mary, remember my favor to you and your mother, when I supported you with the Holy Spirit'(Q 5:110), ... and also: Mary, daughter of Imran, who maintained her chastity, we breathed into it of our spirit and she confirmed the Word of her lord and his books, and she was of the devoted (Q 66:12).

In sum, while employing devices from their forebearers' arguments with Jewish and Hellenic opponents, these trinitarian arguments allude to themes that would have been familiar to a Muslim audience: the nature of the Qur'ān (created/uncreated) as the 'speech' of God (divine attribute? If so, what was its relation to God's 'essence'?), the 'names of God' (also part of the discussion of God's attributes and essence), and anthropomorphic understandings of the transcendent God. In the light of Islamic and qur'ānic assertions of the "oneness" of God (*tawhīd*; cf. esp. Q 112), it is perhaps not surprising that qur'ānic verses are not frequently employed in support of Christian

²³ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 176r.

²⁴ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, pars. 30-31.

²⁵ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, pars. 31-32.

Trinitarian doctrines – with the exceptions of allusions to Word/Spirit conflation and God’s attributes and ‘beautiful names’ (discussed below).

Incarnation theology: The Messiah Jesus Son of Mary – Word? Spirit? Son? of God?

In the words of Jaroslav Pelikan, referencing A. von Harnack, ‘the most important intellectual struggle in all of Christian history – took place in response to the question of whether the divine in Jesus Christ was identical with God the Creator’.²⁶ First, at Nicea: *homoousia*: “one-in-being” with the Father; and then, at Chalcedon: the hypostatic union: the divine and human natures united in one ‘hypostasis’. For, nothing in Christian belief is more central to its soteriology than Jesus of Nazareth as Son of God - God made man – God-with-us (Emmanuel), born of the Virgin Mary, who suffered, died and was buried – and rose again as a salvific offering for the redemption and salvation of humankind.

Judaism would reject the Christian understanding of Jesus of Nazareth as the fulfillment of the messianic predictions of the Old Testament, and see the Christian claims of Christ’s divine Sonship as blasphemous. The Qur’ān chides the Jews for their “calumnious claims” against Mary (Q 4:156; cf. 66:12), insisting on Jesus as the Son of Mary, created by God without a human father (God need only say ‘Be’ and it becomes; cf. e.g. Q 19:35). But it also chastises the Christians for exaggerating about Jesus: on Judgment Day, he will ask his followers whether or not he had ever asked them to take him and “his mother” as “gods besides God”(Q 5:116). The glad tidings of John as a son to Zechariah (Mary’s guardian), a chaste and righteous prophet, and a “confirmation of a

²⁶ J. Pelikan, *Mary through the Centuries. Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 48.

word from God” (Q 3:39; cf. 19:2-15; 6:85), are mentioned in conjunction with the account of ‘God’s glad tidings of a word from him, named the Messiah, Jesus Son of Mary, honored in this world and the next’ (Q 3:45).

Although Trinitarian discussions figured large in Christian thought (the assertion of the oneness of God in 3 persons, and the distinctions among, and relations between, the 3 persons), the most enduring splits in Christianity would center on the understandings of how the Second Person of the Trinity, the Word of God, became Incarnate in the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth (witness until today the ‘Monophysite’ Armenians, Jacobites, Copts; the “Nestorian” Church of the East; the “Chalcedonian” Latins, Greeks, Melikites – and Maronites?). And, members of each of these Christian groupings came to speak, think, write and pray in Arabic, living under Muslim rule. As the texts under examination here are Chalcedonian in confession, the authors would have understood the separate divine and human natures of Jesus of Nazareth to have been united in one hypostasis (the so-called “hypostatic union”). But, like their fellow Christians of the Church of the East (who understand each of the two natures, human and divine, to reside in a separate hypostasis – so as to preserve the unique human and divine elements of the Incarnate Word of God) and the ‘Monophysites’ (who resisted Chalcedon’s splitting of the human and divine elements, and insisted on the “oneness” of the nature of the Son of God), our authors would have understood Jesus to be the “anointed” (Heb. Messiah; Gr. Christ) one who fulfilled the prophecies of the Hebrew Bible (albeit not in the fashion in which Jewish tradition expected).

Arab Christian readings of qur'ānic Christology

The importance of Harnack's question and its currency in late antique society is evidenced in the fact that the Qur'ān itself asserts a Christological position. Rather than engaging the qur'ānic polemic against those who say "God" is the Messiah, or "God" is "Third of Three" (Q 5:17, 72, 73), or the assertion that Jesus gave good news of a messenger named Ahmad (Q 61:6), our Arabophone authors set out to explain how, were Muslims to read their Qur'ān properly, they, too, would honor the Word of God and his Spirit.

For, while the Qur'ān terms Jesus "the Messiah", Islamic tradition has not understood this title as an indication of Jesus as the "anointed one" or lord and savior" of Christian tradition (perhaps akin to the distinction between Christian interpretations of Jesus as Messiah and Jewish messianic traditions). The Qur'ān (as discussed below) also seems to term Jesus as a "Word" and "Spirit" from God; again, Islamic tradition does not understand this as God incarnate, the second person of the Trinity, the Word of God. And, Islamic tradition does not understand Mary as "Theotokos" (God-bearer) when the Qur'ān terms Jesus as "Son of Mary"; rather, that *nasab* (Arabic kinship nomenclature: "son of") is understood as an emphasis on Jesus' humanity: the son of a human mother – albeit one who had no father (rather than the Christian understanding of Jesus as the "Son of God"). As others have expounded on the figure of Jesus, the Messiah, Son of Mary, in Christian and Islamic tradition,²⁷ the focus here is on the use our Christian Arabophone

²⁷ See EQ, s.v. "Jesus"; also cf. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987); Tarif Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Oddbjørn Leirvik,

authors make of qur'ānic statements about Jesus and those who claim, or who are understood, to follow him.

If the introductory antiphons of our works assert Trinitarian monotheism, their conclusions affirm their belief in the Messiah. In the concluding words of Theodore's text, "To the Master, the Messiah, be glory, honor, might and worship, now and always, to the ages of ages. Amen!"²⁸ Paul and the anonymous monk do not have a concluding antiphon exalting the Messiah, but the final segment of each of their works asserts the virtues (and victory) of Christianity: "The Messiah, Word of God, His *jawhar*. God situated in Zion, making *āyāt*, denying the Jewish people ... from vanquished Judaism to complete Naṣrāniyya, as the Qur'ān says about them: 'For a group of the Israelites believed and a group disbelieved'"²⁹. In the understanding of the monk, Christians are the believing party, as they believed in the divinity of the Messiah. And, for Paul, the perfection of the "law of grace" – the revelation of the Incarnate Logos - nullifies anything that came before (Judaism) or after (Islam).³⁰

Key 'Christological' qur'ānic texts

Q 3:45-51 is among the qur'ānic passages paraphrased by our authors:

When the angels said: O Mary! Verily, God gives you the good news of a Word from him; his name is the Messiah, Jesus, Son of Mary, honored in this world and the next, one of those drawn near.

He will speak to people in the cradle and in manhood, one of the righteous.

Images of Jesus Christ in Islam: Introduction, Survey of Research, Issues of Dialogue, LXXVI of *Studia Missionalia Upsaliensia* (Uppsala: Swedish Institute of Missionary Research, 1999).

²⁸ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 125.

²⁹ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 181r.

³⁰ Khoury, ed. and trans., *Paul of Antioch, Risāla*, pars. 59-63.

She said: My lord! How shall I have a son when man has not touched me? He said: Thus: God creates what he wishes. When he has decreed something, he need but say to it 'Be' and it becomes.

And he will teach him the book and the wisdom and the Torah and the Gospel.

A messenger to the Children of Israel: I have come to you with a sign from your lord, that I create for you from clay the figure of a bird, then I will blow on it, and it will become a bird, by the permission of God, and I heal the one born blind and the leper, and I enliven the dead by God's permission, and I inform you of what you consume, and what you keep in your houses. Surely therein is a sign for you, were you to believe.

Confirming what is in your hands of the Torah, and to make licit for you some of what was forbidden to you, and I have come to you with a sign from your lord. Revere God and obey me.

Verily God is my lord and your lord, so worship him. This is the straight path.

While normative Christian tradition records Jesus' curing of a leper and a man born blind, and his reviving of the dead, it does not claim he spoke from the cradle, nor that he blew life into a bird from clay (traditions to this effect are, however, found in apocryphal gospels).³¹ As, however, these are put forth in Islamic tradition as "miracles" of Jesus, our Christian authors do not hesitate to list them in support of their Christian claims about Jesus of Nazareth. In so doing, however, they selectively overlook, or reread, the Qur'ānic passage in its entirety: subtly changing the Qur'ānic assertion that Jesus did these things only by the "permission of God" to the declaration that it was by virtue of his *own divinity* that these miracles were effected. In such discussions of the truth of Christianity, therefore, Arabophone Christian employment of Qur'ānic texts are of interest for the method of argumentation, particularly the willingness to invoke Qur'ānic testimony to events in Christ's life that are not included in the normative Christian canon (and, in some instances, explicitly excluded – as with Jesus' fashioning the bird from clay) *in*

³¹ Such as the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, or the Arabic Infancy Gospels; cf. James Keith Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation Based on M.R. James* (1993; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 68-110.

support of Christian doctrinal claims, rather than as indication of ‘errors’ in the qur’ānic text and, therefore, its not actually being from God. That our authors allude to qur’ānic claims without, however, precisely citing the qur’ānic verse in question is indicative of a selective Christian re-reading of the Qur’ān for a message that, in Paul’s words, “conforms to [their] doctrine and belief.” Furthermore, Islamic tradition preserves no interpretations of these passages other than as indicating a poignant critique of Christian claims about the nature of Jesus as human and divine. And, I could locate no variant readings of the above passages that did not contain correctives to Christian theological assertions. I would therefore argue that, in cases of qur’ānic passages that, in Islamic tradition, are interpreted as explicitly referencing Christianity, Arabophone Christian authors would employ selective verbatim quotation of verses that accord with Christian doctrine, but a convenient paraphrasing of those passages, which, when read in their entirety, challenge and critique Christian doctrine. Perhaps this trend is nowhere more evident than in our authors’ use of Q 4:171.³²

The only qur’ānic citation referenced by Theodore, Paul and the anonymous monk of Sinai Ar. 434 is Q 4:171³³; it is also the most frequently-utilized passage in our three texts. This passage, with its simultaneous referencing of Christological and Trinitarian beliefs, was a favorite verse for those Christian exegetes of the Qur’ān who, rather than attacking the sacred text of Islam, wanted to find a way to appropriate the

³² Sinai Ar. 434, ff. 176r-v; Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 71-3, 83, [85], 86, 90-1, 93; Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, pars. 9, 40.

³³ Other overlapping citations are: Q 1:6-7; 2:62; 3:3, 55, 85; 4:157, 158; 5:82, 110; 29:46; 42:51; 66:12 (by Abū Qurra and Paul of Antioch); Q 2:111; 3:59 (by Abū Qurra and the anonymous monk); and Q 61:14 by Paul and the anonymous monk.

Qur'ān much the way Christians had appropriated the Hebrew Bible.³⁴ While one might expect the Christian glossing of this passage to differ significantly from that of Muslim exegetes, one might anticipate some level of uniformity in Christian references to this verse. But, as demonstrated below, there is a wide range of interpretation of the various nuances of this verse in both the Muslim and Christian glosses thereon, as well as – as might be expected – between ‘Muslim’ and ‘Christian’ readings thereof. Thus, while theologically-based parallels are found in the Muslim and Christian writings, our authors’ various and varying approaches to this qur’ānic verse are valuable not so much for the light they might shed on the form of the Qur’ān known to them, but, rather, for what they tell us of the apologetic concerns out of which the various texts emerged. In the following, we shall explore the variety that is to be found in our Christian authors’ use of the passage, and compare their glosses with a variety of Muslim understandings of the verse, as a “case study” of Christian Arabic uses of qur’ānic verses that have traditionally been understood to reference Christians or Christianity.

Certainly, comparison with the use of this qur’ānic verse in other early Christian texts coming from the Islamic world (most notably the Nestorian Catholicos Timothy I and the Hāshimī-Kindī correspondence) would also be beneficial, as these two texts (which exist in early Arabic forms, and are both available in English translation) are representative of the two extremes of the spectrum of Christian responses to Islam: Timothy is careful to avoid any statement that may be offensive to Muslims, while the Hāshimī-Kindī correspondence appears intent on ridiculing Islam. As both demonstrate

³⁴ For discussion of the Qur’ān verses cited by Christians, cf. e.g. P. Khoury, ed., *al-Tafsīr al-masīhiyy lil-Qur’ān min al-qarn al-thāmin ḥattā l-qarn al-thānī ashār* (Jouniyeh, Lebanon: Paulist Press, 2002).

familiarity with the sacred text of Islam, their varying tones focus attention on the ways in which Christians employed the Qur'ān, furthering an understanding of early Christian approaches to the Qur'ān within the Arabic-speaking, Muslim-ruled world. Additionally, the employment of Qur'ān citations in later texts, such as Elias of Nisibis' discussion of the comparative virtues of Arabic and Syriac³⁵, Bar Ṣalībī's *Response to the Arabs*³⁶ or Bar Hebraeus' *History*³⁷, merits further discussion. It is hoped that the following will spark further scholarship on the nuances of early Christian uses of Qur'ānic passages that directly reference Christian themes.

Q 4:171

In Islamic tradition, Q 4:171 is traditionally understood as the most explicit Qur'ānic rejection of both the Incarnation and the Trinity. (Do not say 'three'; exalted is [God] above having a son.) But it also contains reference to Jesus – the Messiah – as the 'word' of God and a 'spirit' from him. Christian polemicists and apologists responding to Islam have been quick to use this verse as proof of *Qur'ānic validation* of Christian doctrines of the incarnate logos and the Trinity: in this reading, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are all read as being referenced in the verse – a far cry from traditional Muslim readings and, in fact, the actual wording, of the verse, especially when

³⁵ On the "battle" of linguistic virtues, see EQ, s.v. "Language and Style of the Qur'ān"; also, Richard J.H. Gottheil, ed. and trans., *A Treatise on Syriac Grammar by Mar Elia of Suba* (Berlin: Wolf Peiser Verlag, 1887); Cf. Witold Witzkowski, "Elias Bar Shenaya's Chronicle," in *Syriac Polemics: Studies in Honour of Gerrit Jan Reinink*, edited by Wout Jac. Van Bekkum, Jan Willem Drijvers, Alex K.C. Klugkist (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 219-38.

³⁶ Dionysius Bar Ṣalībī, *A Response to the Arabs*, vol. 615 of *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium. Scriptores Syri*. Tomus 239, trans. Joseph P. Amar (Leuven: Peeters, 2005).

³⁷ F. Nau, ed. and trans., "Deux textes de Bar Hebraeus sur Mahomet et le Quran," *Journal Asiatique* 21 (1927), 311-29; Ernest Wallace Budge, *The Chronography of Abu'l-Faraj Bar Hebraeus*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1932).

read in conjunction with Q 4:172: “Never would the Messiah disdain to be a servant of God, nor would the angels near (to Him). And whoever disdains God’s worship and is arrogant – He will gather them to Himself altogether.”

The Muslim exegetes

Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767), Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) and , Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) span the periods from which our texts purport to derive, and provide a glimpse into the development - and variety - of exegetical methods employed by the (Arabophone, but necessarily mono-lingual) Muslim *mufasssirūn* – Qur’ān commentators³⁸. While the early Muqātil (whose *tafsīr* comes to about 4 rather thick printed volumes) appears most concerned with those passages that relate, in some way, to the “tales of the Israelites (Jews or Christians)”, al-Ṭabarī is very attentive to grammatical constructions, as well as the various interpretations, of each lexeme, and phrase, of the received text.

In order to appreciate the nuances of their approaches, the comments of a slightly later exegete, Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Tha‘labī (d. 427/1035), may be helpful. Al-Tha‘labī attempted a critical review of the art of exegesis in his day, critiquing his predecessors.³⁹ For example, while he praised the efforts of Muqātil and al-Ṭabarī, he considered the former to have been merely expository, paying little attention to the legal weight of the Qur’ān; al-Ṭabarī is deemed a good exegete, but a poor writer: he includes

³⁸ See the introduction to McAuliffe’s *Qur’anic Christians* for an overview of the lives of each.

³⁹ For an excellent overview of al-Tha‘labī’s life and qur’ānic commentary, and his place with respect to other exegetes, see Saleh, *Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition*. The following discussion is taken primarily from Chapter One of Saleh’s work.

too many chains of transmission as authoritative support for his points, thus clouding his arguments. He “corrects” al-Ṭabarī’s over-utilization of chains of transmitters by placing them at the beginning of his work, so the reader can peruse his arguments, unencumbered by the lengthy lists of names that validate the traditions. Al-Tha‘labī insists that exegesis is the “chief” of the religious sciences, challenging the more traditional understanding of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) in that role and the even earlier estimation of *kalām* (dialectical theology) as the greater *fiqh* – as well as, possibly, attempting to place discernment of the Qur’ān in pride of place over blind adherence to prophetic *sunna* – not surprising for a non-Arab who may have had no desire to become “Arabized” beyond linguistically. For, by his day, what would prove to be the major schools of legal thought had been established, as were the “normative” theological positions of the *mutakallimūn* (i.e. the inimitability and ‘uncreatedness’ of the Qur’ān; the fate of the grave sinner; “how” God “sits on the throne”; etc.); jurists, however, had still to rule on new cases, and theologians - Mu‘tazila or Ash‘arī – would continue to discuss, teach and attempt to persuade others of the merits of their positions. And, with the rejection of the Mu‘tazila position and an increasing exclusion or marginalization of Christians (and others) from such debates, Muslims were increasingly turning to the Qur’ān (and prophetic *sunna*) in support of traditions or interpretation.

But, exegesis was not solely in the hands of those who professed the ‘uncreated’ nature of the Qur’ān. For, a century later, al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144), would pay particular attention to the grammar and syntax of the Qur’ān, in the context of his (Mu‘tazila) belief in the ‘createdness’ of the Qur’ān, but also its ‘inimitability’. And,

while Mu‘tazila methodologies would rely heavily on reason (as opposed to the traditions of those who came before), and would thus be subject to criticisms of “*tafsīr bi-l-ra’y*”, or *tafsīr* according to personal opinion, the fruits of their intellectual endeavors were not discarded because of disagreement with their theological positions. Thus, al-Zamakhsharī’s work came to be highly valued for his exposition of the inimitability of the Qur’ān. The work of the later Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210: termed a “renewer” of the religion of his day: *mujaddid al-dīn*), whose dialectical/dialogical style resembles Aquinas’ *Summa*, can be read as a strong Ash‘arite response to Mu‘tazila views, employing the methods of exegetes like al-Zamakhsharī in order to refute them.

But, where might our Christian readers of the Qur’ān fall in relation to the above spectrum? This question is of particular interest when the Muslim exegetes appear to be refuting Christian readings or interpretations of qur’ānic passages or lexemes (discussed below). Let us now turn to the one qur’ānic verse that is cited by all three of our authors, through the lenses of the above selection of classical Muslim exegetes, comparing their arguments with those found in our Christian texts.

Exegesis of Q 4:171

Q 4:171 is a Medinan verse traditionally understood to have been revealed in the context of the delegation of Christians from Najrān who came to ally themselves with Muhammad⁴⁰; it is one of the classical qur’ānic refutations of errant Christian belief. It stands in marked contrast to some passages found elsewhere in the Qur’ān (notably in Q

⁴⁰ Cf. Abū l-Ḥasan Muqātil b. Sulaymān al-Balkhī, *al-Tafsīr*, ed. ‘Abdallāh Maḥmūd Shihāta, 5 vols. (Cairo: n.p., 1980-87), ad Q 4:171: This verse came down in the context of the Christians of Najrān, to al-Sayyid and al-‘Aqib and those with them.

3 - Sūrat Al ‘Imrān, Q 5 -Sūrat al-Mā’ida and Q 19 - Sūrat Maryam), which commend Christians and Christianity – with regards both to faith and praxis – and which were revealed, for example, at the time of the first ‘emigration’ (*hijra*) – in which a group of Muḥammad’s followers were granted asylum and protection by the ruler of Abyssinia. By the time this verse was revealed, Muhammad was firmly established in Medina, and various tribes from the peninsula were coming to him, asking for an alliance.

O people of the book: The exegetes are agreed that here the Christians (*al-naṣāra*, or, according to al-Ṭabarī, the ‘People of the Gospel’ from among the Christians⁴¹) are meant.

Do not exaggerate in your religion or say about God except the truth: For the early commentator Muqātil b. Sulaymān, the *dīn* of the *naṣāra* was Islam – and their exaggeration was their saying “other than the truth in the affair of Jesus the son of Mary”⁴². The other two commentators do not specify the religion that is meant. All, however, are agreed that the calumny of which the Christians are accused relates to what they claim about Jesus, the son of Mary. At perhaps the epitome of rationalist – but Ash‘arite, i.e. non-Mu‘tazila - qur’ānic exegesis, the later, Persian exegete, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, places Q 4:171 in the context of a contrast between Jews and Christians⁴³: while the Jews are chastised for their posturing with regards to Christ, Christians are censored for exaggerating his significance. ‘Do not say about God other than the truth’: do not

⁴¹ Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān ‘an ta’wīl āy al-Qur’ān*, ed. Aḥmad Sā‘id ‘Alī et al., 30 vols. (Cairo: n.p., 1954-57), ad Q 4:171.

⁴² Muqātil, *Tafsīr*, ad Q 4:171.

⁴³ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr (Maḥāṣil al-ghayb)*, ed. Muḥammad Muḥyī l-Dīn ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd, 32 vols. In 16 (Cairo: n.p., 1933), ad Q 4:171.

ascribe the incarnation to God, nor to his oneness the body of a man or his spirit. Al-Rāzī demonstrates how the Qur'ān attempts to guide Christians from their error to the truth – namely, the Messiah Jesus the son of Mary is a messenger of God and his servant.

The Messiah, Jesus b. Maryam: Alone among the commentators chosen for this sampling of Islamic exegesis, al-Ṭabarī provides an elaborate discussion of this clause, even going into a discussion of the etymology of the term 'al-Masīḥ'.⁴⁴ First, he points out how, in the Qur'ān, the very name of Jesus indicates that he is the son of Mary, not of God. Second, 'al-Masīḥ' is emphasized as an Arabic term referring to the 'purification' from sin. Any connection to foreign (Hebrew or Syriac) terminology is adamantly refuted, as other such 'foreign lexemes' are names (Isaac) rather than descriptors ("the purified"). (There then follows a brief explanatory digression about the Arabic name for the 'Antichrist' – al-Masīḥ al-Dajjāl).

Was but a messenger of God: All the exegetes affirm the humanity and deny the divine sonship of Christ. Muqātil simply states that Jesus b. Maryam was a messenger of God - God does not have a son.

And his word which he directed to Mary: According to Muqātil, Jesus is God's 'word' insofar as God said 'Be' and he became. Like Muqātil, al-Ṭabarī asserts that Jesus is 'the word' insofar as he is the 'message' which God made his angel – in the form of a man - bring to Mary. This word itself is understood to be '*kun*' (the creative 'Be') – although al-Ṭabarī notes the disagreements among Muslims themselves about God's speech as such. He put this word into Mary – meaning God taught and informed her with it. According

⁴⁴ Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, ad Q 4:171.

to al-Rāzī, Jesus b. Maryam is the ‘word’, insofar as God made Christ through his command, a word of God, rather than a sperm – just as Adam was formed.

And a spirit from him: Muqātil interprets this to refer to the agency of the spirit, rather than of a man, in the procreation of Jesus. Regarding this phrase, al-Ṭabarī again notes the different scholarly opinions: firstly, that God enlivened Jesus, brought him into being – either as a breath from Gabriel, or a spirit from God insofar as he came to be through God’s command – either through his enlivening breath, or through his creative word.⁴⁵ Secondly, it is understood as a ‘mercy’ from God (cf. Q 58:22, which states that for those in whose hearts God has written faith, he has “strengthened them with a spirit from himself”). Thirdly, this is understood to refer to God’s role in the forming of the human soul (cf. Q 7:172). Finally, the spirit is understood to refer to Gabriel. Despite these varied interpretations, the consensus is that they are not too terribly contradictory in meaning.

As with al-Ṭabarī, for al-Rāzī, the Qur’ānic designation of Christ as ‘a spirit from him’ is understood variously: 1) rather than being formed from the sperm of the father, Christ came from the breath of Gabriel; 2) Christ was the reason for their religions – he was their ‘spirit’; 3) a ‘mercy’ from him – Christ was a guide, leading people to the right religion and way of life; 4) as ‘spirit’ is ‘breath’ in Arabic, and ‘wind’ and ‘spirit’ are similar, the ‘breath’ from Gabriel was through the command of God; 5) a noble and great spirit.

⁴⁵ Cf. Griffith, “Syriacisms in the Arabic Qur’ān.”

So believe in God and his messengers: Here, the commentators introduce a variety of explanations: in keeping with his insistence that the *dīn* of the *naṣāra* was Islam, Muqātil underscores the belief in God as meaning belief in the one God, who has no associates. He then emphasizes only the necessity of belief in Muhammad – as he was both a messenger and a prophet. The exhortation to believe in God and his messengers is explained by al-Ṭabarī to refer to the oneness of God: he has no associate, no consort and no son; all his messengers have come to inform the people of this message. It is taken by al-Rāzī to mean that Jesus is one of the messengers of God – Christians should believe in him as they believe in other messengers of God, without making him a god.

Do not say three. Stop – it is better for you. Here, Muqātil explains, Christians are urged against saying that God is a ‘third of three’. This command is interpreted by al-Ṭabarī to mean: Do not say the lords are three. (He links this prohibition to the story of the Companions of the Cave, where they were said to be ‘three’, and their dog the ‘fourth’; cf. Q 18:22 – perhaps reflecting a Christian telling of the Sleepers of Ephesus that contained a Trinitarian motif?⁴⁶) Like Muqātil, al-Ṭabarī also references the prohibition of saying that God is a ‘third of three’.

Al-Rāzī puts forth two explanations for the command not to say ‘three’: firstly, he discusses a general confusion over the ‘essence’ and ‘attributes’ of God: when Christians discuss the incarnation with Jesus, and his relation to Mary, they insist that the ‘hypostases’ – of Jesus, as divine and human? Or of Father – Son - Spirit - are only

⁴⁶ While The Sleepers of Ephesus (reflected in the account of the Companions of the Cave of Q 18) is often understood as an affirmation of belief in resurrection, that it could have been used for other points of Christian doctrine (i.e. Trinitarian references) is not impossible; on this account in early Christian sources, cf. Sidney Griffith, “Christian Lore and the Arabic Qur’ān: The ‘Companions of the Cave’ in *Sūrat al-Kahf* and in Syriac Christian Tradition,” in *The Qur’ān in its Historical Context*, edited Reynolds, 109-38.

attributes (*ṣifāt*), not separate essences (sing. *dhāt*). But, in fact, the Christians are talking of three essences – which is disbelief. Going further, he says it goes against both the Qur’ān and reason to ascribe attributes to God and not violate his transcendent oneness. Echoing intra-Muslim debates over God’s attributes, he asks how you could describe God as ‘knowing’ without understanding also ‘powerful’ or ‘living’?

The second understanding attacks the Christian Trinitarian thinking proper. For here there are three aspects – the first referencing the Christian understanding of the Trinity as three ‘substances’ (also hypostases: ‘*aqānīm*’), and the second, in which Christians are understood to have three gods. In this second understanding, al-Rāzī points out that the Qur’ān indicts Christians for taking Jesus and his mother as gods besides God. Thirdly, the prohibition on ‘three’ could be interpreted as Christians thinking there were two gods – Jesus and his mother with God. In conclusion, though, al-Rāzī says that there is no school in the world weaker or further from reason than that of the Christians (*al-naṣāra*). This last remark may reflect memory of the role of Christians in the translation of works of Greek philosophy (including logic) into Arabic, as well as the presence of Christians in the *majlis* sessions described above, as what would become the normative Islamic theological positions on such issues were coming to be articulated - in which Christians and Muslims (and others) did engage each other in logic-, rather than scripture-, based discussions.

God is only one God. Far exalted is he above having a son. To him belongs what is in the heavens and what is on the earth. God is sufficient disposer of affairs. Here, the commentators are fairly unanimous in their explanation: Jesus is not God’s son; he is one

of God's created servants, like everyone else. God is the sole possessor of absolute transcendence and dominion: it was he who created Mary and Jesus, as he did the rest of creation.

Analysis of Muslim exegesis of Q 4:171

In conclusion, then, al-Ṭabarī and al-Rāzī, despite some additional details, like the earlier Muqātil, understand Q 4:171 as asserting the absolute unicity and transcendence of God: it is read as emphatically denying the possibility of God's being a servant, or having a son, father, consort or partner. Rather, it is God who has divinity and worship – he is not the one worshipping. He is the one God who is worshiped (rather than being a created servant as was Jesus). The earlier Muqātil is more concerned with defining terms, and with Muslim-non-Muslim interactions, than with the multiplicity of interpretations found within Islamic circles. Intimately acquainted with details of Christian and Jewish lore, he often fleshes out his exegesis by reference to non-Muslim traditions. Both of the later exegetes whose exegesis of Q 4:171 was examined allude to debates that would have involved Jewish and/or Christian participants – but clear or explicit utilization of Jewish or Christian material as a source of information tends to be less frequent. Al-Ṭabarī's refutation of a 'foreign' origin for al-Masīḥ, and his attempt to prove its Arabic origin, could be understood as an attempt to preserve the pure Arabic of the Qur'ān against its detractors who would use the presence of 'foreign' lexemes as a proof against its inimitability, either at the level of the beauty – or virtues – of its perfection and/or 'clear Arabic'. But a substratum of Christian polemics about qur'ānic 'borrowing' may

also be detected. For Christians could argue that ‘proof’ of the derived – and non-divine - nature of the Qur’ān is that Jesus is always termed al-Masīḥ by the Qur’ān, an Arabization of the Syro-Aramaic ‘al-Mashīḥ’ (Gr. *Kristos*) – ‘anointed one’. For in Muqātil’s and al-Ṭabarī’s days, Christians were not yet banned from handling – or teaching – the Qur’ān. It is, however, with the later al-Rāzī that we find the clearest direct engagement with Christian thinking at a sophisticated theological/philosophical level, utilizing – in addition to qur’ānic vocabulary - technical terms that Christians would also employ (e.g. the “Christian” [?] Arabo-Syriac? *aqānīm* for the ‘hypostases’ of the Trinity, rather than the more “Islamic” [?] Arabic *ashkhāṣ* or *ṣifāt*), as well as a clear refutation of opposing trends in *Islamic* thought (as in the arguments between Mu‘tazila and Ash‘arites over God’s oneness and attributes, such as ‘knowledge’ and ‘power’ and ‘speech’⁴⁷).

Despite their different perspectives, all of our sample exegetes are adamant in denying any Trinitarian – or ‘Logos’ - reading of Q 4:171. As shall be shown below, however, this is not the take of our three Christian authors. Ignoring the larger context of the ‘Trinitarian’ phrases of Q 4:171 – which, in fact, explicitly deny the divinity of Christ – the Christians selectively gloss the qur’ānic text. For, in contradistinction with the Muslim exegetes (especially the later ones) who carefully, systematically and sequentially parse each phrase, trying to understand its full significance, our Christian authors focus on those phrases that they wish to interpret to support their own theological viewpoints.

⁴⁷ See Goldziher, *Introduction*, 67-115 for a general overview of these debates.

The Incarnation: Son (*ibn* or *walad*) and Word (*kalimat*) or Spirit (*rūḥ*) of God

Having (albeit briefly) provided an overview of normative (classical? traditional?) Muslim readings of qur'ānic “Christology”, our Christian authors’ reading of this theme will be more comprehensible. For, while our Christian Arabic texts focus much of their discussion on the second person of the Trinity as the Word, rather than Son, of God – likely because of the close parallels with the Qur’ān as the Word of God (rather than the Son of God), our authors do not shy away from discussion of the Incarnation or Jesus as the Son of God (rather than a servant of God, or simply the Son of Mary).

Discussions of the relation of God the Father to God the Son were not limited to the person of Jesus of Nazareth. The logical conundrum of a father who generated, but who was not before, the offspring is also addressed: In discussion of the ‘Messiah’ as the ‘son of God’⁴⁸, Paul emphasizes that he was ‘born’ (*mawlūd*) of him, but without origination (*ḥuduth*), before the ages (*qabla al-duhur*). He explains that this means that Christians understand that the Messiah will never stop being ‘son’ (*ibn*) – or, ‘utterance’ (*nuṭq*), and that the father will never stop being father (*ab*) – or, ‘utterer’ (*nāṭiq*). Thus, when God (Father) sent his son (word), there was no division (*mufarriqa*) or distinction (*mubayyina*) between them – just as there is no distinction between the sun and its light when it shines on earth, or the word that a man utters and which is heard by his auditor. This argumentation is akin to the discussions that went on in Islamic theological circles regarding the ‘createdness’ or ‘originatedness’ of the Qur’ān, as the word/speech of God.

For, after establishing, on the basis of Q 4:171, that, despite the qur’ānic claim of Jesus’ equality with Adam - in that God need only say ‘Be’ and something becomes (as

⁴⁸ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, par. 33.

God did in the case of Adam),⁴⁹ Jesus is, in fact, made of the Word of God and his

Spirit (Q 4:171), Abū Qurra asks:

'Tell me about God's Word, is it creative or created?'
Muḥammad ibn 'Abd Allāh bowed his head silently for a while. He made no reply as he was pondering. If he said 'creative,' he would be defeated; yet he was not prepared to say 'created.'"⁵⁰

This is a classic example of using the argument for the uncreated Qur'ān (the position that was under attack by the state-imposed *miḥna*, but which was held by Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, and which became the accepted understanding of the Qur'ān) in support of the Christian assertion on the uncreated nature of Christ. As with earlier, non-Arabophone Christians, our authors would discuss which Arabic term would be most appropriate to indicate the generative/generated – yet coeternal, one-in-being – relationship of God the Father and God the Son (*walad* or *ibn*)⁵¹, not omitting discussion of “Son” as “Word”⁵². Mindful, however, of the discussions in Muslim circles over the ‘created’ (vs. uncreated) nature of the Qur'ān – as God's ‘speech’ or ‘word’ – Arabophone Christians would attempt to demonstrate the logical difficulty of considering Jesus “created” - a “creature” - if, in fact, he (like the Qur'ān) is the ‘Word’ of God (in Christian interpretations of Q 4:171, especially when conflated with other qur'ānic allusions to God's ‘spirit’ – discussed in Chapter 4, below).

⁴⁹ e.g. Q 3:59.

⁵⁰ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 73.

⁵¹ Cf. e.g. Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, esp. 104-5; Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, pars. 33-35.

⁵² Cf. e.g. Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, par. 31: Jesus as “Word” rather than “Son.”

Christ, fully human, fully divine: explanatory defense of Chalcedonian

Christology

“We find in the book also, great praise for the Lord Christ and his mother, and that God made a sign of them for the world when it says: ‘She who preserved her virginity, we blew our spirit into her and made of her and her son a sign for the world’ (Q 21:91) and ‘When the angels said, “O Mary, God has raised and preferred you above the women of the world”’ (Q 3:42)”⁵³.

Paul directly alludes to Q 4:171 in two places, interpreting it in a divergent fashion from that of the Muslim *mufassirūn*. The initial reference⁵⁴ is in the context of a discussion of the qur’ānic praise of both Jesus and his mother. Paul points to the qur’ānic insistence on Mary’s chastity, its allusions to the miraculous deeds Jesus performed, and its terming Jesus the “spirit of God” and “his word” as conforming to Christian views of both Jesus and Mary. This sets the stage for Paul’s discussion of the qur’ānic esteem not only for Jesus, but also for the Gospel - as well as for monasteries and churches – in short, not only for Christian faith or individual Christians, but for Christianity.

Paul’s second citation of Q 4:171⁵⁵ is more nuanced, in that he uses it as proof of a qur’ānic assertion of the “Chalcedonian” understanding of the nature of Christ: two natures united in the one person of Christ. In naming Christ – ‘the Messiah, Jesus the son of Mary’ – the spirit of God and his word, the Qur’ān only affirms the Chalcedonian Christian understanding of Christ. At this point of his discussion, Paul reads Q 4:171 in conjunction with Q 19:34, ‘that is the word of truth, which they call into doubt’, claiming

⁵³ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, par. 8.

⁵⁴ Par. 9 of Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, read in conjunction with par. 8.

⁵⁵ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, par. 40.

that also here the Qur'ān refers to Christ, the 'true word' of God (discussed in Chapter 4, below: in Muslim circles, Q 19:34 would not be understood as referencing Christ, the word of God). The conflation of God's 'Word' and 'Spirit' in Jesus emphasized by Paul and Theodore (see below, and in Chapter 4) echoes early Trinitarian/Christological discussions.

The anonymous monk of Sinai Ar. 434 has a similar argument when he references Q 4:171 in the context of Q 3:45 (the latter with some variations), in an argument for the oneness of the nature (*jawhar*) of God. He makes this argument based upon the fact that the Qur'ān itself alludes to God's spirit and God's word: surely the Christian Trinity is permissible if the Qur'ān itself, even in its declaration of absolute monotheism, speaks of these two aspects of God – the third and second persons of the Christian Trinity, respectively. When Gabriel announces the impending birth of Jesus, he does not say a 'son from [God]' nor a 'messenger from [God]', but a 'word from [God]' – the nature of God united in the son of Mary. As the Qur'ān itself alludes to God's 'hand', for example, with no trace of polytheism – likewise his 'son' or 'spirit' or 'word' would be 'one in being' – *jawhar* - with him.

This is an echo of the classical arguments over the possibility of God's having attributes – such as speech – and retaining his unique, eternal transcendence. While such arguments in Islamic circles, which formed the basis for the classical discipline of *kalām* (Islamic dialectical theology), were formulated in a milieu that knew of Christian discussions over the nature of God, it also reflect the concerns of a Chalcedonian Christian who would want to insist on his Nicene orthodoxy (Christ the Son – the Word

of God – is *one in being* with the Father). He also would likely be sensitive to criticisms that, as a Chalcedonian, he was ‘dividing’ the humanity and divinity of Christ with a ‘two-nature’ Christology. As a Melkite monk in Jerusalem, his Christian opponents would likely have been Armenians or Jacobites – in other words, non-Chalcedonian adherents of a ‘one-nature’ Christology.

Spirit and Word

Theodore employs Q 4:171 in response to the indignation of a man from Damascus at the thought that Christians understand the spirit of God to have dwelt in the belly of a woman. Theodore points out that the Qur’ān itself terms the Messiah (uniquely among the Children of Adam, and the angels) the ‘word’ and ‘spirit’ of God – and also that the Qur’ān details Gabriel’s annunciation to Mary of Christ’s impending birth. He explains that this terming of Christ as ‘spirit’ was to emphasize that exalted nature of the Messiah: ... the Qur’ān (at this point, at least) does not term Jesus a servant (but cf. Q 43:59 – not referenced here by Theodore) or creature (see also further in Q 4:171, and 5:75; 43:63-4, for qur’ānic allusions to Jesus as a “messenger” – also not employed by Theodore in this context), but, rather, his word and spirit. As such, he is of the essence (*dhāt*) and being (*jawhar*) of the – uncreated – creator of all (as opposed to being a servant [‘*abd*’] and creature [*khalq*], descriptors of Jesus elsewhere in the Qur’ān). If the Muslim objects to the Christian belief that God’s spirit dwelt in the womb of a woman, he would also have to deny the testimony of his own scripture on the matter. He goes on

to emphasize how the Christians maintain the glory and dignity of Christ to which Q 4:171 refers, by considering him God – whereas Muslims who emphasize Christ’s human – created – nature are not being faithful to their own scripture. Here, Theodore (and Paul) may be touching on a theme found in early Christian discussions of the Godhead, and a seeming conflation of the actions, if not natures, of the 2nd and 3rd persons of the Trinity.

Third of three = Second person of the Trinity?

Supporting the above-cited claim of Harnack, that Theodore, Paul and the monk combine their discussions of Trinitarian and Christological issues may indicate the primacy accorded to Christ in their discussions, and their need to assert Christian – Messianic – understandings, both in the light of Jewish challenges and, now, Qur’ānic/Islamic. Q 3:45, reiterated in Q 4:171, is invoked by the anonymous author of Sinai Ar. 434⁵⁶ as the strongest Qur’ānic proof of Jesus’ unique status as the Word (and, in the Christian reading, Son) of God:

[Gabriel] did not say to [Mary] that God gives you good news of a servant from him, nor a prophet, nor a messenger from him – but, rather a word from him: the *jawhar* of God, united to the son of Mary, seen as a man – one God, two actions/wills/energies (*fi’alayn*), enlivening the dead by the power of his divinity situated in him, his name connected to God’s accomplishment as spirit and word – as his hand or arm or pinky or other named parts [of God]... what he did from his human action is like when God most high ate in the house of Abraham, the third of three himself, in the saying of the Qur’ān...

Although (as discussed below) the monk reads some Trinitarian allusions into this passage, his description of the being that ate with Abraham as the “third of three” may, in

⁵⁶ Sinai Ar. 434, ff. 176r-v.

fact, reflect early Christian discussions of this passage as proof of the second person of the Trinity appearing to the Patriarchs (as God the father would not thus appear manifest to man). But, it may also indicate conflation of the second and third person of the Trinity in Christian thought.

Word (and Spirit) “Veiled” in the flesh of the Messiah Jesus b. Maryam

Theodore and the anonymous monk make a similar argument for the Qur’ānic validation of God as having Spirit and Word – and, their embodiment – veiling - in Jesus the Son of Mary. And, like Paul, they focus this aspect of their discussion on Christological, rather than Trinitarian, claims.

The Messiah is whom Adam was promised as his savior – God in man, the *jawhar* of God in him, His Word and His Spirit veiled, so he could defeat Satan. The Messiah is *jawhar* of God and savior of Adam and his seed ... his *bāṭin* is the *jawhar* of God, and his *ẓāhir* is the Son of Mary, united with a uniting that has no boundaries.⁵⁷

Or, because God is the perfect benefactor, he had to send that which was of the highest order of existence – namely, his Word, his *nuṭq*, but it had to assume a sentient *dhāt*: as the human being (*insān*) is the most noble of God’s creatures, he therefore took human form (*al-tabī‘a al-bashariyya*)⁵⁸. Furthermore, God cannot address man but from behind a veil (cf. Q 42:51; discussed in Chapter 4, below) – so this Word had to be “veiled” in flesh – that of the most noble of God’s creatures, man – and, not just any person, but the pure Mary, chosen above the women of the world (Q 3:42)⁵⁹. Thus, Christians are, according to the Qur’ān itself, placed “above those who disbelieve” on account of their

⁵⁷ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 175v.

⁵⁸ Houry, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, pars. 61-62.

⁵⁹ Houry, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, par. 36 (cf. par. 62).

following the Lord Christ, the “Spirit of God and his Word” (discussed below, Chapter 4).⁶⁰ In a theme recurring in eastern imagery, perhaps the legacy of the Syriac tradition, Theodore, too, points to the flesh as a ‘veil’ for the divinity:

He appeared to man incarnate, since human eyes were unable to see Him. Were it not for his veiling himself in that body, He would not have come down from his heaven to the earth, and He would not have mingled with human beings. The Word of God came to be in the likeness of a man, without sin, he being God, having the power to perform the miracles he worked, just as your scripture testifies, when it says ‘We sent our Spirit to Mary and he presented himself to her as a full human being’ (cf. Q 19:17)⁶¹. It means he came to be in the likeness of a man in the body.⁶²

The likeness of Jesus: Adam or Qur’ān, as (uncreated) Word of God?

Verily the likeness of Jesus before God is the likeness of Adam: He created him from dust, then said to him ‘Be’ – and he was. The truth from your lord, so do not be of those who doubt. Then whoever disputes with you concerning [Jesus] after knowledge has come to you, say: ‘Come, let us call our sons and your sons, our women and your women, ourselves and yourselves – then we pray and invoke the curse of God on those who lie.’ (Q 3:59-61)

In Theodore’s debate, one of the Hāshimīs objects to the Christians’ terming of God’s word and spirit as ‘Son’.⁶³ To this objection, Theodore explains the difference between Adam and Jesus: if the Muslims liken Jesus to Adam, then how do they explain the fact that Jesus – and not Adam – was able to perform miracles? The answer is that God’s own spirit resides in Jesus, whereas God just enlivened Adam, and all other humans. God’s word and spirit are creating forces – it would be blasphemy to liken mere mortals to the creative word and spirit of God. This argument reflects knowledge of the Islamic rejection of likening anything to God (seen also in Paul and, to a lesser extent, the

⁶⁰ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, par. 47.

⁶¹ Theodore’s utilization of this Qur’ānic passage merits further research.

⁶² Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 83.

⁶³ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 87.

anonymous monk). Even those Muslims who would accept a literal reading of those anthropomorphic attributes of God in the Qur'ān, did so by saying that 'how' God was seeing, hearing, etc. could not be questioned. To liken God to humans, or for humans to try to approach too close to the divinity, is blasphemous. Theodore continues this line of argument by asserting yet another distinction between Jesus and other mortals – in that he did not die.

Theodore's invocation of a qur'ānic phrase in support of Christian Trinitarian – and Christological - belief is countered by a man from the clan of Hāshim – 'Abdallāh – who bewails Abū Qurra for this blasphemy, saying that “the Messiah, the word of God and his spirit which he sent into Mary” is, rather, the equivalence of Adam, whom God created from dust (Q 3:59), and into whom God blew his spirit (Q 32:9). Theodore, however, counters this objection by a subtle employment of definitions of God's attributes that were being worked out in *Islamic* dialectical theology. Asking the Hāshimī if Adam were created from something describable, definable and/or measurable, he is greeted with an affirmative response: yes, dust is a finite and identifiable object. Theodore then asks first whether or not the Messiah was created 'from something'. Yes, a contingent being, the Messiah was created from something. But herein lies the difference with Adam. For Q 4:171 says that the Messiah was God's 'word and a spirit from him'. As Theodore continues his probing, the Muslim realizes the trap into which he is being drawn. For, in normative Islamic theology, the attributes of God – such as his speech/word or his spirit – are one in being with God and, as such, cannot be limited or

defined. To say that they could be defined, adapted, described – or comprehended – amounts to blasphemy.

But it is particularly the *word* of God on which Theodore focuses, emphasizing his familiarity with contemporary debates in Muslim circles over the created – or uncreated – nature of the Qur’ān. For, the next question Theodore poses is whether God’s word is “creative or created”. Were his Muslim interlocutor to say ‘creative’, he would be supporting Abū Qurra’s Christian position: To revisit the pertinent clause of Q 4:171, which states that Christ was [God’s] word. If this ‘word’ is itself *khāliq* [creative/creator] – and not *makhliq* [created] – and if the Messiah is this ‘word’, then the Messiah himself is creative/creator – the Nicene Christian position on Christ’s ‘one in being with the Father’. But, if the Muslim were to say that the word of God (as the Qur’ān – but also as an attribute of God) was ‘created’, he would be countering his own tradition’s understanding of the attributes of God. He is portrayed as having been drawn into a logical trap, the basis of which is not Christian scripture or tradition, but pure reason and the Qur’ān itself.

Next, there follows a detailed discussion and defense of both the Trinity and (Chalcedonian) Christology,⁶⁴ and their consonance with a monotheistic worldview. The final instance in which Theodore references Q 4:171⁶⁵ involves another Damascene – ‘Alī b. al-Walīd, a religious expert, one well-versed in the scriptures, including the Gospel and the Psalms - and Abū Ḥasan b. Lāwī al-Fārisī, a man who in all likelihood represents a Jewish convert to Islam (as “al-Lāwī” is the Arabic form of “Levy”); in debates such as

⁶⁴ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 98-105.

⁶⁵ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 93-94.

those we are examining here, Jews were often invited to partake as a check on the Christians – to verify that the Christians were indeed quoting scripture correctly).⁶⁶ (Additionally, these Jewish interlocutor/scripture-checkers are also indicative of the extent to which Jewish-Christian arguments formed a substratum of the Christian-Muslim debates: for example, Jews and Muslims shared objections to the Trinity, insistence on the non-divinity of Christ – albeit with different nuances – and an insistence on laws of ritual purity, etc. Christians in dialogue with Muslims had a ready-made arsenal at their hands, and traces of the Christian-Jewish argument often makes itself felt in the Christian-Muslim discussions.)

Word of God: creative or created?

That the ‘created’ vs. ‘uncreated’ nature of the Qur’ān has parallels in Christian understandings of the second person of the Trinity – the Word of God – would not have been lost upon Muslims or Christians familiar with these theological questions. Indeed, Theodore engages this theme, expanding the parameters of the debate to emphasize not only the created/*uncreated*, but *creative/created* divide. This, the necessarily creative, vs. created, nature of the ‘Word of God’ is – conveniently - used by Theodore to best his opponents:

[Theodore:] “Tell me about the Messiah. Was he created from something or not?”
 -“Yes. From the Word of God and His Spirit.” (cf. Q 4:171)
 -“Are the Word of God and His Spirit definable, describable, adaptable?” -“No. Nor are they comprehensible.”
 -“Tell me about God’s Word. Is it creative or created?”

⁶⁶ For further on this topic, see Griffith, “The Monk in the Emir’s Majlis.”

Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh bowed his head silently for a while. He made no reply as he was pondering. If he said “creative,” he would be defeated; yet he was not prepared to say “created”.⁶⁷

This exchange is notable, as al-Ma’ mūn himself would enforce professions of the ‘createdness’ of the Qur’ ān – the Word of God – from public officials during his reign. And, Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, whom (as discussed above) history would eventually vindicate for refusing to assert this position, is recorded not so much as asserting the uncreatedness of the Qur’ ān, but as feeling unable to assert its createdness. Might al-Ma’ mūn’s seeming pleasure at a Christian supporting – or utilizing arguments from – Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal’s position (as opposed to the “createdness” arguments encouraged by the *miḥna*) be a trope indicating the “true” Islam (or *īmān*) of the *miḥna*? For, if a Christian agreed with the “anti-*miḥna*” position, how “Muslim” or “Islamic” could that position be? Might one not conclude, logically, that the *miḥna*’s position was the “true” one for a Muslim, if a Christian could support – or best the supporters of – the advocates of the Qur’ ān’s ‘uncreatedness’?⁶⁸ Furthermore, might the trends that culminated in the *miḥna*’s assertion of the createdness of the Qur’ ān also have contained elements of doubt about the received and recorded *muṣḥaf*? Doubts that would surface (as discussed below, in Chapter 6) as charges of *tahrīf al-Qur’ ān*? And which could lead (as discussed below, in Chapter 4) to an understanding as the Gospel, rather than the Qur’ ān, as “that book” in which “there is no doubt” (cf. Q 2:1)?

⁶⁷ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 73.

⁶⁸ See Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 73, 93.

Father (*ab*) or Lord (*rabb*) God? Chalcedonian Nicene theology

In keeping with the assertion of Q 112:3 (God does not beget, nor was he begotten) and Q 3:51 (Jesus' statement that 'God is my lord and your lord'), Muslims have understood John 20:17 as an assertion of Jesus' humanity – 'I am going up to my Father and your Father, my God and your God' (referenced by Ṣa'ṣa' b. Khālid in Theodore's text).⁶⁹ (Some Muslim exegetes explain that there were transcription errors: rather than the Arabic "*ab*" for father, John's quotation should read "*rabb*", lord – as in Q 3:51). Theodore explains that he said 'Father' by reason of his divinity (*ilāhiyya*), but 'God' by reason of humanity (*nāsūtiyya*) – but as a figure of speech (akin to when the disciples are termed 'sons of God') – and to show respect: "It is just like a king's son saying to his attendants, 'My master and your master says to you'. He is their master strictly speaking; he is his master by way of showing respect."⁷⁰ Thus, God is not 'the god of our Master, Jesus the Messiah our Lord' (*ilāh sayyidinā yasū' al-masīh rabbinā*).⁷¹ (See above for discussion of the variations on the nomenclature of Jesus in our authors' texts.)

In an assertion of Chalcedonian Christology, Theodore insists that Christ "came to us as perfect man and perfect God."⁷² When God cast his "spirit" into Mary, he became father for us. The disciples and, indeed, all Christians, would say "our father" when referencing God not in the strict sense of the term, but in terms of his beneficence and favor towards them. In another example of the logical twists Theodore enjoys

⁶⁹ Cited in Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 82.

⁷⁰ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 83.

⁷¹ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 83.

⁷² Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 82.

employing, he showcases the flaws in Ṣa‘ṣa‘a’s selective proof-texting of the Bible: if the literal understanding of Jesus’ calling God his ‘God’ and his ‘father’ is accepted, then would not the literal reading of biblical allusions to the disciples as ‘children of God’ also have to be accepted? As Muslims do – and would – not admit such an understanding of the disciples, then Sa‘ṣa‘a’s proffered reading of John 20:17 cannot be accepted, either. Furthermore, were he merely a man, akin to Adam, he would not have been able to work the miracles he did.

Ministry/prophethood: as Son of God, or by permission of God?

The Qur’ān describes Jesus as a messenger to the Children of Israel who performs multiple miracles – through the power/permission of God (Q 3:49). Although reference is made to God’s “raising” Jesus “to himself” (Q 3:55), in an ambiguous passage, the Qur’ān also denies the crucifixion and, in many understandings, also the death, of Jesus of Nazareth (Q 4:157-159), who, it is believed, will return at the end of time (Q 43:61) to slay the anti-Christ (according to later exegetical tradition and *ḥadīth*). But, in its explicit assertion of the ‘pains’ Mary suffered while giving birth, it refutes what had evolved as the (Judeo-) Christian notion of Original Sin (Q 19:23). In essence, then, the Qur’ān confirms, but reinterprets, the Christian telling of the conception, life, death and ministry of Jesus, the Son of Mary.

Miracles?

According to Theodore, were he merely a man, a son of Adam, he ‘would not have worked the signs and wonders (*al-āyāt wa-l-‘ajā’ib*), such as the enlivening of the dead and other such things that it would take too long to put forth, with no helper nor assistant.’⁷³ The Jerusalem author of Sinai Ar. 434 uses the phrase “*al-hāl fīhi*” to emphasize the divine “situated in” Jesus. He does not show Theodore’s “restraint” in expounding upon the miracles of Christ, even including among them signs found in the Qur’ān, but not in the canonical New Testament accounts:

He enlivened the dead, expelled demons, cured the sick, breathed life into the bird he had fashioned from clay by virtue of his divinity; he also sent bread from heaven and spread the table and walked on water and went to heaven. But, he also did human deeds – everything except desires. The apostles, too, attest to his divinity, in that they raised the dead and worked all sorts of miracles in the name of the crucified one.⁷⁴

Paul, too, cites the Qur’ānic witnesses to the Lord Christ:

that he worked miracles, that he was conceived not by the copulation of a man, but by the annunciation of the angel of God to his mother, that he spoke in the cradle, revived the dead, cured those who were born blind, healed the lepers, made from clay the figure of a bird and breathed on it, and it flew with the permission of God – for he is the Spirit of God and his Word. This conforms to our understanding and our belief.⁷⁵

Death and crucifixion – and resurrection?

When asked who was managing the heavens and the earth when God’s word and spirit was in the womb of a woman, on earth or on the cross,⁷⁶ Theodore points to God’s omnipresence and the impossibility of God’s being contained/encompassed in anything, a

⁷³ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 82-83.

⁷⁴ Sinai Ar. ff. 177v – 178r.

⁷⁵ Khoury, ed., ed. and trans., *Paul of Antioch, Risāla*, par. 9.

⁷⁶ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 96.

concept that is found in the Qur'ān. The topic of contention here is the crucifixion of Christ. In a conflation of Qur'ānic references, the Damascene states that “they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him. Rather, it seemed so to them. God raised him up to himself because he is his word and his spirit.” Theodore turns these words into an assertion of the incarnation: he asks al-Fārisī if he confesses that Jesus is the word of God and his spirit, which is answered in the affirmative. Theodore then makes a comparison between the Messiah as the word of God and his spirit – of God and therefore not separable from him – with the Qur'ān as the uncreated speech of God that became manifest. The Muslim cannot refute this latter point, as it is a tenet of what came to be normative Islam. But, intriguingly, it would not have been the position of al-Ma'mūn who instituted the *miḥna*, which asked all public officials to profess the createdness of the Qur'ān. The extent to which Christian assertions of Jesus as the uncreated word of God – coeternal with God – prayed into Muslims theological debates is a matter of speculation. Traditionally seen as al-Ma'mūn versus the power of the *qādīs*/public officials/religious scholars, or an assertion of caliphal theological power (1. al-Ma'mūn saw his position strengthened because it would also refute Christian doctrines; 2. coincidence of Christian/Muslim positions with respect to the Word of God – Jesus or Qur'ān), Theodore goes on to demonstrate the ‘necessity’ of the incarnation for belief in resurrection. People needed to see something with their own eyes – in a form to which they could relate – in order to understand it. Only by God becoming man and suffering and dying as man would people be able to believe in the reality of the resurrection. When al-Fārisī tries to indicate that the thought of the word of God and his spirit – i.e. God –

being crucified is still blasphemous (how could anyone crucify the word of God and his spirit?), Abū Qurra draws a comparison with the sun: if the sun shines on a stone wall, and the wall is pulled down – is the sun in any way affected by the destruction of that on which it shines? Clearly it is not. Thus, if some created object (the sun) can be so manifestly unaffected by the destruction of an object that is touched by its radiance – is it not therefore not only possible, but also necessarily the case, that the uncreated creator of all – God – would in no way be diminished by the destruction of even the fleshly body that was assumed in the incarnation?

Invoking Qur’ānic attestation of the “resurrection” as proof of the veracity – and validity – of Christian belief,

We find also that God raised Christ to himself, and placed those who follow him above those who disbelieved, on the day of resurrection – as it says: ‘When God says, “O Jesus, Son of Mary, I will call and raise you to myself, and will separate you from those who disbelieve, and will put those who follow you above those who disbelieve, on the day of resurrection”’(Q 3:55; cf. 4:158) – and also ‘We have made Jesus son of Mary succeed, to whom we have given the Gospel, and we have put in the heart of those who follow him humility and mercy’(Q 57:27; cf. 5:46).

Paul brings the crucifixion into a discussion of how Christ’s divinity and humanity should be understood: it was through his divinity (*lāhūt*) that he worked wonders (*mu’jaz*), but by reason of his humanity (*nāsūt*) that he was able to manifest weakness (*‘ajz*). These two operations (*fi’lān* – an echo of monoergism?) are present in the one Messiah, just as one could say that a human is ‘immortal’ by virtue of his soul (*nafs*), but subject to corruption by virtue of his body (*jasad*).⁷⁷ Paul goes on to note how the book (*al-kitāb*) understands this when it asserts that they neither ‘killed nor crucified’ the

⁷⁷ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, par. 37.

Messiah, but that it ‘seemed so unto them’: for, when Christians say Christ was crucified, they are asserting that it was by virtue of his humanity that he was crucified – but, as regards his divinity, that he was not.⁷⁸

When compared to discussions over the nature of Jesus’ conception, his resurrection of Jesus figures relatively infrequently in Christian Arabic apologies – perhaps because resurrection is not a particular point of contention between Christians and Muslims? For the Qur’ān itself attests to the possibility of resurrection - even to Jesus’ own ability (through the permission of God) to raise the dead. Furthermore, in the context of its discussion of Christian belief in Jesus’ crucifixion, the Qur’ān asserts that God ‘took [Jesus] to himself.’ But, given the tone of the three texts, it also should come as no surprise that Theodore is the only one of our authors to insist on the death – and resurrection – of Jesus of Nazareth (countering the normative Islamic assertion that he did not die).⁷⁹

Concluding discussion: Christian *tafsīr* or *kalām*?

The discussions of Christ as God and man were certainly not new to the Islamic milieu, but the Arabic Qur’ān’s depiction of Jesus, the son of Mary, the Messiah prompted a re-examination of the significance of the Christian understandings of the incarnation – particularly the virgin birth and crucifixion. For, the details and general outline of the life of Jesus of Nazareth and his mother closely follow the Christian narrative – if that narrative is read without an understanding of the eventual theological

⁷⁸ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, par. 38.

⁷⁹ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 120-21.

interpretation thereof. For Christians, Mary is the ‘mother of God’ (*theotokos*); as such, she had to be ‘pure’ in order to carry the son, the word, of God in her womb. For the Qur’ān, Mary is ‘purified’ above the women of the world but Jesus denies that he ever asked his followers to take him or his mother as gods besides God. The virgin birth appears in the Qur’ān – but the likeness of Jesus is Adam: God need only say ‘be’ and something ‘becomes’. Similarly, the crucifixion is mentioned in the Qur’ān – but it denies that they killed or crucified him – it only “appeared” so unto “them.” Exegetes have spent much time explaining the “appearance” and the “them” of this Qur’ānic passage. But, in the Qur’ān, God took Jesus up to himself (whence Jesus will return at the end of times to fight and kill the anti-Christ). If the Qur’ān defends the Christian narrative of Christ, but not its interpretation, did Christians have to re-assert the salvific necessity of Christ in Arabic? Especially in a larger socio-political context in which they were seen as “equals” (theologically, as well as socially and politically) with (politically and theologically) “vanquished” Judaism?

Qur’ānic challenges to Christian faith are summarized in the challenge of Ismā‘īl al-Kūfī to Theodore:

“Tell me about the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Are they three, two, or a single one? If they are a single one, then the Messiah is created, as we say, and if they are two, then one of them must be greater/older (*akbar*), more powerful (*a’zam*) than the other.”

This question, as to whether the Christians worship two (instead of three) gods echoes early – and persistent - Christian pneumatological debates: (how) was the ‘son’ or ‘word’ of God distinct from the ‘spirit’ of God? Trinitarian confusion is also attested to by the

Qur'ān's own description of Jesus (Q 4:171) as a 'word of God and a spirit from him' – surely indicating only a single individual. This may be further echoed in Jesus' own question to his community at the end of times: 'Did I say to take me and my mother as gods besides God?' (Q 5:116: with no mention of the Father/Son/Spirit Trinitarian formulation). Although later Muslim exegetes would know the Christian Trinity as Father/Son/Spirit, the Qur'ānic presentation of Christian Trinitarian theology merits further study (as Griffith has demonstrated in his discussion of a possible Syriac forelogger to the Qur'ānic warning against saying 'Three'⁸⁰). Especially if the accounts of the pre-Islamic Ka'ba containing an icon of Mary and Jesus are historically accurate⁸¹, might the Qur'ān know of the Mary-worshipping Colyridians (whose presence is attested in the 4th century list of heresies on which John of Damascus draws) – or their heirs? Alternatively, does the seeming identification of Jesus the Christ as both Word and Spirit (but not Son of God) reflect an articulation of Christian Pneumatology distinct from that which would become the normative understanding of the church, beginning at Nicea, one attempted clarification of which being the Latin insertion of the *filioque*?

But it is the question posed here that most occupies Theodore:

And if they are three, then specify for us the status (*manzila*) of each one of them, and his power (*qudra*), so that we might make distinctions (*numayyiz*) and give some consideration to this language of yours about which even superior mind are perplexed, and from which disputants flee. How is it? The Commander of the Faithful will recognize that you are only serving a created servant ('*abd makhlūq*'), who ate food, drank drinks, rode a donkey, went around in the market streets, was struck with whips (*duriba bi-l-siyāt*), and acknowledged servitude ('*abdiyya*') of himself and that he was a created being (*khalq makhlūq*). Yet you are turning him into a God, a judge to be served, and you

⁸⁰ See Griffith, "Syriacisms in the Arabic Qur'ān."

⁸¹ As attested in Muḥammad b. 'Umar al-Wāqidī's biography of the Prophet, *Kitāb al-Maghāzī*, edited M. Jones, 3 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1966).

also maintain that he was arrested, crucified, killed, and he rose again. This is an exceedingly shocking business; God forbid it!⁸²

In confronting these and other challenges⁸³ to his Christian faith by his interlocutors, Theodore expertly weaves in words and phrases familiar from Islamic discussions of God and his attributes, leaving little room for argument with his conclusions: since, were his assertions to be disputed, the normative Islamic doctrine of Theodore's interlocutors (but, presumably, not that of al-Ma'mūn himself) would itself also be implicated, particularly that of the Qur'ān as the uncreated and eternal Word of God – yet not compromising the uniqueness and unity of God (discussions akin to what the Christian world witnessed in the Arian controversies of the third and fourth centuries CE).

As with the theological challenges Theodore addresses, the three questions posed to the Jerusalem monk of Sinai Ar. 434 center on the central questions with which Christians grappled whenever they entered into serious theological/philosophical discussion about the foundational mysteries of the Christian faith, namely the Trinity and Incarnation: Is the Eternal Being (*jawhar*) one of the hypostases (*aqānīm*)? What do you claim about the truth of the (hypostatic) union (*ittihād* - i.e. the uniting of divine and human in Christ)? What is the proof (*dalīl*) for the veracity (*siḥḥa*) of what they say about the truth (*siḥḥa*) of the actions (*af'āl*) of the Masīḥ from what they put forth, that is, what they claim? If the questions themselves are not unique to Christians living in an Islamic milieu, the response of the anonymous monk in Sinai Ar. 434 indicates a familiarity not

⁸² Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 100.

⁸³ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 88-89: the spirit of God dwelt in the belly of a woman? Your God died?; 98: would the Messiah in the belly of Mary have died, had she died while pregnant with him?; 96: who managed the world while God walked on earth, or was in the belly of Mary, or in the tomb?; 121: to whom did the Messiah pray?

only with the Qur'ān, but also with arguments employed by Muslims in their discernment of their own theological positions.

The methods of our three Christian authors resemble those of the Muslim theologians (the *mutakallimūn*) far more than those of the exegetes (the *mufasssirūn*): Muslim theologians – like our Christian authors - would likely have known much of the Qur'ān by heart and, again like our authors, utilized Qur'ānic passages selectively. They would have done so, however, from within the normative interpretive tradition that was derived from the accepted body of authoritative commentators – and traditionists, relators of Muhammad's words and deeds, whose pedigree generally traced itself back to a close Companion of Muhammad. The Muslim theological method paralleled Christian inter-confessional disputation material, and was not ignorant of challenges posed by Christians (from the time of the Qur'ān itself). It also posed a strong challenge to Christianity: paralleling Muslim discussions about God's attributes and his essence was the question of how the Christian Trinity and Christological understandings did not destroy the unique, eternal, transcendent unity of the Godhead – questions that Arius and Nestorius, as well as Jewish interlocutors, posed. And, now, the divine sonship of Christ had to be defended in the face of a revelation that explicitly refuted it – even while insisting on Jesus' creation without an earthly father – but rather through the angel's annunciation to Mary, and while defending Mary against the calumny of the Jews. How, exactly, did Christ's creation (without an earthly father) differ from that of Adam? Need not God only will something into existence, and it exists? Need he not only say 'Be' and it becomes? Christian theology in Arabic was being formulated in new ways – in response to Muslim

challenges. And, as the Bible in the form known to Christians was not considered a sufficient (or irrefutable) proof-text, Christians turned to the Qur'ān – and logic – to support and articulate their positions, as we have just seen – particularly with Theodore's and the anonymous author of Sinai Ar. 434's use of Q 4:171.

Q 4:171, as the only passage used by all three of our authors, and one which Islamic tradition references as an example of Qur'ānic refutation/correction of Christian misguided beliefs, serves as a good proof text, both for traditional Muslim modes of exegesis and theological concerns, as well as the variety of ways in which our Melkite authors appropriated (and manipulated) the Qur'ānic text to suit their own purposes. The Qur'ānic refutation of Trinitarian theology is quite clear. Whether Muslim understandings of Q 4:171 as refuting Christian doctrines of the Logos emerged independently of, or in response to, Christian claims that Q 4:171 actually was a subtle affirmation of Nicene, if not Chalcedonian, Christology, is less easy to determine. That Islamic discussions of the relationship of God's word (the Qur'ān) to God's essence emerged in a milieu fully cognizant of the variety of Christian positions on how the Logos, God's incarnate word, could be both human and divine, is indisputable. The parallels between Islamic debates on the 'dangers' of ascribing 'corruptibility' to the 'inlibrated' (vs. incarnate) word of God – the Qur'ān – and the Nicene refutation of Arius' insistence of the subsidiary nature of God the Son to God the Father with its insistence that the Son is separate from, yet 'one in being' with, the Father are clear: the Qur'ān – as God's divine speech – is, like the other attributes of God, distinct from, but 'one in being' – coeternal - with the divine essence.

Perhaps the use that our three authors make of Q 4:171 can tell us more about their respective familiarity with the nuances of Christological discussions within their own Christian circles than it does about their understanding of the Qur'ān or their interactions with Muslims or Islamic thought patterns. For, when one compares the discussions of Q 4:171 that Paul, the anonymous author of Sinai Ar. 434 and Theodore employ, a hierarchy of Christological sophistication emerges.

Such discussions, and the conflation of theological and socio-political issues, lead to a questioning of the intention of the authors (or scribes, or auditors) of the texts at hand. But, whether these criticisms were voiced out of a sense of prayerful devotion to the truth of Christianity, regret at the loss of past Christian political dominance, or real suffering under “Islamic rule” is secondary to the fact that these criticisms were voiced in Arabic in an Arabophone, Muslim-ruled milieu. And, judging from the texts at hand, it was an environment in which Christians were free to handle the Qur'ān and engage Muslim interpretations thereof. Just as the laments at the “plight” of contemporary Christians might best be read with an eye to rhetorical devices employed by our authors (how difficult, in fact, were their lives, if they were engaged in such open conversations with Muslims as portrayed in these very texts that appear to lament the lived situation of the Christian disputants – and if these texts circulated long enough to come down to us, today?), so, too, should their use of the Qur'ān be explored while bearing in mind the question as to whether the authors employed the Qur'ān with the intention of portraying the text as it was verbatim known to them, or if they were using it as a tool in their larger polemic or apologetic discourse – and, as such, were more concerned with conveying the

sense than the letter of the text at hand. Just as the laments of the difficulties of Christian life under Muslim rulers might contain elements of exaggerated rhetoric, so, too, might their use of the Qur'ān be more valuable for the manner in which it was handled, than for what it might tell us of the text(s) at the disposal of our authors?

Paul, who was born in one Crusader state and became bishop of another, was caught between a rock and hard place, as it were. An Arabic speaker, but a Christian, he and his community were looked upon with varying degrees of suspicion by both the European Christian invading forces and the native Muslims – Arabs or others.⁸⁴ In what appears to be an urgent appeal to his Muslim compatriots to continue to accord Christians a certain degree of respect, and not force their conversion to Islam, he references Q 4:171 in an appeal to the Qur'ān's own esteem of Christians and Christianity. He goes a bit further, and attempts to show – superficially - how qur'ānic and (Chalcedonian) Christian understandings of Christ converge. But he does not go into any detailed discussion of the deeper arguments underlying the Chalcedonian (or Nicene) debates about the relationship of God the Father to God the Son, or the humanity and divinity of Christ. Caught between Latin Crusaders and Turkish Muslims, as an Arabophone Christian bishop of a Crusader state, he likely had more pressing concerns than the detailed philosophical and philological nuances of theological arguments. And, even if non-Chalcedonian Christians were present in his circles, again, due to the larger political circumstances, doctrinal differences were likely to have been subsumed in the face of the greater

⁸⁴ Cf. Kedar, "Subjected Muslims of the Frankish Levant"; A. Jotischky, "Ethnographic Attitudes in the Crusader States: The Franks and the Indigenous Orthodox People," in *East and West in the Crusader States: Context – Contacts – Confrontations*, edited by K. Ciggaar and H. Teule (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 1-20.

concerns faced by all Oriental Christians during the Crusader times. Or, alternatively, perhaps his insistence on the qur'ānic affirmation of Chalcedonian faith is an effort at highlighting the convergence of Latin and Melkite theologies – perhaps an attempt to curry favor with both the Latin and Muslim overlords, and possibly in contradistinction to the other 'oriental' Christian communities in his milieu?

The anonymous author of Sinai Ar. 434 is more explicit in his defense of Christian doctrine against Muslim criticisms. He gets to the heart of Muslim criticisms of Christianity as polytheistic. Comparing God's speech to God's hand (an image found in, e.g., Q 5:64, and used in later Islamic discussions on the 'attributes' of God defending the divine oneness and unity), the anonymous monk underlines how the Word of God is 'one in being' with the Father – an echo of Nicene orthodoxy, but based upon qur'ānic terms and images. Again, the Christological argumentations surrounding the formulation of Chalcedonian orthodoxy are not present in the discussion of Q 4:171 by the anonymous monk of Sinai Ar. 434– perhaps reflective of a mixed confessional community (Armenians and Greeks) in Jerusalem at the time⁸⁵, and a desire to avoid drawing undue attention to the divisions within the Christian community?

These represent varying attempts to preserve God/human separation and uniqueness of God: Islam prompted Christians to reflect on the proper articulations of the Trinity and Christology – while keeping Christianity monotheistic. Theodore, however, evinces a very different Christological tone in his employment of Q 4: 171. Paralleling

⁸⁵ A. Sanjian, "The Armenian Church and Community of Jerusalem," in *The Christian Communities of Jerusalem and the Holy Land*, edited by Anthony O'Mahony (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), 57-89.

the Islamic understandings of the Qur'ān as the word of God, the Christian doctrine of the Logos – the Son of God as his word – is heavily emphasized by Theodore.

These arguments indicate an intimate familiarity on the part of Abū Qurra with trends current in Islamic circles: the debate over the nature of the Qur'ān – as word/speech of God: created or uncreated – and also the various schools of logical thinking heavily influenced by the translations of Greek philosophy into Arabic that were being commissioned by the caliphs.

But, in these attempts to defend Christian theology against (Muslim interpretations of) Qur'ānic challenges thereto, there is also a highly selective reading of the Qur'ān on Theodore's part. For example, his explanation of Q 4:171 as identifying Jesus as the word and spirit of God, as opposed to a servant or creature, is not supported by other passages in the Qur'ān: as noted above, the Qur'ān explicitly states that Christ was a servant, who never asked people to take him or his mother as gods besides God⁸⁶, and also that the miracles of Christ were allowed and performed only through the permission of God. Does this mean that Theodore knew a version of the Qur'ān that did not contain allusions to the servitude of Jesus, or the “permission” needed for his miracles to be effected? Or, is it an example of the Qur'ānic prooftexting of which Muslims would accuse Christians? Just as the Muslim is portrayed as selectively reading the Bible (taking John 20:17 as proof that Jesus saw God as his Lord, rather than his Father), so, too, Theodore (like Paul and, to a lesser extent, the anonymous monk of Sinai Ar. 434), is not above selectively mining the Qur'ān for passages that fit his Christian worldview. While this example of intimate Christian engagement with the Qur'ān and

⁸⁶ cf. Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 85.

Islamic tradition may be of particular interest and importance in contemporary discussions of Christian-Muslim relations, I would argue that Arabophone Christians' uses of qur'ānic passages that explicitly reference "Christian" themes are not reliable sources for the form of the Qur'ān known to them. Given their apologetic (or polemical) concerns, it is difficult to determine the Qur'ān they knew – but their attitudes towards it are telling. Imprecise citations and freedom of handling and (re)interpreting it – in a Muslim-ruled, Arabic speaking milieu - indicate that the doctrines of its inimitability and eternity were not as solidified as they would be after the Mongol destruction of Baghdad (markedly evidenced in Ibn Taymiyya's response to Paul's letter).

Although internal Christian Christological debates are reflected in Theodore's arguments, his employment of logic and defense of passages from the Christian scriptures indicate strong engagement with Islamic tradition. When arguing with an opponent who does not accept the validity of your scripture, logic is a common tool for argumentation. And, just as our Christian authors would selectively mine the Qur'ān for passages that supported their positions, so, too, would Muslims look for irregularities in Christian scriptures to support their understandings of Jesus b. Maryam. In this enterprise, it should be noted that, rather than looking at the Qur'ān as an early Arabic document that could teach about the understanding or situation of Christianity or Judaism in Arabia, both Muslims and Christians were guided in their readings of the Qur'ān by a determination to disprove – or prove – the truth of the claims about its divine status. History was used – but in order to understand or explain qur'ānic references to previous peoples, or the events that occasioned the revelation of a given verse to Muhammad.

And, even those who did not consider the Qur'ān as the Word of God were guided by the claims of its being such – or Christians thought their arguments would be more persuasive if they could use Muslims' own scripture in support of their – Christian – arguments.

Just as Jews did not accept Christian interpretations of the 'old' Testament – yet incorporated Christian critiques of Judaism into their own self-definitions of Judaism – Muslims would not accept Christian readings of the Qur'ān, but may have been very well aware of them in their own exegesis thereof. For, while Christianity 'needed' the Hebrew Bible in a way that Arabic Christianity did not – initially – theologically 'need' the Qur'ān, as Christians came to adopt Arabic, and as Islamic hegemony increased, a potentially potent defense of, or response to – an apology for – Christianity, in Arabic, would be to use the very words of the scripture of their overlords. That this history is not so readily apparent is, perhaps, explained by the fact of the supercessionist tradition being the respondent and the one holding the power. Unlike the Christianity of the Latin West and Greek East, which came to be both politically dominant and demographically ascendant, Christianity in the Arabic speaking world was, for the early and formative Islamic centuries, a demographic and cultural presence – but not in absolute political power. Possibly insecure about (or ignorant of) the initial Muslim-Christian (and, arguably, Jewish) codependence, normative Islam (especially after the Crusades, exacerbated by the era of Capitulations and the Colonial experience), came to reject all things Jewish or Christian – including those Qur'ānic exhortations to ask those who were

given the book before (and also to debate with them), understanding, instead, that Islam (and the Qur'ān) contained all that was necessary to understand.

Due to their overtly apologetic agenda and only occasional verbatim citation of Qur'ānic texts, the clearly selective (re)readings of the Qur'ānic passages discussed in this chapter are likely not of use to any investigator curious about the possibly persistent circulation of non-Uthmanic Qur'ān codices. Rather, such passages highlight a mode of Christian apologetics that, instead of attacking the text or teaching of another tradition, would be willing to reinterpret passages found therein that could be testimony to Christian teachings, even if the letter of the text in question had earlier been rejected by normative Christianity. Thus, were a Christian group to claim that Christ spoke from the cradle, or fashioned a bird from clay, Christian tradition would not accept it. In the case of Islamic/Qur'ānic claims, however, the details of the narrative are subordinate to Jesus' or God's "agency" therein.

Does this mean that our Arabophone Christian authors might say that the Qur'ān was, in fact, from God – but that Muslims misinterpret its meaning? In order the more fully to explore this question, we shall next turn to a selection of passages that do not explicitly reference Christians or Christianity, but which our Christian authors have read as supporting the veracity and validity of their – Christian – faith. How do their readings compare with those recorded in Islamic tradition?

As we proceed, bear in mind the following question: are Arabophone Christian discussions of the Qur'ān most useful for the light they may shed on the form of the text itself that was known to our authors, its transmission, or its interpretation – by Christians,

or by Muslims? For, in the discussions under examination here, Arabic terminology familiar from Islamic discussions of God and His Attributes are readily apparent. The *aqānīm* are likened to the *ṣifāt* (attributes) – *asmā'* (names) of God; the *jawhar* (substance) is the *dhāt* (essence). Whether the incarnation or the Trinity is more akin to 'anthropomorphism' is rebutted by the reminder that Islam, too, speaks of attributes/names – and bodily parts – of God, while very much aware of the difference between the Creator and the creature. Similarly, the attempts to articulate how God took on flesh are paralleled to discussions of God's word being revealed, and then codified, as the Qur'ān. That Greek philosophy (and, to a lesser extent, Hebrew Bible attestations), rather than the Qur'ān, is used in support of Trinitarian arguments is likely a concession to Muslims' being unlikely to be convinced by biblical arguments. Similarly, the terming of "your prophet" or "your Qur'ān" indicates that the Christians might not have accepted the Qur'ān as, in fact, from God – with the possible exception of those passages that could be read as confirming Christian belief. That Qur'ānic passages that are read to portray Christianity in terms that normative Christianity would not, in fact, accept (Jesus – Mary – God as the Trinity, for example) are, by and large, overlooked by these three authors may be evidence of a) a reading of the Qur'ān as not intending to portray Christianity accurately, but, rather, to portray it polemically, or in hyperbole (playing on Christian discussions of Mary as Theotokos and Jesus as Son of God, rather than Son of Mary) or b) recognition that contemporary Muslims were very familiar with Christian Trinitarian discussions (Father – Son – Spirit: Word/Wisdom, etc.) – even if the Qur'ān did indeed know Christians who considered Mary – God – Jesus as the Trinity, that was

no longer relevant for our authors' discussions or c) a realistic deference to the sensibilities of the ruling faction, and a desire to avoid casting any unnecessary aspersions on the Arab/Muslim prophet or revelation.

By Paul's time, Islamic dominion and the Islamic critique of Christianity were well established. In the face of increasing conversions (largely voluntary and not condone) to Islam – or fallings away from Christianity, Christians were intent upon defending and maintaining their presence. Unlike Theodore's aggressive defense of Christianity, which included biting criticism of Islamic doctrine and praxis, Paul's tone is far more irenic – pleading. Likely out of pragmatic concerns (and an acceptance of, or resignation to, Islamic hegemony), Paul (and the monk) do not engage in such blatant critiques of the Islam of their day (or early Islamic history). But, again, unlike al-Kindī's (or John of Damascus') attack on Muhammad and the Qur'ān, all three of our authors follow Timothy's respect of the person of Muhammad (and, on the face of it, the revelation he received). It is, rather, the post-prophetic period where criticisms are leveled (as shall be discussed in Chapter 6 below).

A slightly different case is presented in Christological/incarnate logos discussions: as the Qur'ān contains a number of passages that directly parallel accounts of Jesus familiar to Christian tradition, but which Islamic tradition has emphatically interpreted as excluding divinity from the Person of Jesus Son of Mary, our Christian authors are intent on attempting to persuade their audience of the merits of a Christian (re)reading of such passages. Although Qur'ānic allusions are occasionally difficult to locate, or are cited with discrepancies from the various readings of the 'Uthmānic codex

that has come down to us, the expressed intent of our authors argues against using their qur'ānic citations as definitive testimony to the circulation of non-ʿUthmānic codices, or of alternate readings to those that have been preserved. Rather, their approach to the qur'ānic text, the apparent freedom with which they – as Christians – handled it, their seeming familiarity with its contents, and their active awareness of, and engagement with, Islamic interpretive categories, merit further attention.

As indicated above, the three texts at hand can be read as a progressive assertion of Christian Trinitarian monotheism to assertions of Christ as the Messiah – and the Son of God, the Incarnate Word of God, God himself “veiled” in human flesh. Having examined our Arabophone Christian authors’ reading of qur'ānic passages that Islamic tradition, too, has understood to contain explicit references to Christians or Christianity, let us now turn our attention to how our authors read Trinitarian and Christological assertions into qur'ānic passages that do not contain explicit reference to Christian themes.

CHAPTER FOUR

Passages Read with “Christianizing” Glosses

by Paul, Theodore and/or the Anonymous Monk

Alīf. Lām. Mīm. That is the book in which there is no doubt, a guide for the pious who believe in the unseen and establish prayer and give generously from what we have bestowed on them, and those who believe in what was sent down to you [Muhammad] and what was sent down before you, and are certain of the Hereafter. Those have guidance from their lord, and those are the successful.

(Q 2:1-5)

Having discussed the general themes of the three works at hand, and examined the use our authors make of a sampling of qur’ānic verses that are understood by Islamic tradition as explicitly containing Christian-related themes, let us now turn our attention to a selection of qur’ānic verses that our Christian authors read as referencing Christians or Christianity, even though the letter of the text does not mention themes familiar from Christian tradition. As shall be discussed, normative Islamic tradition has also read some of these passages as referencing Christians and/or Christianity – albeit with a different gloss from that provided by our Christian Arabophone authors. But, our Christian authors also read Christian-related themes or references into passages that Islamic tradition does not understand as referencing Christians or Christianity. What might such references tell us, either of the qur’ānic text known to our authors, or of the interpretive trends and approaches to the Qur’ān in the larger, Muslim-ruled, Arabophone milieu in which our authors were writing?

Beautiful names: Trinity and Word of God as among the *ṣifāt Allāh*

Similar to earlier Christian apologists, the anonymous monk finds biblical foreshadowing of Christian Trinitarian theology in the angels' thrice-holy praise of the lord (Isaiah 6:3): the "holy holy holy" is praise of the *aqānīm*; the singular "lord" (*rabb*) is attestation to *tawḥīd*: the "oneness" of the God.¹ But the anonymous monk of Jerusalem also finds Trinitarian (as well as Christological) foreshadowing in the appearance of the guests of Abraham²: "the lords are found in the three *aqānīm* when they clearly said to you 'Salām – salām – salām'...meaning the three persons (*ashkhāṣ*), owners of the *aqānīm* of the Lord..." This is a conflation of Genesis 18 (which begins: "The Lord appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground.") and Q 11:69 ("And our messengers indeed came to Abraham with glad tidings. They said 'Salāman'. He answered 'Salāmun' and hastened to entertain them with a roasted calf.")

Christians prior to Muhammad traditionally found this biblical passage to be an indication of the "veiling" of God in "flesh" (perhaps indicated by the monk's use of the qur'ānic "third of three" – cf. Q 5:73 - to identify that which ate with Abraham; discussed above, Chapter 2) – and, thus, a biblical appearance of the second, rather than first, person, of the Trinity. That the monk combines the biblical "3" with the qur'ānic plural

¹ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 173r.

² Sinai Ar. 434, f. 176v.

form of “guests”, and its reporting of the greeting exchanged (“*salām*”) indicates a more explicit Trinitarian reference. Is this, then, more likely to indicate that there was a version of the Qur’ān that had *salām – salām – salām*? Or an Arabic Bible with such? Or prooftexting of Bible and Qur’ān for Christian theology? In the context of the larger discussion, it would seem that – in this instance – the monk’s usage of Qur’ānic passages was done in a selective manner for apologetic purposes, and does not furnish a reliable source for the form of the Qur’ān known to him, or for Muslim interpretations thereof. It might, however, reflect – if not shed light on - the manner in which the Qur’ān’s early auditors understood the recitation: might the monk be echoing (if not contributing to) discussions of the irregular Arabic greeting in the Qur’ān (*salāman - salāmun*), which the later Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373) explains as reflecting the Qur’ānic injunction of Q 4:86 to return a greeting with one better than (or equal to) it? Particularly in the light of the relatively infrequent (explicit) referencing of Isrā’īliyyāt on the part of some exegetes whose works are readily available today (such as the aforementioned Ibn Kathīr³), might early Christian Arabic texts complement a reading of Muslim exegesis (e.g. of the - Qur’ānically unspecified - number of Abraham’s guests as “3” angels: Gabriel, Michael and Israfil), and, when read with works of *tafsīr* (e.g. those that preserve memories of early understandings of Q 5:73’s prohibition on terming God “a third of three” as referencing Jewish and Christian claims that Uzayr and Jesus were, respectively, the sons

³ cf. e.g. the following website: <http://www.qtafsir.com/index.php> (accessed February 14, 2011).

of God), shed light on the nature of the transmission, reception and/or rejection of rabbinic/Christian (Trinitarian or other) discourse in Arabic?⁴

A slightly more direct engagement with Islamic interpretive trends is found in our authors' discussions of the (qur'ānic) 'beautiful names' of God – and the later (Islamic) discussions of the 'attributes' and 'essence' of God: in addition to the 'persons' of the Trinity, Father – Son – Spirit are 'names', 'attributes' of the living, 'speaking/rational' God. In the words of Paul⁵:

[When] I said, 'The Muslims disapprove of us when we say Father, Son and Holy Spirit.' [His European Christian interlocutors] would say: 'If only they knew that by these words we intend nothing but to make more explicit the assertion that God Most High is a living rational thing, they would not disapprove of this.' For, we Christians, having seen things come into being, deduced that something other than themselves brought them into being, since it would not be possible for them to come to be of themselves, because of their composition of contradictory elements. We therefore say that [God] is a thing (*shay'*), but not like created things because he is the creator of all, and therefore could not have 'non-existence'. Then we see that things are divided into living and non-living; as the living are more noble than the non-living, we said that he was living, so as to deny that he is mortal. Then we say that the living are divided into rational and non-rational, and as the rational is more noble than the non, we assigned him reason, so as to deny that he is ignorant. These three names are the one God who always is (lit. never was not), and remains (lit. never stopped being) something living and reasonable (*nāṭiq*). Thus, for us, the essence (*dhāt*) is the father, the son is the spoken word (*nuṭq*), and the life (*ḥayāt*) is the Holy Spirit. For, as it says in the book: 'God. There is no god but he, the living (*al-ḥayy*), the subsistent' (Q 2:255)...

It also says in the Book⁶: 'It is he who gives life and gives death, and if he decrees anything, he need only say 'Be' and it becomes' (Q 40:68), and also: 'Our Word was already addressed to our good servants' (Q 37:171) ... and also: God addressed Moses with a clear word (Q 4:164) ...⁷

⁴ See the exegesis of 'Imād al-Dīn Ismā'īl b. 'Umar b. Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'azīm*, edited 'Abd al-'Azīz Ghunaym et al., 8 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Makhtūṭāt, 1971), ad Q 5:73 and 11:69; for an excellent overview of Judaic themes in Islamic tradition, see Abraham Geiger, *Judaism and Islam* (1898; New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1970).

⁵ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, pars. 25-30.

⁶ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, pars. 31-32.

⁷ As the present study utilized Khoury's edition of Paul's letter, a systematic comparison of Paul's citation of qur'ānic verses with the 'Uthmānic versions was not attempted.

In sum, all the Muslims say that the Book is the Word of God; there can be no Word save by one living, reasonable. These are the substantial (*jawhariyya*) attributes having the weight of names – each (*ṣifa*) is different from the other, but God is one, without parts or divisions. Furthermore, it says at the beginning of the Book: ‘In the name of God, the compassionate, the merciful’ (Q 1:1 – the opening of every qur’ānic chapter except for the ninth) – it rests on three attributes to the exclusion of the others – attributes that, for us, are the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, meaning thereby, something living, speaking – for there is nothing in the other, successive attributes but that it is defined as living, reasonable. And thus it is said in this book: Say: Call upon God, call upon the Merciful, whatever you call him – for his are the beautiful names (Q 17:110).

These discussions of the ‘beautiful names’ but, particularly, the Word of God, are interpreted by Paul in a two-fold manner: Christian Trinitarian theology is no more “polytheistic” than is the normative Islamic understanding of God and his attributes (discussed below) and, in a subtle twist of the Islamic understanding of the importance of the Word of God (the Qur’ān), Paul asserts that, ultimately, it is the *Christians* who are the truest of the believers, for they follow the Lord Christ, the Spirit of God and his Word – and the proof for that is in the Book.⁸

Word and Spirit ... and Son – of God

“The most astonishing thing is that you mock us for our following the Messiah whom you yourselves acknowledge to be the Spirit of God and his Word. And you accept the statement of one who grew old and died over one who neither dies nor grows old, who is in the heavens, just as you yourselves say...” (cf. Q 4:171, 158)⁹

⁸ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, pars. 47-48.

⁹ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 86.

Our authors take advantage of Muslim disputes over the Qur’ān as the Word of God (created or not, part of God or not), and weave it into their defense of the Christian understanding of God the Son as Word of God. For example, Paul details how things are divided into two kinds – living and non (*shay’ ḥayy wa-shay’ ḡhayr ḥayy*). In order to be able to deny mortality (*al-mawtāniyya*) to God, God must be understood to be living (*ḥayy*).¹⁰ Likewise, the living are divided into two groups: rational and non (*ḥayy nāṭiq wa-ḥayy ḡhayr nāṭiq*). Here, too, God is placed in the more noble group (rational) – but, again, in order that his lack of ignorance (*al-jahl*) might be asserted.¹¹ Paul goes on to explain that, for Christians, the essence (*dhāt*) is the father; the son is the utterance (*nuṭq*) and the life (*al-ḥayāt*) is the Holy Spirit. He sums up this argument with the following statement: “And thus it was even formulated in the Book (*wa-qad jā’a fī l-kitāb*): ‘God. There is no god but him, the living (*al-ḥayy*), subsistent (*al-qayūm*)’” – the book, in this case, being the Qur’ān itself (cf. Q 2:255).¹²

The Muslim charge of ‘precedence’ found in Ismā’īl al-Kūfī’s challenge to Theodore¹³ and the anonymous monk¹⁴ (discussed above) also parallels Paul’s allusion to the accusations that, by terming Christ the ‘Son of God’, Christians must mean either a carnal filiation, or that the Father is before [*qabl*] the Son, or that God had a child with a consort. While Theodore and the monk rely on logic alone to refute this charge, Paul also employs qur’ānic passages in his response – God does not have a consort, yet he does

¹⁰ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, par. 27.

¹¹ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, par. 28.

¹² Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, par. 29.

¹³ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 98.

¹⁴ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 172r.

generate: ‘The originator of the heaven and the earth – how could he have a child when he does not have a consort?’ - Q 6:101. And, ‘..I swear by the Generator and that which he engenders’ – Q 90:1-3.¹⁵ Paul notes¹⁶ that Muslims would accuse Christians of intending a carnal sonship (*banuwwa bashariyya*) if they say ‘The Messiah is the son of God’ (*al-masīh ibn Allāh*), or that the father was before the son (*al-ab qabla al-ibn*), or that he had a son by a female consort (*lahu waladan min sāhibatin*). He then invokes the Qur’ān in defense of the Christians: Q 6:101, which denies a female consort to the Creator-God, and Q 91:1-3, which contains a series of oaths, the last of which is by ‘the begetter and that which he begot’ – which Paul understands to refer to God and his son – that is, his spoken word (*al-nuṭq*). Thus, while Paul’s criticism of the Islam of his day is generally muted, he is not above citing debated themes in Islamic intellectual tradition (anthropomorphism¹⁷ and the tension of the attributes/names of God) in a counter-attack – although his primary concern appears to be a (re?)reading of the Qur’ān in a fashion consonant with Christian theological categories.

God verifies the truth with his word (kalimat, Q 10:83; cf. 8:7)

While Sinai Ar. 434 and Khoury’s edition of Paul’s text largely retain qur’ānic passages with the wording of the ‘Uthmānic codex familiar to us, but proffer a ‘Christianized’ gloss thereof, Dick’s edition of Theodore’s text contains a number of passages that would appear to be direct citations from a qur’ānic codex (“your book says”), but with wording that is not found in the ‘Uthmānic codex currently in our

¹⁵ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, par. 35.

¹⁶ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, par. 35.

¹⁷ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, pars. 49-54.

possession, or in the recorded variants thereon. To what extent might we read Theodore's text (or at least Dick's edition thereof) as a potential indicator for the circulation of non-'Uthmānic codices? Ought contemporary norms in Qur'ānic citation (in academic, apologetic, polemical, or other words) – i.e. exact quotation, rather than paraphrasing, of the Arabic text – be assumed as also the norms for our authors? Can we read discrete Qur'ānic allusions independently of the context in which they are invoked?

Theodore is particularly keen on invoking Qur'ānic support for Christian honoring of the Word and the Spirit of God, in a manner that normative Islamic interpretation would not support. As his Muslim interlocutor will not deny that the Messiah is the “spirit of God” and “his word,”¹⁸ Theodore maintains that God “*creates*” with His Word and His Spirit¹⁹ and asks if God issues threats through his spirit and his word, or grows angry at those who follow him (a reference to Muslim understandings of Q 5:116 - in which God asks Jesus if he had told his followers to take himself and his mother as gods besides God, and, as noted above, Jesus emphatically declares that he had not asked such a thing). This rhetorical question is answered in the course of Theodore's discussion of how the Qur'ān, rather, says that God *verifies the truth with His Word and His Spirit* (cf. Q 10:82 and 8:7):

Abū Qurra said: ‘Do you deny that the Messiah is the Spirit of God and his Word?’ (a paraphrase of Q 4:171)

Ṣa'ṣa'a said: ‘No. I do not deny that.’

Abū Qurra said, “So, does God issue threats by means of His Spirit and His Word and grow angry at whoever follows Him? Your own scripture says, ‘God *verifies* the truth with His Word and *His Spirit*.’ (Q 10:82 and 8:7) ... Your prophet and your scripture call us ‘*virtuous*’ and ‘*rightly guided*.’ But you in your contrariness and hatefulness ascribe ‘*disbelief*’ (*kufr*) to us and you make us out to be ‘*polytheists*’ (*mushrikīm*). Know

¹⁸ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 83.

¹⁹ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 79, 86, 88, 101, 102.

that your prophet wanted not to have you in doubt. Rather, he informed you that we are neither ‘polytheists’ nor are we disbelievers. He said, ‘Whoever associates aught with God has committed a manifest error.’ (Q 4:116) He also taught you that the ‘polytheists’ are the Arabs, not the Christians (*al-naṣārā*)... [a theme discussed below] And he said of us, ‘Those who have believed and are rightly guided are the Christians (*al-naṣārā*), the ones asserting God’s grace. In the Day of the Resurrection they will be among the successful ones. Those in error and the ‘polytheists’ are the ones among whom God will make distinctions on the Day of the Resurrection. Your own scripture puts all Christians (*al-naṣārā*) far from ‘polytheism’ (*al-shirk*) and absolves them from ‘disbelief’ (*al-kufr*) when it mentions them with nobility and favor.²⁰

Are Theodore’s allusions to qur’ānic reference to ‘Word’ and ‘Spirit’ in passages that, in the ‘Uthmānic codex, contain only one or the other of these terms testimony to alternate Qur’ān codices or readings, which have not come down to us? When Theodore is attempting to defend Christian theological positions, it would appear that such seeming qur’ānic citations could be more for the purpose of apologetic argument, and an attempted – logical – entrapment of his Muslim interlocutors, than any effort to reflect exactly the wording that a given qur’ānic codex may have preserved. Further examination of early Arabic texts that employ these verses might, however, shed light on the validity of this thesis. As discussed below, a different hypothesis is proffered when Theodore references qur’ānic passages that are removed from Judeo-Christian-themed concerns. And, even if the texts under discussion might not always serve as reliable sources for the form in which the Qur’ān was known to our authors, early Christian Arabic discourse on both Christian- and non-Judeo-Christian-themed passages, may well shed light on the nature of theological discourse, and the freedom with which the Qur’ān

²⁰ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 85.

circulated, was handled and discussed, by both Muslims and members of other communities.

Thus, it appears that, in these arguments, Theodore makes the case for Christian Incarnation theology from two angles, qur'ānic and Islamic. Firstly, as the qur'ānic phrase for God's "verifying the truth with his word" employs *kalima*, the term for "word" that the Qur'ān also employs when speaking of the "Word" which Mary received, and as the Qur'ān says Jesus was both a *kalima* and a *rūḥ* (Spirit) from God, therefore, God's verifying of the truth by His Word implies, also, the conjunction of His Spirit. Secondly, as normative Islamic tradition would (in contradistinction to the position that al-Ma'mūn attempted to enforce with the *miḥna*) maintain the "uncreated" nature of the Word of God, the Word of God must, therefore, be "creative". This is further supported by God's "speaking" and, thereby, creating Adam and Jesus, in the qur'ānic perspective. And, again, alluding to the conjunction of God's Word and Spirit in the person of Jesus in Q 4:171, God's Word and Spirit are to be considered as "creative" rather than "created":

You make us out to be enemies because we do not say about the Word of God and His Spirit, the Creators, that they are created nature, owned chattel, as you yourselves say. And you also make us out to be enemies since it is right according to us, and clear to us, that God has sent no messenger after His Messiah to hold people back from the imperative of obeying him and following his commandments and his good pleasure. Your own prophet says in his scripture that no one of the People of the Book will die since he believes in God and the Last Day (cf. Q 2:62). It is incumbent upon you, O Muslim, to be content with the sayings of your prophet and the testimony of your scripture, and not to impute servility to the Word of God and His Spirit, nor to expect to obey him and to please him, all the while you are exasperating His Word and His Spirit, enjoying your disobedience to him and your divergence from his ways. At the same time that you know that the Word of God and His Spirit created all creatures visible and invisible, everything that is in the heavens and on the earth, you ascribe kuf and shirk to us for our following this Spirit and Word, since we believe in the Word of God and His Spirit.²¹

²¹ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 79.

And, as Christians are following “the word” and “spirit” of God²² – they could not, in fact, be those who are “astray”, as a common gloss of Q 1:7 maintains (discussed below)²³. This line of Theodore’s argument culminates in a distinction between what God *actually* says – namely, verifying and telling the truth (be it in those qur’ānic passages that confirm Christian beliefs, or in the Christian scriptures and tenets) - and those instances in which *Muslims* are “falsifying and contradicting” what God says²⁴ (discussed below).

Injil and Messiah

*On what basis is your allowance of what God has forbidden in his holy Gospel? You treat his sublime revealed scriptures contemptuously. You find fault with the sunnan of the Messiah. You forge lies against his word and his spirit, who is the Messiah. There is also the fact of your neglect of the prophets’ testimony to the Messiah, mighty and exalted be he! And you do not think that any other creature will enter paradise along with you?*²⁵

In the previous chapter, we saw how Q 4:171, in particular, is proffered as a *burhān* for qur’ānic witness to a - Christian - understanding of the Messiah. Arabophone Christians did not limit their *burhān* to (re-reading) passages that Islamic tradition acknowledged as explicitly referencing Christians or Christianity. Paul and, in a more nuanced way, the Jerusalem monk, put forth yet another qur’ānic text as testimony to the virtues of the Messiah and the Gospel, in their discussion of “*ālif – lām - mīm*” of Q 2:2 (in another work, Theodore, too, references this verse in a manner similar to Paul and the anonymous

²² Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, par. 47.

²³ cf. e.g. Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, ad Q 1:7.

²⁴ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 86.

²⁵ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 95.

monk²⁶). And, these Christian readings of Q 2:2 have echoes in classical works of Muslim *tafsīr* of this verse. While the causal relationship among these testimonies is difficult to determine, reading Christian Arabic texts in conjunction with texts from the normative Islamic tradition may illuminate the intellectual (and socio-political?) milieu in which the Muslim (and Christian) authors were writing.

While Theodore is the most explicit not only in his assertions of the veracity of Christianity, but also in his criticisms of the Islam of his day, Paul and the anonymous monk are no less certain of the veracity of Christianity. In fact, both Paul and the Jerusalem monk use the ‘mysterious letters’ at the beginning of the second sura of the Qur’ān as qur’ānic validation of the veracity of Christianity. And, the argument that they employ is also reflected in classical Muslim works of exegesis, such as that of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210). Paul writes:²⁷

And, concerning the Injīl, [the Qur’ān] testifies on its behalf, that it is guidance for the righteous (*hudā lil-muttaqīn*), and that is its saying {Q 2:2-3}: “*ālīf – lām – mīm*. That book in which there is no doubt, a guidance for the righteous.” And, ‘-l-m is an abbreviation; it is al-Masīḥ, and “that book” is the Injīl, since it said {Q 3:184}: “But if they reject you, so indeed were rejected before you messengers who came with clear arguments and scriptures and the illuminating book” – which is the Injīl, which messengers before him brought, together with clear arguments (*bayyināt*). And verily that [Injīl] is “that book”, because “that” cannot be “this”!

The anonymous monk from Jerusalem takes a similar approach (after a discussion of the biblical attestations of Jesus’ miracles):²⁸

And the book of the Injīl mentions some of his miracles (*āyāt*) out of very many. And the Qur’ān testifies to that, when it says, ‘Al-mīm. That book in which there is no doubt, a

²⁶ cf. also Theodore’s invocation of this passage in his “Confirmation of the Gospel” (*Theodore Abū Qurrah*, trans. Lamoreaux, 51).

²⁷ Khoury, ed. and trans., *Paul of Antioch, Risāla*, par. 16.

²⁸ Sinai Ar. 434, ff. 178v-179r.

guide to the pious'. And 'al-mīm' is the beginning of the name "the (al-) Messiah"; the ancient book which he had is that Christian book (*al-kitāb al-qadīm la-qad la-hu dhālika l-kitāb al-masīhi*), and his book, in which there is no doubt, is a guidance for the pious, his *umma* and whosoever obeys him - and it said that God would verify with his Word the truth, that is, the deeds of the Messiah, the Word of God – [the Word] is the verifying truth, so do not deny [the Word].

In the direct qur'ānic quotation, the (edited) text of Paul of Antioch mimics the orthography found in the (printed) Standard Egyptian Edition of the Qur'ān commonly found today: the three Arabic letters, 'ālīf', 'lām', 'mīm', written separately (i.e. not connected, emphasizing their separate – disconnected – nature; as Arabic is a cursive-type script, it is rare to see letters standing alone). When an Arabic speaker sees this, the inclination is to say the name of each letter, rather than the sound it indicates. Thus, when reciting the Qur'ān, these disconnected, "mysterious" letters, which appear at the beginning of some sūras of the Qur'ān, are recited as various *letter names* (i.e. "ay", "ell", "em", or, in Arabic, 'ālīf', 'lām', 'mīm', rather than "alm"). But, when Paul gives his commentary on these letters, he no longer writes them as three separate entities, but connects them: "a – l – m" becomes "alm". The monk approaches these letters in a distinct fashion: connecting the 'ālīf', 'lām' and 'mīm', but writing out 'm' as the letter name is *pronounced*: "mīm" (using the Arabic letters 'mīm', 'yā', 'mīm'). In Arabic, when 'ālīf' and 'lām' appear at the beginning of the word, it is often the definite article, "al-" ("the"). Thus, in the reading of the monk, 'ālīf', 'lām', 'mīm' is rendered 'al-mīm'. Does this indicate that he knew of a recitation (tradition?), in which the so-called 'disconnected' letters were pronounced as a word of sorts? Or, does this orthography indicate a distance from any Islamic interpretive tradition? Does it indicate a knowledge

of a scribal tradition, in which the “mysterious” beginning letters were written in a connected fashion (but, presumably, recited as separate entities)? Or, is he simply reflecting (and emphasizing) a Christian interpretive tradition that Paul also seems to know: that these three letters are merely an abbreviation for the Qur’ānic (and certainly Christian) title of Jesus, “al-Masīḥ” (The Messiah): “The M.” = “The Messiah”?

While these so-called mysterious, or disconnected, letters have received much exegetical attention, and there is no scholarly consensus as to their exact meaning, function or purpose, normative Islamic tradition would reflect, but not validate, Paul’s and the anonymous monk’s understanding that the opening of Sūrat al-Baqara alludes to Jesus. Similarly, it would preserve the memory of debates over why the sūra goes on to say that there is no doubt in ‘*dhālika*’ (“that”) book, rather than ‘*hādha*’ (“this”) book.

As an example of the range of exegetical opinions, in his *tafsīr* on the beginning of Sūrat al-Baqara (Q 2), Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī writes among the 21 explanations put forth concerning the ‘mysterious’ or ‘disconnected’ letters:

-[6] some say they point to the names of [God’s] *dhāt*; others, to the names of [God’s] *ṣifāt*;

-[8] some of them point to the names of God, while others point to the names of something other than God. For al-Ḍaḥḥāk says: ‘The ‘*ālīf*’ is from *allāh*; the *lām*, from *gibrīl*; the *mīm*, from *muḥammad* – God (*allāh*) sent the book to the tongue of Gabriel, to Muḥammad.

And, in the third part of the first section among the points concerning the use of ‘*that*’ rather than ‘*this*’ for the ‘book’ in which there is ‘no doubt’ (among which are 32 alternative names for ‘Qur’ān’ – number 14 of which being ‘*al-rūḥ*’), al-Rāzī lists

the Most High was addressing the Banī Isrā'īl because Sūrat al-Baqara is Medinan, and much of it concerns the Banī Isrā'īl; and the Banī Isrā'īl had had Moses and Jesus – peace upon both of them - informing them that God would send Muhammad (prayer and blessing of God upon him) – and would reveal a book to him, so the Most High said ‘that book’, that is the book which the prophets of old said that God Most High would send to the prophet sent from the offspring of Ishmael.²⁹

The chronology of these various Christian and Muslim interpretations cannot be precised; it is equally difficult to determine how seriously Muslims took Christian interpretations of qur'ānic passages, or how sincere or disingenuous were the intentions of Christian interpreters of the Qur'ān (recall Paul's comments of Muslim and Christian interpretive efforts). Classical Muslim Qur'ān commentators did, however, include the comments, insights and criticisms, of Jews and Christians in their works of qur'ānic exegesis. And, the very allusion to the '*injīl*' as the 'book' of Christ is testimony to the degree of 'Islamification' of the theological categories of our Arabophone Christian authors: Christians writing outside of an Islamic context would tend to regard the Gospels as independent, eye-witness testimonies to the 'good news' of Jesus of Nazareth as the Son of God and Savior of the World, rather than the (qur'ānic) understanding of the *injīl* – Gospel as an independent 'book' that Jesus the Son of Mary brought (akin to the Qur'ān associated with Muḥammad and his message). All of this, however, points to an environment in which Christians, Jews and Muslims did engage one another in discussion of their sacred texts. In addition to employing Christian Arabic texts in an effort the more fully to understand the insights of Muslim *mufassirūn*, might we also follow the example of our predecessors on this matter with benefit, reflecting on our own traditions

²⁹ Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, ad Q 2:2-3.

through the questions posed to us by those of another tradition who are willing to approach our sacred texts with respect?

*Īmān or islām?*³⁰

If, in fact, our texts are properly read as a vindication – validation – of *belief* in a Triune God, and, particularly, in Jesus of Nazareth as the Incarnate Son of God to skeptical *Muslims*, what might be made of the qur'ānic – and eventual Islamic – seeming distinction between “*faith*” (*īmān*) and *islām*? Whereas the anonymous monk’s Muslim interlocutor is noted as being ‘pre-eminent in his *islām*’, that al-Ma’ mūn – the Commander of the Faithful (*amīr al-mu’minīn*) - delights in the discomfit of his fellow Muslims in Theodore’s account, echoing doubts that normative Islam has recorded, concerning the strength of his “Islam” – due, in part, to his attempted imposition of a profession, on the part of public officials, of the createdness of the Qur’ān during the infamous *miḥna*. This distinction between faith (*īmān*) and Islam picks up on the distinctions enumerated in the popular “Gabriel ḥadīth” (which, in turn, echo qur’ānic distinctions, as discussed below):

My father, ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, told me: One day we were sitting in the company of Allah's Apostle (peace be upon him) when there appeared before us a man dressed in pure white clothes, his hair extraordinarily black. There were no signs of travel on him. None amongst us recognized him. At last he sat with the Apostle (peace be upon him) He knelt before him placed his palms on his thighs and said: Muhammad, inform me about

³⁰ For further background, and a range of interpretations of these distinctions, see Fred McGraw Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); Michel Cuypers, *The Banquet: A Reading of the Fifth Sura of the Qur’an* (Miami: Convivium Press, 2009); Gerald R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Louis Gardet, *L’Islam: Religion et communauté* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1967).

al-Islam. The Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) said: Al-Islām implies that you testify that there is no god but Allāh and that Muhammad is the messenger of Allāh, and you establish prayer, pay Zakāt, observe the fast of Ramaḍān, and perform pilgrimage to the (House) if you are solvent enough (to bear the expense of) the journey. He (the inquirer) said: You have told the truth. He (‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb) said: It amazed us that he would put the question and then he would himself verify the truth. He (the inquirer) said: Inform me about īmān (faith). He (the Holy Prophet) replied: That you affirm your faith in Allāh, in His angels, in His Books, in His Apostles, in the Day of Judgment, and you affirm your faith in the Divine Decree about good and evil. He (the inquirer) said: You have told the truth. He (the inquirer) again said: Inform me about al-ihsān (performance of good deeds). He (the Holy Prophet) said: That you worship Allāh as if you are seeing Him, for though you don't see Him, He, verily, sees you. He (the inquirer) again said: Inform me about the hour (of the Doom). He (the Holy Prophet) remarked: One who is asked knows no more than the one who is inquiring (about it). He (the inquirer) said: Tell me some of its indications. He (the Holy Prophet) said: That the slave-girl will give birth to her mistress and master, that you will find barefooted, destitute goat-herds vying with one another in the construction of magnificent buildings. He (the narrator, ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb) said: Then he (the inquirer) went on his way but I stayed with him (the Holy Prophet) for a long while. He then, said to me: ‘Umar, do you know who this inquirer was? I replied: Allāh and His Apostle knows best. He (the Holy Prophet) remarked: He was Gabriel (the angel). He came to you in order to instruct you in matters of religion.³¹

This traditional distinction between *īmān* and *islām* echoes a qur’ānic distinction – one on which our Christian Arabophone authors picked up, as did early Muslim exegetes.³² In the Qur’ān, a distinction is made between the ‘submission’ and the ‘faith’ of the ‘desert Arabs’ (Q 9:97-101; 48:11-16; 49:14-17)³³. As with many qur’ānic categories, however, there is not an absolute judgment: for example, if Q 9:97 terms the Arabs of the desert the worst in unbelief and hypocrisy, two verses later the Qur’ān states that some of them believe in God and the Last Day. Similarly, Q 5:51 instructs the ‘believers’ not to take the Jews and the Christians as allies – *awliyā’* – as they are protectors of one another; but,

³¹ Muslim, *Sahih*, K. *al-Iman*, 1; found online, at <http://hadith.al-islam.com/bayan/display.asp?Lang=eng&ID=2> (accessed March 1, 2011).

³² cf. e.g. Muqātil, *Tafsīr*, ad loc; Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, ad loc.; Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, ad loc.

³³ See the allusions in Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 85, and elsewhere (discussed below).

Q 5:82, while warning that the Jews and associators – *mushrikūn* – will be the strongest in enmity to the believers, terms those who say ‘We are Christians’ to be the ‘nearest in love to the believers’; and, Q 5:69 asserts that ‘those who believe, who are Jews or the Sabians or the Naṣāra (Christians), who believe in God and the Last Day, and who work good deeds (*ṣāliḥāt*), no fear shall be upon them, nor shall they grieve’ (cf. Q 2:62). In different times and places, these varying estimations of ‘believers’ and Muslims, of Jews and Christians (and Sabians), have been subjected to various legal and theological interpretations.³⁴ The distinction between ‘believer’ and ‘Muslim’ is a particular curiosity, as are elements of the Qur’ānic and later Islamic antipathy to Judaism.³⁵ For, while prophetic tradition and the biography of the Prophet describe the alliance of some Jewish tribes with Muhammad’s Meccan opponents (and the eventual treacherous plots against Muhammad and the early community of believers), unlike Christianity, Islam would seem to have no theological grievance with Judaism (see the discussion below).

Seen from the perspective of traditional Islamic narratives of the early community, the Qur’ānic wariness of the ‘desert Arabs’ may not have been unwarranted, in the light of the so-called ‘wars of apostasy’ immediately following the Prophet’s death³⁶. But, divisions among Arab tribes, or Arabic speaking peoples, including this disparagement of nomadic Arabs (or those deemed less ‘civilized’) is not new to the period of the revelation of the Qur’ān: for at least a century before Muhammad’s life,

³⁴ For a general overview, see, for example, *EQ*, s.v. “Religious Pluralism”, as well as Sachedina, “Qur’ān and Other Religions.”

³⁵ See, e.g. Ḥanafī Mahallawī, *Jarāʾim al-Yahūd didda l-adyān al-samawīyya: Al-Yahūdiyya wa-Masīḥiyya wa-l-Islām* (Cairo: Dār Akhbar al-Yawm Qiṭā al-Thaqāfa, 2002).

³⁶ cf. Fred Donner, “The Historical Context,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur’ān*, edited by McAuliffe, 23-40.

there were efforts to ‘unite’ the various tribes of the peninsula – not to mention the employment of various northern Arab tribes as ‘border guards’ by both Persians and Romans.³⁷ Today, “Arab” is sometimes more a linguistic than ethnic or, arguably, cultural, designation (cf. the various usages of ‘*ajnabī*’ ‘southerner’ or ‘*a jamī*’ – ‘Persian-accented Arabic speaker’ – as opposed to “*franji*” – ‘Frank’ or “*gharīb*” – ‘Westerner’ to designate “strangers” in the “Arab” world). Likewise, “Arab” appears to have been equally a linguistic and ethnic designation, as evidenced by the qur’ānic dismissal of claims by Muhammad’s opponents that a man, rather than God through an angel, was the source of his inspirations, on the basis of the linguistic “foreignness” of the alleged informant, as opposed to the “clear Arabic” of the qur’ānic recitation (Q 16:103). Additionally, the distinction between Arabs (desert or other) and others would obtain increasing importance as the Arab Islamic empire expanded beyond the confines of the Arabian peninsula, as indicated by the ‘shu’ūbiyya’ discussions in Abbasid times. (The Umayyad distinction of Arab vs. non-Arab, and the concomitant question of the position of non-Muslim Arabs therein would eventually expand, under the Abbasids, to a question of non-Arab Muslims: to what extent is “Arabness” – linguistic, ethnic or cultural – “necessary” for “true” Islam, faith or polity?)

But, for our purposes, and more to the point in any effort to understand the early ‘Islamic’ period, is the distinction between ‘believer’ (*mu’min*) and ‘Muslim’ (*muslim*): The submitting men, the submitting women, the believing men, the believing women, the obedient men, the obedient women, the truthful men, the truthful women, the steadfast

³⁷ Cf. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs*; Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs*; Irfan Shahid, *Byzantium and the Semitic Orient before the Rise of Islam* (London: Variorum, 1988); cf. also the polemics in al-Kindī (in Newman’s translation).

men, the steadfast women, the reverent men, the reverent women, the charitable men, the charitable women, the fasting men, the fasting women, the chaste men, the chaste women, and the men who commemorate God frequently, and the commemorating women; God has prepared for them forgiveness and a great recompense (Q 33:35).³⁸

Arabic texts from the early Islamic period, especially those from non-Muslim sources, may provide valuable insights to complement traditional narratives of Islamic origins. While the Qur'ān alludes to the community – the *umma*³⁹ – and to various laws – *shar'* – by which various peoples were guided, and the need for governance/judgment (*ḥukm*), the elaboration of *dār al-islām*, with its legal, political⁴⁰, military⁴¹ and social structures, would be left to later generations to articulate and define.⁴² And, it is this very process of discernment that may be said to be the 'heart' of Islamic thought: to what extent are 'Arab' traditions essential to the lives of Muslims in times and cultures far removed from the Arabian peninsula of the 1st/7th century? And, for much of the first centuries of 'Islam', while theological articulations did take place in an environment whose rulers

³⁸ This verse is said to have been revealed in response to a query from one of Muhammad's wives regarding the lack of direct discussion of "women" (as, in Arabic, masculine plurals can encompass female, but not vice versa). For further discussion of "women in the Qur'ān", see B. Stowasser, "Women and Citizenship in the Qur'ān," in *Women, the Family and Divorce Laws in Islamic History*, edited Amira Sonbol (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 23-38.

³⁹ F. Mathewson Denny, "The meaning of 'umma' in the Qur'ān," *History of Religions* 15/1 (Aug. 1975): 34-70.

⁴⁰ Cf. e.g. M. Haddad, "Arab Religious Nationalism in the Colonial Era: Rereading Rashid Rida's Ideas on the Caliphate," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 117/2 (Apr-Jun 1997): 253-77; Sherman Jackson, "Shari'ah, Democracy and the Modern Nation-State."

⁴¹ Paul Heck, "Jihad Revisited," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 32 (2004): 95-128.

⁴² M. Parvin and M. Sommer, "Dar al-Islam: The Evolution of Muslim Territoriality and its Implications for Conflict Resolution in the Middle East", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 11/1 (Feb. 1980): 1-21.

were – nominally, at least – ‘Muslim’⁴³, there was the additional question of how to live in an ‘Islamically appropriate’ manner in a society in which most of the population was not ‘Muslim’. The five ‘pillars’ of Islam were not explicitly defined until generations after the Prophet’s death⁴⁴; the same is true for the determination of a ‘*ḥudūd*’ offense (including witness requirements and the discernment of extenuating circumstances) and the application of the appropriate penalty⁴⁵. In parts of the contemporary ‘Islamic’ world, the ‘pillars’ and the ‘*ḥudūd*’ penalties are enforced as visible markers of ‘Islam’, but the careful and complex efforts of scholars (‘*ulamā*’) and jurists (*fuqahā*) in the nuances of their discernment are often overlooked.⁴⁶

But this distinction between ‘*islām*’ and ‘*īmān*’, Islam/submission and faith, does not necessarily entail ‘hypocrisy’ on the part of the individual engaged in visible/verbal signs of ‘Islam’, as elaborated upon in the famous *ḥadīth* of Gabriel, which distinguishes between faith and praxis, and which was cited above.

This duality, and the qur’ānic distinction between believer and Muslim, *īmān* and *Islām*, did not go unnoticed by our three authors. Theodore, for example, picks up on this qur’ānic – and, possibly, Abbasid (discussed below) – distinction between “believers” and “muslims”, but in defense of Christianity. In this, he calls attention to the Qur’ān’s

⁴³ For an overview of the articulation of responses to an unjust, or sinful, ruler, see, e.g. *EI*, s.v. “Imāma”.

⁴⁴ For a general overview, see J. Jomier, *How to understand Islam*, trans. J. Bowden (1988; Paris: Cerf, 1989), 49-72.

⁴⁵ For modern complexities, see, e.g., Rudolf Peeters, *Crime and Punishment in Islamic Law. Theory and Practice from the Sixteenth to the Twenty-First Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). For an overview of classical theories, see M.Ch. Bassiouni, ed., *The Islamic Criminal Justice System* (London: Oceana Publications, Inc., 1982), esp. 195-215.

⁴⁶ For a thorough overview of Islamic law, see Bernard G. Weiss, *The spirit of Islamic law* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2006), esp. 1-23 (“The formation of Islamic law”). For some contemporary challenges, see Kh. Abou el-Fadl, “Islam and the Theology of Power,” *Middle East Report* 221 (Winter 2001): 24-33; R. Peeters, “The Eclipse of Islamic Criminal Law”, in his *Crime and Punishment in Islamic Law*, 103-41.

own derision of the outward “submission” without “faith” of the (desert?) “Arabs” (cited above)⁴⁷ – a distinction that neither the Jerusalem monk nor Paul makes (although the latter asserts the equality of all men, Muslims and others, with the following Qur’ān citation: O man, we created you male and female, and we divided you in peoples and tribes, that you might know. But the most worthy of you, in the eyes of God, is the most pious, Q 49:13⁴⁸). This distinction between ‘faith’ and ‘Islam’, as both are Qur’ānic categories, have occupied much theological and exegetical – and legal – attention in Islamic history.⁴⁹ For, while elements of the five “pillars” of Islam (witness to faith, prayer, fasting during Ramadan, almsgiving and pilgrimage) are found in the Qur’ān, the precise definitions, and their subsequent “markings” of Islamic societies were only delineated in the *ḥadīth*. And, generally, Islamic tradition has maintained that, ultimately, God is the judge of what is in a man’s heart as regards belief, or intention (with a discouragement of *takfīr* – the declaring of another Muslim not truly a Muslim, with the possible juridical result of making licit the declared-non-believer’s blood⁵⁰). Thus, the disparate prayer practices of Sunnis and Shiites (and even varieties of Qur’ān readings) have been allowed in much of Islamic history. But, in times of tension (as exemplified in Ibn Taymiyya’s writing), discrepancies of praxis could lead to doubts about the faith of the practitioners. Subsequently, these categories of ‘believer’, ‘Muslim’, ‘unbeliever’, ‘polytheist’: *mu’min* – *muslim* – *kāfir* – *mushrik* – had legal and social, as well as theological, impact. If the distinction between a ‘Muslim’ and a

⁴⁷ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 76, 85, 109.

⁴⁸ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, par. 22.

⁴⁹ Cf. e.g. the discussion and bibliography in *EQ*, s.v. “Faith.”

⁵⁰ Cf. e.g. Yūsuf Qaradāwī, “Extremism”, in *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook*, edited by Charles Kurzman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 196-204.

‘believer’ was not made explicit in the Qur’ān, what, then, would be the estimation of a ‘Christian’ or a ‘Jew’ – as a ‘Person of the Book’ or a ‘protected’ person (*ahl al-kitāb* or *dhimmī*, respectively)? While this is not the place to explore the implications of possible legal categorizations, the fact of a multiplicity of estimations throughout Islamic history is important to bear in mind as we proceed.

Al-Ma’mūn’s seeming delight at the vanquishing of his coreligionists may indicate an awareness of the new situation in which Muslims in Baghdad, as opposed to Damascus, found themselves, rather than a rejection of “Islam” (as per the *īmān/islām* distinction): Is it an attempted, or partial, shift of Abbasid attentions away from the traditional (Hellenized? Arab) heartlands of Islam and their traditions, a position that would be consonant with an assertion of the createdness of the Qur’ān (and a concomitant lessening of the status of the Arabic Qur’ān - and Arabian traditions of Muhammad) – and as exemplified by the tolerance for Shia/Alid positions, as well as Christians and others (perhaps sparked by – an understanding of - the Arabic Qur’ān’s denunciation of one of their own progenitors? Or the prominence accorded the qur’ānic readers and interpreters – see above, over and against the central authority?)?

For, qur’ānic passages favorable to Christians were particularly problematic for the Umayyads, as theirs was a policy of “Arab” vs. “non-Arab” – and, Arab was identified as “Muslim”. This strong sense of communal and religious unity was, perhaps, a natural outcome of the wars of apostasy, in which Arab tribes who had allied with the Meccans during Muhammad’s life, tried to split from the community at his death and the

loss of the prophetic leader⁵¹. As such, Arabs who did not adhere to the prophetic claims of the *ummī*/Arabian prophet, but who lived within, and under, Umayyad rule, were deemed suspect: so much so, that the qur'ānic injunction that the “food” and “women” of the “People of the Book” are licit for Muslims/believers (Q 5:5), was interpreted not to apply to Arab People of the Book⁵² (notably, this point would be picked up on by Ibn Taymiyya, on the heels of the Mongol invasion). In the Abbasid period, the paradigm shifted, as more and more non-Arabs came under Arab Muslim rule – and, eventually, converted to Islam. Could non-Arabs follow the Arabian prophet and Arabic scripture as well as Arabs? But, ancient Arabian distinctions did not vanish, as seen in the tension seemingly evidenced in the Qur'ān itself on linguistic and ethnic categories (“clear/clarifying Arabic”; *a jamī*), and between the desert and non-desert “Arabs”, as well as in al-Kindī's assertion of a Kinda supremacy in “Arabness” over those of the Qurayshī Hashimites⁵³, or in the debates over the leadership of the Muslim community, and as also evidenced in the familial affiliations of Muhammad's wives, and echoed in the account of Theodore's debate. (In the account of Theodore's debate before al-Ma'mūn, a curious parallel with the names of the wives of Muhammad should be noted, and merits further study: e.g. “Ṣaṣa'a” and “al-Khuḏā'ī”). Again, is this a detail included so as to lend greater authenticity to the account, or is there an underlying meaning to these names - akin to the political alliances attributed to Muhammad in conjunction with his marriages)? As noted above, such emphasis on lineage is also

⁵¹ Cf. Rudolph Peters and Gert J.J. de Vries, “Apostasy in Islam,” *Die Welt des Islams*, NS 17 (1976-77): 1-25.

⁵² cf. John Spencer Trimingham, *Christianity among the Arabs in pre-Islamic Times* (London: Longman, 1979).

⁵³ 'Abd al-Masīḥ al-Kindī, *Apology*, ed. Newman, 462-66.

invoked by the author of Sinai Ar. 434 in Jerusalem, as a proof against any malicious intent on the part of the Muslim sheikh who had written to him, asking his reflections on the questions found in the “Refutation of the Christians”: “he is neither a harasser nor an interrogator; the nobility of the stock of his fathers prevents that.”⁵⁴

And, Christians writing in Arabic were not unaware of the qur’ānic censor of Jews, which fit very well with their own theological predilections – but which tended to perplex Muslims engaged in theological discourse with Christians (see below). While Theodore’s discussion of Jewish perfidy might be “sound” from a Christian theological perspective, would Islam have had the same antipathy towards Judaism as did Christianity?

Qur’ānic (and early Islamic) familiarity with details from the Jewish and Christian traditions, as well as Jewish-Christian tensions and divisions have been discussed in great detail elsewhere.⁵⁵ But, the possible role of *Christian* anti-Judaism in later *Muslim* glosses of the Qur’ān (and early Islamic history) has not been extensively explored. While the gloss of Q 1:6-7 as indicating Jews (those at whom God is ‘angry’) and Christians (those who are ‘astray’) is familiar to many scholars of the Qur’ān, early Christian Arabic texts might shed further light on *why* even early exegetes such as Muqātil (d. 150/767) or al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) might have understood ‘Christians’ as those who were astray, and ‘Jews’ as those against whom God was angry. Q 4:171 has been used in Islamic circles as ‘proof’ of Christian errancy; it is also the only qur’ānic

⁵⁴ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 171v.

⁵⁵ For some classical discussions, see Trimmingham (*Christianity among the Arabs*) and Geiger (*Judaism and Islam*); for more recent discussions, see *EQ*, s.v. “People of the Book”; see also Rubin, *Eye of the Beholder*; Robert Hoyland, “The Earliest Christian Writings on Muhammad: An Appraisal,” in *The Biography of the Prophet*, edited Harald Motzki (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 276-97.

verse cited by all three of our authors – but in a fashion that does not accord with traditional Islamic glosses thereof. When our Christians’ readings of Q 4:171 are read in conjunction with their assertions of Christian ‘faith’ (*īmān* - as opposed to ‘Islam’ or Jewish perfidy), might ‘Muslim anti-Semitism’⁵⁶ be read in a new light?

Abū Qurra said, ‘Do you, O Muslim, say that we “fabricate falsehood” about God?’
The Muslim said, ‘Yes, you give God associates, and whoever gives God associates “fabricates falsehoods” against Him.’

Abū Qurra said, ‘Is it with His permission, or without His permission? If you say that we “fabricate falsehood” against Him and disbelieve in Him with His permission, then we have no blame with Him, and no punishment. And if you say it is without His willing [it] and without His permission, then it would already be right according to those who are present that He is a weak God, since He did not lead us to the right faith.’

Al-Ma’ mūn said, ‘By God, you have spoken truly, O Abū Qurra.’

Then the whole assembly cried out and said, ‘This is not like what our master says, and there is no satisfactory answer except the fact that God gave you guidance, but you would not be guided.’

...

(Abū Qurra said:) “Now understand this and make the proper distinction. The Jews, when they crucified our master the Messiah, did not want to accommodate him and to bring to fulfillment what the prophets foretold about him. Their only certain concern was his destruction, the obliteration of his name, and the elimination of his memory from the world. So he will judge them and requite them.”⁵⁷

(See Chapter Five for further discussion of the significance of this strain of argumentation.)

Early in his debate, Theodore admonishes his Muslim interlocutors:

Do not act haughtily against me, or disdainfully, out of concession, once it is clear to you from your scripture you should address me “*only in the best way*,” just as your prophet commanded you in your scripture, speaking to the Christians whom he met earlier: “*We believe in what He sent down to us and to you; our God and your God are one*.” (Q 29:46) But you, due to your conceit, have not accepted what he (i.e. the Prophet Muhammad) said, nor have you obeyed his command. Rather, in the place of his commandment to you, you have put your contempt for our religion, and your defamation

⁵⁶ Cf. e.g. B. Lewis, “Muslim anti-Semitism,” *Middle East Quarterly* V/2 (June 1998), on <http://www.meforum.org/396/muslim-anti-semitism> (accessed February 15, 2011).

⁵⁷ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 118.

of us. 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. Q 1:6-7) Who were those 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 'Christians' (al-nasāra), 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. And if you say that you are a follower of the Messiah, and you follow his prescripts, you invalidate what you say of your own scripture. I recognize you are far from being a follower of the Messiah; you are estranged from him by reason of abandoning his commandments."

The Muslim said, *"Whoever follows any religion other than Islam, it will not be accepted from him, and he will be one of the losers in the hereafter."* (Q 3:85)

Abū Qurra said, "Your own scripture, O Muslim, rebuts this statement of yours, in its saying, *"God made what is in the heavens and on the earth submit willy nilly."* (Q 3:83) So if it is as I say, all people, birds, predators, animals and devils have already entered into Islam⁵⁸. All creatures together have become Muslims, whether they want to or refuse to, and your position is only like one of them. So why do you brag to us about your Islam, since you do not have any precedence over anyone else who entered into it along with you? But know, O Muslim, that God's religion is faith (al-īmān). You are Muslims and we, the community of Christians (al-nasāra) are Believers. You have submitted, just as your scripture mentions, according to God [Himself], mighty and exalted be He, in connection with the Arabs in their saying, 'We believe.' He said to them, 'You do not believe. But say, 'We submit.' (Q 49:14) Then it says, according to God Himself, *'It is the same for you, whether you warn them or you do not warn them. God has sealed their hearts, their eyes and their ears, by reason of their not believing.* (Q 2:6-7) So you, O Muslim, should not boast that you do not believe in the Word of God and His Spirit, the Creator of everything. By my life, the fact is that no one who will not believe in the Word of God and His Spirit *'enters into faith.'*" (cf. Q 49:14)

Al-Hāshimī, and the company of the Quraysh who were present, became furious at this. Thereupon, a man called Hārūn ibn Hāshim al-Khaḏā'ī approached Abū Qurra and said, "O Abū Qurra, are you acquitting us of *faith* and certifying it for the Christians (*al-nasāra*) alone?"

Abū Qurra said, "O Muslim, your prophet and your scripture testify about God, mighty and exalted be He, that He excluded you from *faith*. So if your prophet gave testimony

⁵⁸ As 'submission' and 'Islam' are the same word, the Arabic makes this point more clearly.

about God, your God, other than what he said, you tell [us] and make it known. You give no credence to what does come in your scripture and what your prophet did utter. So there is then no reason for your boasting to me of your claim for something your scripture did not set forth nor did your prophet speak of it.”

Al-Ma'mūn asked, “What is that, Abū Qurra?”

He said, “His boasting to us, O Commander of the Faithful, of his *Islam*, and of his claim and allegation of his own entry into a garden in which there are {“*houris (hur al-'in) whom neither man nor jinn have wed.*”}(Q 55:56) This is something of which God would not create anything at all.”

Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd Allāh said, “Yes, this thing is prepared for all the Muslims.”

Abū Qurra said, “If this is what is prepared for you, as you relate it, who will be the partners of your wives in the hereafter, since you will have disowned them and replaced them with *houris*?... (discussed below, in Chapter 6)⁵⁹

In addition to Theodore’s assertion that the Jews were both astray and those at whom God was angry, his conflation of belief (*īmān*) with Christianity, and the denial of ‘Islam’ to Muhammad is a subtle point whose elaboration may shed light on the glossing of Q 1:6-7 in the normative Islamic interpretive tradition (it also accords with a subsequent discussion in Theodore’s text, that of the ‘corruption’ of the qur’ānic, rather than biblical, text: discussed below). In this reading, the caliph al-Ma’mūn is named with the traditional honorific (according to Sunni Islamic tradition, dating to the caliph ‘Umar), not as ‘Commander of the Muslims’, but as ‘Commander of the Faithful’ (*amīr al-mu’mīnīn*: from the same trilateral Arabic root as *īmān*, which would tell the Arabic auditor that the caliph could be the leader of the Christians), whereas ‘Islam’ is identified as an earthly religion, concerned with political and military power (as discussed below), and bodily pleasures in the heavenly paradise. This latter charge is a common trope in Christian polemics against Islam – particularly the ‘inappropriateness’ of the very physicality of the qur’ānic and Islamic visions of paradise, but in the context of debate

⁵⁹ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 74-77.

texts, it has a further nuance. For at Q 2:111, Jews and Christians are portrayed as claiming paradise exclusively for themselves (when read in the context of the larger passage, Q 2:109-123), and are challenged to bring their ‘proof’ (*burhān*) if they are truthful. Whether *scriptural* proofs were considered appropriate in Christian-Muslim debates would be debated, as discussed below. But, the ‘proofs’ for the true ‘religion’, and the implications for the afterlife were likely not merely academic matters for the believing disputants. Picking up on this claim to paradisiacal exclusivity, Abū Qurra goes on to say,

“By my life, in your saying, {“There is no god but God”} (Q 3:62) you testify to the delight of Paradise for yourself. It is the same with the Samaritans and the Jews; they give a testimony like your testimony in accordance with the dogma of your observance. So there is no sense to your vaunting yourself over people and vouching for yourself, since the testimony is in behalf of Paradise”⁶⁰

– with the implication that Islam is no better than other religions of ‘orthopraxy’ (rather than orthodoxy). This ties into Theodore’s exaltation of Christian belief in God’s ‘grace’, a theme (as discussed below) that Paul and the anonymous monk of Jerusalem also contain. But, in all three cases, the ‘law of grace’ of Christianity is contrasted first with the ‘law of justice’ of Judaism, and only secondarily, by extension, with Islam.

The denial of this sort of ‘Islam’ to Muhammad accords with Theodore’s attempt to respect Muhammad and the (original) message he brought – which, in Theodore’s understanding, was distinct from the Qur’ān known to later Muslims, and the later Islamic elaboration of dogma and praxis. For, if later Islamic tradition would understand

⁶⁰ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 95.

Christians as ‘astray’ as much for their denial of Muhammad’s prophethood as for their Trinitarian and Christological assertions, Christians would deny ‘belief’ to Muslims because of Islamic denials of Christ’s divinity. As referenced above, building upon his reading of Q 4:171 (in which Jesus is said to be a Word of God and a Spirit from Him), Theodore states: “Your own scripture says, ‘God *verifies* the truth with His Word and *His Spirit*.’ (Q 10:82 and 8:7) ... yet in your conceit, you term us polytheists (*mushrikūn*).” Continuing, he cites a few qur’ānic passages that reference Christians explicitly, and in a positive light (Q 5:82): the Qur’ān, in Theodore’s reading, considers Christians - believers

‘a people of virtuous individuals, who read God’s *signs/verses*. And because they are rightly guided by the truth and they speak it (conflation of Q 7:181 and 3:113-4). Your prophet and your scripture call us ‘virtuous’ and ‘rightly guided.’ But you in your contrariness and hatefulness ascribe ‘disbelief’ (*kufr*) to us and you make us out to be ‘polytheists’ (*mushrikūn*). Know that your prophet wanted not to have you in doubt. Rather, he informed you that we are neither ‘polytheists’ nor are we disbelievers. He said, ‘Whoever associates aught with God has committed a manifest error.’ (Q 4:116) He also taught you that the ‘polytheists’ are the Arabs, not the Christians (*al-naṣāra*), in his saying to them, ‘The Arabs are the strongest in disbelief and hypocrisy.’ (cf. Q 49:14) he did not mean those who used to worship idols, but rather those of the Arabs who had become Muslims. For *Islam is not faith*. (cf. Q 49:14) And he said of us, ‘Those who have believed and are rightly guided are the Christians (*al-naṣāra*), the ones asserting God’s grace. In the Day of the Resurrection they will be among the successful ones. Those in error and the ‘polytheists’ are the ones among whom God will make distinctions on the Day of the Resurrection. Your own scripture puts all Christians (*al-naṣāra*) far from ‘polytheism’ (*al-shirk*) and absolves them from ‘disbelief’ (*al-kufr*) when it mentions them with nobility and favor.”⁶¹

⁶¹ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 85.

Concluding discussion

The multi-confessional milieu in which each of our authors lived is amply evident in their writings. Paul ends his letter with a prayer that God might effect the reconciliation of “His servants, Christians and Muslims” (par. 64); the anonymous monk in Jerusalem is responding to anti-Christian charges found in a work from the genre of the “refutation of the Christians”; and Theodore is termed – by the caliph himself – to be a “sea of knowledge” (*baḥr al-‘ilm*) against whom no one could stand victorious in *kalām* or “knowledge of religions” (*ma‘rifat al-adyān*)⁶². While “religious studies” as a distinct academic discipline is a relatively recent development in western scholarly circles (in which the 20th century Romanian Mircea Eliade is touted as the “Father of comparative religious studies”), the political, geographic and demographic realities of early Islam lent themselves well to fertile discussions in “comparative religions” (the numerous discussions of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazzālī [d. 505/1111], whether on Islam, unbelief or other religions – are a case in point⁶³) – both regarding the particular hallmarks of individual confessions (for example, ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s [d. 415/1025] sometimes scathing account of Christian origins⁶⁴ is not dissimilar to that found in Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*), as well as the qualifications of the “true” religion⁶⁵, and various

⁶² Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 80.

⁶³ Cf. also Camilla Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible: From Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazm* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996); Waardenburg, *Muslims and Others*.

⁶⁴ Cf. Moshe Stern’s translation, “Abd al-Jabbar’s Account of how Christ’s Religion was Falsified.”

⁶⁵ Cf. e.g. S.H. Griffith, “Faith and Reason in Christian *kalām*: Theodore Abū Qurrah on Discerning the ‘True Religion’,” in *Christian Arabic apologetics during the Abbasid period (750-1258)*, edited Samir and Nielsen, 1-43.

“refutations” of those deemed false (which genre is not dissimilar to the later

”*Summa ... contra gentiles*” of Thomas Aquinas).⁶⁶

While Theodore’s citations and interpretations of Qur’ānic passages do not always accord either with the ‘Uthmānic codex known to us today, nor the glosses of what came to be the normative Islamic interpretive tradition, they may provide some indication of the subtext with which classical Muslim Qur’ān exegetes were working. In al-Ma’mūn’s time, if there was not an express need to emphasize the ‘Islam’/īmān distinction, might there have been occasion to criticize the ‘Arabs’ (keeping in mind the increasing prominence of the Barmacids and other non-Arab forces in the early Abbasid period; that Theodore’s Muslim interlocutors, whom he vanquishes before al-Ma’mūn, are all ‘Arab’ may be significant in this regard)? And, if Christians were a majority of the Muslim-ruled world, might there have been a political tendency to downplay the ‘Christian-Muslim’ distinction – with the ambiguities that īmān, as opposed to islām, might allow, through an emphasis on the commonalities of ‘belief’, in some quarters? Both the very honorific ‘Prince/Commander of the Faithful/Believers’ (*amīr al-mu’mīnīn*) and the various accounts of suspicions of al-Ma’mūn’s ‘Islam’ (or faith) preserved in normative Islamic narratives may merit closer study, as increased attention is devoted to early Christian Arabic texts. And, as with the Baḥīrā legend, and the various accounts of Muhammad’s encounters with a ‘monk’ (either as a ‘proof’ of his prophethood, or as an explanation for how he can be informed about Judeo-Christian traditions)⁶⁷, the cycle of cause and

⁶⁶ Cf. e.g. Abū ‘Uthmān ‘Amr b. Baḥr al-Jāhīz, *Radd ‘alā l-naṣāra*, ed. Y. Finkel, in *Three Essays of Abu Othman Amr ibn Bahr al-Jahiz* (Cairo: Salafiyya Press, 1926); Eng. trans. in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 47/3, 4 (1927): 311-34.

⁶⁷ Roggema, *Legend of Sergius Bahira*.

effect is difficult to determine. But, the writings of Theodore and other Christians attest to the eagerness with which Christians were picking up on qur'ānic distinctions between 'faith' and 'Islam/submission'; and, while they demonstrate discontent with Muslim rule, they also testify to the extent of Christian – theological - vitriol against Jews/Judaism. As Christians came to speak and write in Arabic, and as Christians were the largest demographic in *dār al-islām*, and frequently in conversation with Muslims (as attested to by the popularity of Christian-Muslim debate texts), it is not unlikely that Muslim exegetes would have been familiar with these Christian estimations of Judaism. Might such a '*Christian* contra-Judaeos' subtext provide a more historically and theologically satisfactory explanation for the glosses of Q 1:6-7 and other passages than that which the normative Islamic interpretive tradition has preserved? Finally, the relative peace in which Jews lived in the Muslim-ruled world (until the middle of the 20th century), in contrast to their difficulties in Latin Christendom, belies any deep-seated Islamic theological necessity to 'hate' the Jews.

Rather, might Christian Arabic texts shed light on the ways in which the Qur'ān's first auditors might have understood it? The early Islamic centuries were a time in which Christians were a significant demographic in the Arabic-speaking, Muslim-ruled world, and when – Muslim – exegetes did appear to heed the qur'ānic injunction to “ask those who read the book before you” (Q 10:94). *Isrā'īliyyāt* (tales of the Children of Israel: pre-Islamic Jewish and Christian lore) found its way not only into the *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* (“popular” accounts of the lives of the prophets), but also into works of *tafsīr* and even into *kalām* discussions. If the Qur'ān itself is understood as an Arabic bookend to Late

Antiquity, might our Arabophone Christian authors' defense of Christianity against claims of *shirk* support Hawting's argument that the *mushrikūn* of the Qur'ān, far from being "polytheistic Arabs of the *jāhiliyya*" are Christians – even if, perhaps, as a rhetorical device, along the lines of Griffith and Neuwirth?

Those who are "astray", those with whom God is "angry" of the opening Chapter of the Qur'ān do map very well onto Christian-Jewish polemics: God was angry at the Jews for killing his prophets, etc., as Paul indicates with a quotation from the Hebrew Bible (Psalm 106/105:37-39)⁶⁸, and Jews (and, eventually, Muslims) would accuse Christians as "straying" from true monotheism, uttering blasphemies incorporated from polytheistic Hellenized Roman tradition – such as God's having a "son" (even if such discussions were, eventually, framed in abstract theoretical philosophy). Furthermore, to Late Antique observers of Christianity, would it have seemed more a Semitic monotheism, or a syncretism of a Semitic monotheism into a Greco-Roman polytheistic pantheon?⁶⁹ Anyone who has had occasion to travel through Rome, from Appia Antica to Vatican Hill, to the varied layers of the church of San Clemente, to the ruins of Ostia Antica and the Jewish and pre-Christian Roman traces of Trastevere and elsewhere, recognizes how difficult it is to separate a "Christian" from a "Roman" remain. The Hellenization of Judaism itself (as evidenced with the Septuagint in pre-Christian times) would only further add to the difficulty in finding a purely "Semitic" (Jewish, Israelite and/or Biblical) monotheism in Christianity: in the words of one of Theodore's

⁶⁸ Khoury ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, pars. 19 and 24.

⁶⁹ On this theme, see Robert Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984); cf. Peter Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992) or his *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

interlocutors “Give up what Paul and your early bishops enjoined on you, mortification and self-punishment, and the promise of Paradise in exchange for praise and tedious prayers⁷⁰” (an intriguing twist on the more commonly-heard Muslim criticism of the “distortion” of Christianity by Christ’s followers, as for example, that which the slightly later ‘Abd al-Jabbār would level at Christians: Paul’s ‘romanizing’ of the ‘true’ religion of the Messiah⁷¹). Pope Ratzinger himself attested to the convergence of Biblical faith and Hellenic culture in his Regensburg speech of 12 September 2006⁷². In this regard, the accounts of icons of Mary and Jesus as being placed in the pre-Islamic Ka‘ba, and God’s reported query to Jesus in the Qur’ān as to whether or not he asked people to take him and his mother as two gods besides God (discussed above, Chapter 2), merit further exploration.⁷³ But, while Christians, East and West, past and present, would acknowledge the confluence of “biblical faith” and Greco-Roman traditions (and many other cultures where Christianity has taken root), the interpretation of these “facts” is not that of a “corruption” of the “true” or “original” message of Jesus of Nazareth and his followers, but authentic manifestations thereof – even, in the words of Ratzinger – “historically definitive” forms. And, perhaps this is akin to the interpretations of the Qur’ān familiar to our Arabophone Christian authors, as – particularly before the understanding of the Word of God as inimitable and uncreated became normative, there was arguably a fluid handling of the text. Similarly, the process of the compilations of

⁷⁰ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 124.

⁷¹ See the translations of Stern and Gabriel of ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s works.

⁷² Cited above, as the opening quotation in the Preface.

⁷³ Although Collyridians have been posited in this respect, their seeming disappearance from the historical record in the 4th century of the Common Era complicates this claim; cf. Tringham, *Christianity and the Arabs*.

collections of *ḥadīth* (eye-witness reports of Muhammad’s deeds and actions, as handed down from generation to generation by – reliable - transmitters) in the early Islamic centuries: rather than being viewed as an attempt to preserve, even in chronologically and geographically remote Baghdad, for example, a way of life that would have been appropriate in the Prophet’s Mecca or Medina, might the very process of *ḥadīth* collection be understood as an attempt to interpret the tradition in a fashion that was appropriate to the life and needs of contemporary Muslims?⁷⁴

In the intra-monotheistic debates that pre-dated the Arab prophet and his recitation, discussions of the “true” believers would loom large – as attested to in the Qur’ān itself, which speaks of the “believers” among the People of the Book and the Children of Israel. These debates would become particularly vivid once Christianity was no longer an illegal and persecuted sect, but the religion of the Roman Empire. Discussions of “true” belief were no longer confined to factions within a limited and oftentimes illegal monotheistic community, limited to matters of ritual, communal identity and a “proper” messianic understanding, but now had grave socio-political consequences: emperors would convene councils to settle doctrinal disputes. Discussions of the “true faith” and the “true church”⁷⁵ would be more widespread and increasingly vitriolic (and not only on the part of those who were the current holders of political power). And, with the assertion of Islam as another, competing, monotheistic system, yet another claimant to “truth” would enter the discussion.

⁷⁴ See the works of Goldziher and Juynboll on their collection.

⁷⁵ For an example of such discussions on the part of one of our own authors, see Lamoreaux’ translation of the works of Theodore on these themes.

Christians responding to Islam were quick to pick up on the distinction of *īmān/islām*, even using it to elevate themselves over Muslims (as, in some places, the Qur'ān commends Christians – and Jews – as those who 'believe' in God, etc.). Perhaps it was in response to Christian claims of *īmān* for themselves that Islamic tradition would come to understand those with whom God was 'angry' in Q 1 as the Jews, but those who had 'gone astray' as the Christians. For, as discussed above, while Theodore explicitly refutes Islamic glosses of Q 1:6-7, maintaining⁷⁶ that the Jews were both those at whom God was angry, and those who had gone astray, Paul asserts⁷⁷ that the Jews were those with whom God was angry (and, in another context, he includes them as 'injust' on account of their prostrating before the head of a calf – the account of the calf of gold occurring at the beginning of our other two texts⁷⁸, being unfaithful to God, having killed his messengers and prophets, having adored idols, and, citing Psalm 105, sacrificing even their sons and daughters to demons: Q 29:46⁷⁹), but the polytheists are those who have gone astray. The monk in Jerusalem does not cite the text of the Fātiḥa explicitly in this context, but, like Paul⁸⁰, he does identify the Jews who disbelieved in Christ as the Qur'ānic 'party of the Banī Isrā'īl' who 'disbelieved', and the Christians as those who 'believed' (Q 61:14)⁸¹.

Even if, as discussed above, Christian readings of the Qur'ān (the text itself or interpretation thereof) might more likely reflect a Christian apologetic or polemical

⁷⁶ e.g. Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 75.

⁷⁷ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, par. 24.

⁷⁸ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 171 r; Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 71.

⁷⁹ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, pars. 18-19.

⁸⁰ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, par. 13.

⁸¹ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 181 r.

agenda than an accurate “reporting” of the qur’ānic text known to our authors, or even larger Islamic interpretive trends (as in the “Trinitarian” allusions in Abraham’s greeting of his guests, or in the *ṣifāt Allāh*; or even disingenuous readings such as, following Q 4:171, the insertion of *rūḥ* into qur’ānic allusions to the word - *kalimat* - of God; of glossing the ‘mysterious letters’ of Q 2:2 as referencing the Messiah and his ‘book’), might Christian examination of certain qur’ānic passages (for support of their own doctrines and arguments against their “oppression”) be behind some Muslim exegetical trends? The understanding of Q 1:6-7 is a case in point. Was the understanding of those who were “astray” as the Christians in response to Christians’ having claimed “faith” for themselves (as opposed to the mere “Islam” of the Muslims)? Or, were Christian claims to “faith” a response to Muslim glosses of Q 1:7 as a reference to Christians’ misguidance?

Having examined passages that our authors read as referencing Christians or Christianity, explicitly or implicitly, let us expand on some of the themes in this chapter, and turn our attention to our authors’ discussion of qur’ānic passages which they (and normative Islamic tradition) understood as referencing Jews or Judaism.

CHAPTER FIVE

Arab Christian ‘Anti-Semitism’ ... or Messianic Assertions?

“Tell me, O Abū Qurra, did the Jews crucify the Messiah with his consent or without his consent? I see you, the community of Christians, maintaining that the Messiah is your God and that the Jews crucified him. If the Jews did crucify him with his consent, then there is no crime imputable to them for it, but if it was without his consent, then he is a weak Lord. So tell me, O Abū Qurra, about what I have asked you.”¹

Although Arabic is, by definition, a Semitic language, and ethnic Arabs are also, by definition, Semitic peoples, some recent trends in political and academic discourse have focused attention on “Arab-Muslim anti-Semitism”.² The “Semitism” in these discussions is Judaism (including Israel and Zionism); the “Semites” are Jews (especially Zionists and Israelis). This is in keeping with trends in European discourse, as the “Semites” most familiar to European history would, in fact, have been Jews (although recent discussions of the validity of the state of Israel raise the question of the “Semitic” nature of Ashkenazi European Jewry; similarly, one might question how ethnically “Semitic” is each population that came to speak Arabic). Such discussions of Arab Muslim anti-Semitism are generally tied to concerns about the security of the state of Israel, and are associated with “Islamophobia” or assertions of the fears of “Islamofascism”.

¹ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 116.

² The following websites (accessed February 15, 2011) provide a sample overview of such trends: <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/anti-semitism/arabantoc.html>; <http://israelmatzav.blogspot.com/2010/10/video-new-trends-in-arab-muslim-anti.html>; http://christianactionforisrael.org/antiholo/arab_anti2.html; <http://www.zionism.netfirms.com/ArabAntiZionism.htm>; http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/html/a_s_170408e.htm; <http://www.meforum.org/396/muslim-anti-semitism>; http://www.adl.org/main_Arab_World/default.htm

Muslim polemic

Even though it is not our primary concern here, the first element to keep in mind when examining early Christian responses to Islam – particularly the Christian Arabic response -- is the Islamic critique of Christianity. For, following the Qur’ān itself, Muslim theologians very early on picked up on intra-Christian debates, particularly as concerned those points of Christian doctrine that conflicted with Islamic conceptions of God -- namely, the Incarnation and the Trinity³. In these charges, Muslims would follow the lead of Qur’ānic verses such as Q 4:171 (warning against exceeding the ‘bounds’ of religion), 5:13; 4:46; 2:79 (scriptural corruption), 57:27 (which can be read as an assertion that monasticism is a Christian innovation, which God did not prescribe) – commonly glossing Q 1:7 (those who are ‘astray’) as the (post-Qur’ānic?) Christians. The fact of Christian sectarian divisions (especially Nestorian – Jacobite – Melkite, those most present in the milieu of the early Islamic empire); the existence of 4 canonical gospels (instead of the – one - “Injīl” with which the Qur’ān says Jesus was sent: Q 5:46); the multiple languages and discrepancies, even within the same language, among these gospels (and between them and the letters of Paul); and, despite Christ’s claims that his kingdom was “not of this world” (Jn 18:36), the identification of Christianity with the Roman Empire, attributed to Paul and Constantine, in particular: all of these argue for Christian “corruption” of the religion – as well as the “book” – of the Messiah, ‘Īsā, Son

³ See, e.g., the works of the third/ninth century Abū ‘Īsā l-Warrāq, *Early Muslim Polemic against Christianity: Abū ‘Īsā al-Warrāq’s ‘Against the Incarnation’*, ed. and trans. David Thomas (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 2002) and *Anti-Christian Polemic in early Islam: Abū ‘Īsā al-Warrāq’s ‘Against the Trinity’*, ed. and trans. David Thomas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

of Mary. And, in their responses to Islam, Christians did indeed pay considerable attention to these charges, as well as to trinitarian and christological matters. (The Nestorian Catholicos, Timothy I, presents a good example of the extent to which these theological issues figured in Christian responses to Islam: a good two-thirds of his argument is devoted to a complex discussion of the triune nature of God, and the divinity and humanity of Christ; the degree, however, to which this emphasis is due to a need to respond to Muslim challenges, or to inter-Christian rivalries has yet to be determined.) Our authors – particularly Theodore and the anonymous monk of Sinai Ar. 434 – are no exception.

The nuances of these arguments, and the interplay of Christian-Jewish, Christian-Muslim and Jewish-Muslim polemics, have yet to be fully studied. Are these invocations of the Jewish-Christian debates in Christian Arab apologetics reflective of a need to formulate a response to a Muslim employment of Jewish anti-Christian arguments (either as a result of active Jewish-Muslim ‘collaboration’ – not excluding the possibility of Jewish converts to Islam acting as ‘informants’-- or Muslim familiarity with Christian anti-Jewish polemics – possibly from Christian converts to Islam)? Even though Judaism and Islam do have marked similarities (not least of all a shared Semitic heritage of Jews and Arabs), and conceivably could have – independently – challenged Christianity in a similar fashion, the structural similarities between, for example, Theodore Abu Qurra and the fourth-century CE Syriac writings against Judaism by Aphrahat, argues against the evolution of Christian anti-Muslim polemic in complete isolation from the earlier anti-Jewish polemic. If the Muslim use of the Christian-Jewish polemic preceded the

Christian employment thereof, did Muslims employ the Jewish arguments because they were sympathetic to the Jewish position? Qur'ānic passages that seem to support Christian positions over and against Jewish calumny – such as the virgin birth of Jesus (e.g. Q 3:59), or the Jews' ability to crucify Jesus (Q 4:157-158, but cf. 19:33), as well as those passages from the Qur'ān, prophetic sayings or biography (*ḥadīth* and *sīra*, respectively), that commemorate the treachery of the Jews in Muhammad's own life and otherwise, might argue against this position. Again, though, the question can be raised: in relating such incidents of Jewish perfidy, was Islamic tradition picking up on a theme already found in Christian literature, and which may have found renewed vigor when Christians found themselves as the social "equals" to Jews under Arab Muslim rule (not dissimilar to the construction of a synagogue in Rome by Garibaldi's government, the Arab/Muslim rulers would lift the ban on Jews in the city that had been in place under Roman/Christian rulers⁴)? Do these reports reflect independent developments within Islamic tradition - or, like the pagans who in the early centuries of Christianity had picked up on the Jewish-Christian tension, did Muslims attempt to exploit a known sore point when debating Christians?

Alternatively, if the Christians were the first to use the Jewish-Christian debates as a model for the Muslim-Christian ones, were they employed because Muslims were seen as the 'new Jews'⁵ or, as a tried and true defense, were these polemics put forth as a convincing argument for the truth of Christianity? Or are these polemics indicative of the aforementioned socio-political resentments? Or, were the Semitic Christians in the early

⁴ On the Arab/Muslim lifting of the ban on Jews in Jerusalem, see, e.g. Thomas A. Idinopulos, *Jerusalem Blessed, Jerusalem Cursed* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1991), 214.

⁵ See Hoyland, "The Earliest Christian Writings on Muhammad."

Islamic period still in the process of defining and asserting themselves theologically in the light of the continued existence of the Children of Israel who followed the ‘old’ Law? (With respect to this last point, and while bearing in mind its polemic intent, the Qur’ān itself appears to attest to a continued Jewish-Christian tension: Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian, but a Muslim, a *ḥanīf* – Q 3:67; ‘Uzayr and Jesus as ‘sons’ of God for Jews and Christians, respectively – Q 9:31).⁶

Here, a final cautionary note to one aspect of this traditional comparison between the Christian response to Judaism and its response to Islam is in order. For, although the Christians do indeed recognize the Jewish Bible as “scripture”, their interpretations of the significations of this sacred text – the ‘Old’ Testament, for Christians - differ drastically from those of Jewish scholars. If there is not a mutual acceptance of the interpretation of a text, to what extent do the communities actually “share” it? Like the Syriac speaking Aphrahat who, in the fourth century CE, likely understood the Hebrew scriptures in their original language (based upon the similarities between Syriac/Aramaic and Hebrew; today, even a student of Syriac whose native language is not Semitic can generally follow the Hebrew and Aramaic of a Jewish liturgical service), Arabophone Christians could

⁶ Cf. Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004) for deeper discussion of the process of differentiation of ‘Jewish’ and ‘Christian’ identities in the patristic and rabbinic periods. Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined worlds: Medieval Islam and Bible Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) and the collection of essays in *The Majlis: Interreligious Encounters in Medieval Islam* vol. 4 of *Studies in Arabic Language and Literature*, edited by Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, Mark R. Cohen, Sasson Somekh, Sidney H. Griffith (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1999) provide a good general overview, bibliography and introduction for inter-religious dialogue in the Islamic world; for a comparison of the Jewish-Muslim interface with the Jewish-Christian, see e.g. Mark Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); on Christian anti-Jewish polemics within and outside the Semitic world, see e.g. Robert Wilde, *The Treatment of the Jews in the Greek Christian Writers of the First Three Centuries* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1949); Jacob Neusner, *Aphrahat and Judaism: The Christian-Jewish Argument in Fourth-Century Iran*. Vol 11 of *Studia Post-Biblica* (Leiden: Brill, 1971).

understand the Qur'ān in its original 'clear Arabic' – a far cry from their Greek or Latin – speaking, or Armenian, Coptic, Georgian, etc. coreligionists. But, as Christians, they did not approach it with the same theological precepts as did Muslims: like the Hebrew Bible, the Qur'ān contains passages that – if interpreted with a Christian frame of reference – can be understood to validate Christian theological tenets (as discussed above).

Nevertheless, the pride of place devoted to philosophical and theological arguments centering on trinitarian and christological issues in Christian anti-Muslim polemic argues for an "honest" attempt on the part of the Christian to respond to the challenges posed by Islam (although the Islamic challenges to Christianity certainly follow in the line of Qur'ānic christological and trinitarian discussions, that, themselves, reflect intra-Christian debates). Finally, it must be emphasized that Christian-Muslim 'debate' was not solely (or even primarily?) the provenance of the learned elite. That mutual recriminations of immorality arise in Christian-Muslim debates (particularly regarding sexual ethics and dietary habits, as well as their respective visions of paradise) indicates that Muslim-Christian debates were not reserved exclusively for scholars. Rather, common tropes (e.g. accusations of homosexuality or heterosexual licentiousness, either in the here and now, in history, or in the eschaton) and observations of daily practices argue for a more mundane level of Christian-Muslim interactions, a fact reflected in laws such as the eventual general prohibition in the 'Covenant of 'Umar' of non-Muslim handling of the Qur'ān, among other regulations.

One interpretation of (Arab) Muslim resistance to the establishment/existence/ policies of the state of Israel is an anti-Jewishness intrinsic to Islam⁷. The roots of Islamic anti-Jewishness are frequently traced to the resistance of certain Jewish individuals, or groups⁸, to Muhammad and his message, and their subsequent treachery. Here is not the place to examine the historical accuracy of these accounts, or even their place in later, Islamic narratives.⁹ Additionally, the *qur'ānic* anti-Jewish rhetoric is beyond the scope of the present discussion; rather, here the focus is on the interpretation of certain *qur'ānic* phrases, and Islamic traditions thereon – by Christians living under Islamic rule.

As Christians were often the demographic majority in Arabophone *dār al-Islām*¹⁰, might Christian Arabic texts illuminate our reading of the persistence of a *Muslim* anti-Jewish sentiment? While anti-Jewish vitriol in Arabic Christian texts has been noted¹¹, the nature and tone of anti-Jewish remarks in our three Melkite Christian Arabic texts will be examined here. Are comments on 'Jews' 'code', as it were, for remarks against

⁷ Frequently – and famously – cited is the charter of HAMAS, with its reference in Article 7 to the tradition, related by Muslim and al-Bukhārī, of the Gharkad tree that will not 'give up' those Jews who are hiding behind it: 'The Day of Judgement will not come about until Muslims fight the Jews (killing the Jews), when the Jew will hide behind stones and trees. The stones and trees will say O Muslims, O Abdulla, there is a Jew behind me, come and kill him. Only the Gharkad tree would not do that because it is one of the trees of the Jews.' Available on <http://www.mideastweb.org/hamas.htm>; cf. e.g. Lewis, "Muslim anti-Semitism," and Avi Beker, *Chosen: The History of an Idea, and the Anatomy of an Obsession* (New York: Macmillan, 2008); for an alternative understanding, see Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross*.

⁸ See, for example, EQ, s.vv. "Naḍīr," "Qurayza," "Qanuqā'."

⁹ See, for example, EQ, s.v. "Jews and Judaism."

¹⁰ See, for example, the demographics provided in Fletcher, *Moorish Spain*, 34-51.

¹¹ cf. e.g. Theodore Abū Qurra, "Against the Jews," in *Theodore Abū Qurrah*, trans. Lamoreaux, 27-40.

the Muslim overlords?¹² Or, did Arab Muslim rule provide Christians who came to write in Arabic with a particular circumstance that necessitated a renewed examination of Christian arguments against Judaism (and Jews) – elements of which arguments would be picked up by Muslim authors, as well? It is hoped that this brief exploration of the use in these three texts of qur’ānic passages read as referencing Jews/Judaism will prompt deeper examination of the discussions of Jews/Judaism in classical Arabic, helping to nuance and contextualize contemporary discussions of ‘Muslim anti-Semitism’¹³. For, while *Christianity* has a fundamental theological difficulty with the continued existence of the Chosen People – the Children of Israel – the Jews (due to their rejection of Jesus as their promised Messiah), is this Christian anti-Jewishness comparable to that found – theologically and historically - in an Islamic milieu?

Given the vitriol that often clouds such discussions, three points should be highlighted at the outset of the present discussion: 1) as many non-Arabs – and non-Semites – came to speak Arabic in *dār al-Islām*, ‘Arab’ may indeed be a linguistic marker, devoid of ethnic or cultural connotations; 2) ‘Jew’ may be used for cultural or religious accretions that are not precisely ‘Semitic’, particularly in an Ashkenazi community; and, finally, 3) Christian (or Muslim) anti-Jewish sentiment, past or present, may have historical, socio-economic, political, as well as theological roots. With our three texts as a basis, and in the hopes of providing a note of academic nuance to such

¹² “Here and elsewhere [in his “On the Veneration of the Holy Icons”] Abu Qurrah addresses his remarks to a Jew, or the Jews, even when...he is quoting from the Qur’ān...In the Islamic milieu in which he wrote, Abu Qurrah avoided direct references to Muslims. Like other defenders of the icons, however, he frequently directs his arguments against the Jews, who were widely charged with being at the root of hostility to icons in the Christian community.” S.H. Griffith, trans. and annot., *A Treatise on the Veneration of the Holy Icons Written in Arabic by Theodore Abu Qurrah, Bishop of Harran (C. 755-c.830 A.D.)* (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 39, n. 81.

¹³ See, for example, the 1998 article of this title by Bernard Lewis, cited above.

political discussions, the following explores the extent to which trends in *Islamic* anti-Jewish rhetoric might have roots in *Christian Arabic* discourse. It does not introduce “new” evidence, but, rather, asks whether already-known sources may be read with a new question in mind: Did Christians living under Islamic “rule” (and, in particular, those who would, presumably, have been the most comfortable under Roman, Chalcedonian rule – i.e. the ‘Melkites’) maintain – or even increase – anti-Jewish theological formulations in response to political “equality” with Jews, or to political subjugation to (Arab) Muslims?

God’s Chosen People – a people apart?

Jews, or Israelites, have a long history of being a people apart, as attested to in their own narrative as God’s “chosen” people, but displaced from their land, as related in both biblical and non-religious sources, Jewish or other.¹⁴ The biblical narratives – situated largely in the region of the so-called ‘Fertile Crescent’ - focus on the various trials and tribulations of the Israelites – and their disobedience to God’s law. Despite some questionable historical evidence (i.e. the origins of Ashkenazi vs. Sephardic Jewish communities), contemporary ethnic and linguistic categorizations follow many biblical categories (e.g. the very term under discussion here, ‘Semite’, which is rooted in the genealogies of the sons of Noah, as found in Genesis 9-10).

Knowledge of these Chosen People in the western and northern Mediterranean is relatively recent, at least when compared to Persian history. For, Cyrus the Great of

¹⁴ Cf. Robert Wilken, *The Land Called Holy: Palestine in Christian History and Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), esp. chapter 1. On the presence of Jews in early Christian writing, see e.g. R. Wilde, *The Treatment of the Jews*; Neusner, *Aphrahat and Judaism*.

Persia (who is mentioned at least 23 times in the Bible) is credited, in the 6th century BCE, with liberating the Jews from their Babylonian captivity, decreeing the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem, and granting cultic freedom, arguably the earliest example of state-sponsored religious tolerance. It would be two centuries later that the conquests of Alexander the Great (356-323 BCE) would bring knowledge of these Chosen People of God to Hellenic society – where, be it under Greek, or Roman, or Christian, rule, they were not always well accepted.

Christianity has had an historical theological difficulty with the refusal of God's Chosen People to accept Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ, but the situation of ('Semitic') Jews in non-Semitic, Christian Europe was, arguably, different from that of their counterparts elsewhere in the Diaspora. While here is not the place to discuss the distinctive nature of (Christian) European anti-Jewish sentiment, in order to refine current discussions of anti-Semitism, it should be borne in mind that Christians (Semites or others?) in the 'Semitic Orient'¹⁵ may have, early on, found Arab (even if 'Muslim') rule more palatable than living under the Romans (even if Christian, albeit of a different confessional persuasion¹⁶) – either because of cultural similarities with fellow Semites, or because of the impartiality, or unconcern with the details of their creed or non-public practices, on the part of the new overlords¹⁷.

¹⁵ See the multi-volume work, to date spanning the fourth through the sixth centuries of the Common Era, of I. Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs*.

¹⁶ See W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), for discussion of one theory of the ethnic/'nationalistic' bases of early Christian confessional divisions.

¹⁷ For a general overview, see Berkey, *The Formation of Islam*. On the pre-Islamic intra-Christian tensions, one need only read the various accounts of the early church councils (cf. e.g. Eusebius and Zacharias Rhetor), or, more proximate to the Arab conquests, the iconoclasm controversies (e.g. John of Damascus' writings and the aforementioned work of Abū Qurra).

Thus, although ‘anti-Semitism’ has become the accepted term for anti-Jewish sentiment in many academic circles of European provenance, the particularity of this term to European - theological and racial – reactions to Jews/Judaism must be emphasized¹⁸. It should at least be asked whether ‘anti-Semitism’ is an appropriate term for anti-Jewish sentiment among Christians or Muslims or others in another *Semitic* community (as opposed to a non-Semitic European setting) - bringing to light (in the present discussion) the degree(s) of affinity between Arabs and Jews, as fellow Semites. (Despite its inaccuracy, the term ‘anti-Semitism’ has intentionally been retained here to refer to ‘anti-Jewish’ sentiment, in part to draw attention to its incongruity, despite its widespread currency in some academic circles¹⁹.)

And, when discussing Arab anti-Semitism, that ‘Arab’ may be a linguistic, ethnic or cultural designator should not be forgotten. For, with the Islamic – Arab conquests, many peoples came to speak Arabic who were not ethnically Arab, nor even of Semitic extraction. This is in marked contrast to the other Abrahamic faith with universal claims, Christianity – which prides itself on adopting, and adapting to, the languages of the peoples to whom it has spread. Furthermore, the constant dynamic between Arab and local cultural practices in those cultures that came to have a significant portion of their populations accepting the truth of the Arab prophet as God’s final messenger adds a further dimension to any discussion of ‘Arab’ or ‘Semitic’ cultural milieux.

¹⁸In pre- and modern European academic circles, interest in Semitic languages and literatures stemmed largely from Reformation and Counter-Reformation exploration of the Bible and Patristic sources. Arabic and qur’ānic studies are largely modeled on the template provided by biblical and Hebrew / Aramaic / Akkadian / Ugaritic / etc. studies.

¹⁹Cf. e.g. the aforementioned article of Lewis, “Muslim anti-Semitism.”

And, as these texts were composed well before the establishment of a Jewish State, and when Christians were a majority of much of the Arabic-speaking, Muslim-ruled world, their statements on Judaism may speak to contemporary debates with a particularly poignant clarity.

While a Jew (or Jewish convert to Islam) is among Theodore's interlocutors (a common trope in such debates, as the Jews were portrayed as the 'guarantors' of the accuracy of Christian citation of the Bible), Theodore is asked by one of his – Muslim – interlocutors why Christians have such an aversion to Jews/Judaism, when the action of the Jews – killing Christ – was, in fact, necessary for the Christian salvation story.²⁰ To echo the question a 'man from Iraq' poses to Theodore – why are Christians so adverse to the Jews/Judaism ... in particular, why might early Christian Arabic texts contain strong anti-Jewish sentiment - especially in the light of the seemingly – comparative to the Christians – insignificant numerical presence of Jews in *dār al-Islām*? Certainly, in addition to the confessional divisions among the Christians themselves, there was the reality of a continued Jewish presence in the Arabic-speaking, Muslim-ruled world. And, while "Christendom" (Latin or Greek Byzantium) could – and did - enact legal restrictions against Jews,²¹ reflecting Christian theological understandings of supercession, in *dār al-Islām*, Christians and Jews were *equally* 'protected people of the book', and *equally* inferior with respect to, and in the eyes of, the ruling Muslims (not dissimilar to the position in which Christians and Jews had found themselves under

²⁰ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 116-19.

²¹ Cf. J. Marcus, *The Jew in the Medieval World: A Sourcebook, 315-1791* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1938), 3-7; excerpts available on the Web, on <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/jewish/jews-romanlaw.html>.

Roman rule, prior to 380, or 313). What impact did this renewed (and involuntary) equality with Judaism, but in the face of a religious tradition that challenged the veracity of Christian professions of faith (as well as, at times, suspecting Christian political loyalties) have on Christian Arabic theological articulations?

Anti-Jewish polemics as a model for the Christian response to Islam?

As the Christian response to Islam is often understood in the context of its earlier response to Judaism, a cautionary caveat should be placed at the beginning of our discussion. In speaking of the divergence of Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity in Late Antiquity, Daniel Boyarin states:

at the time of the initial formulation of rabbinic Judaism, the Rabbis, at least, did seriously attempt to construct Judaism (the term, however, is an anachronism) as orthodoxy, and thus as a 'religion'... At a later stage... the stage of the 'definitive' formulation of rabbinic Judaism in the Babylonian Talmud, the Rabbis rejected this option, proposing instead the distinct ecclesiological principle that 'an Israelite, even if he sins, remains an Israelite.'... The Church needed 'Judaism' to be a religious other.²²

In the prelude to his discussion of Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, Boyarin continues to explain how Christianity defined Judaism as a religion, a definition which, he argues, Late Antique Jews did not accept, as they saw themselves as a people or a nation (perhaps closer to the qur'ānic *umma* than the Christian *ekklesia*), rather than a community defined by faith: "Judaism is, for Justin, not a given entity to which he is opposed and which he describes accurately or not, or to which he addresses an apologetic but an entity that he is engaged in constructing in the textual process."²³

²² Boyarin, *Border Lines*, 10.

²³ Boyarin, *Border Lines*, 28.

Christian Arabic literature on Islam should be read with Boyarin's words (on early Jewish/Christian categories) in mind: are the words before us the result of a Christian attempt to 'construct' Islam and, possibly, as a simultaneous and subsidiary effort, to define Christianity (and Judaism)? If so, is it "Islam" as polity (*shar' dār*) or nation (*umma*), or as religion (*dīn – īmān* and/or *islām*), that is being opposed – or defined? This question relates to the one regarding the presence of Jews/Judaism in Christian responses to Muslims/Islam: one understanding has been that the Muslims were seen as the "new Jews" (ethnically and doctrinally). But, might Christians living under Islam, and writing in Arabic, have had to revisit the question of their distinction from Judaism?

In the post-Chalcedonian world, the need for Christian self-definition had become all the more complex, as the Christian had to define himself against other persistent groups of Christians who articulated their understandings of Christ's humanity and divinity in variant fashions. With the rise of Islam, a further layer was added²⁴: no longer were the primary adversaries monotheists with whom they shared a scripture (i.e. Judaism or other Christian groups) but differed as to the interpretation. For now 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 pagans). Rather, under Islam, Christians and Jews were *equally* 'protected' 'People of the Book'. Theological justifications of earthly power (such as Eusebius') would have to be revisited, as did the seemingly already

²⁴ As pagans and those Christians who did not recognize the ecclesiastical organization as represented by ecumenical councils did not share the same theological presuppositions, they are beyond the pale of our discussion.

solidified distinctions between Christianity and Judaism (as found, for example, in Athanasius, Aphrahat, Augustine, Gregory Nazianzus, Theodoret of Cyr and John Chrysostom).

Since its inception, Christianity shared a sacred book – the Old Testament (albeit in Greek or Syriac, rather than Hebrew) - as well as sacred history, with Judaism. As a result, Christianity ‘needed’ Judaism in a way that it never would need Islam (see, for example, the traditional – and contemporary – approaches to Islam and Judaism by official organs of the Vatican, such as the statement contained in *Nostra Aetate*, *The declaration on non-Christian religions* promulgated at the end of the Second Vatican Council). And, perhaps also because of this dependence, Christian polemics against Judaism were concerned very much with demonstrations both of the ‘correct’ interpretation of the (now) ‘Old’ Testament, as well as how Judaism had been superceded – while never (among the ‘orthodox’) urging its eradication.²⁵

The inter-relatedness of Christianity and Judaism is well attested in the Qur’ān. For example, there is an enigmatic passage in which it seems to consider ‘Jews’ and ‘Christians’ as essentially the same phenomenon (evoking Boyarin’s argument that Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity may best be understood as two ends of a spectrum of beliefs and practices), but with different names:

The Jews say, ‘Ezra is the son of God’; and the Christians say, ‘The Messiah is the son of God’. This is the statement from their mouths. They imitate the saying of those who disbelieved before. May God destroy them. How are they deluded!²⁶

²⁵ See the recent work on Augustine and the Jews by Paula Fredriksen, *Augustine and the Jews: A Christian Defense of Jews and Judaism* (New York: Doubleday, 2009), reviewed, with helpful commentary, by Robert Wilken in *First Things*, March 1, 2009.

²⁶ Q 9:30.

Various explanations have been put forth for this conflation (such as the presence of a Jewish Christian remnant extant in Arabia into the seventh century)²⁷. While the Qur'ān's intent is beyond the scope of the present work, the passage does point to a theme found in Christian-Muslim polemics and debates: namely, the relationship of Christianity to Judaism.

For, when Christianity – east and west, Chalcedonian and non – was faced with the challenge posed by Islam, Christian apologists and polemicists had to come to terms with Islamic claims concerning the prophethood of Muhammad, the validity of the Qur'ānic revelation, as well as the Islamic challenge to Christian trinitarian and christological doctrines. In short, Christianity had to understand the tenets of this Arab monotheism that also laid claim to much of its own sacred history. Despite the different paradigms posed by Judaism and Islam to Christianity, as Christianity had already had to address some aspects of these issues as a result of the continued presence of Judaism, some preliminary comparative remarks on Christianity's response(s) to the earlier Abrahamic monotheistic religion may be helpful in contextualizing our discussion. Some examples of Christian self-definition against Judaism are:²⁸

refute Judaism on the basis of Jewish scripture

believe the Old Testament promises no longer applied to the people of Israel

emphasize the stubborn defiance of contemporary Jews to stem from congenital

rebelliousness: backsliding to idolatry; scoffing at their prophets

scorn Christians who elevated Judaism by observing their commandments and customs

²⁷ See *EQ*, s.v. "People of the Book" for an overview of some theories.

²⁸ Discussed in Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross*, 21-22.

The Qur'ān itself reflects such themes (with respect to both Judaism and Christianity):

- Christ is going to testify against the Christians that he never said to 'take me and my mother as gods besides God' (Q 5:116-117);
- the Bible and the Torah attest to Muhammad as a prophet (Q 7:157; 61:6);
- the (excessive) dietary laws are, in fact, punishment on the Children of Israel for their wrong-doings, lies, abuse of usury (Q 4:160-161);
- God has put a seal on the hearts of the People of the Book (understood here as Jews) because they broke the covenant, rejected God's signs, and killed their prophets (Q 4:153-157);
- But, rather than scorning Christians who observed the commandments, the Children of Israel (which could include Christians) are chastised for not respecting God's laws as they ought (Q 3:112; 5:78).

Are any (or some, or all) of these attitudes found, in turn, in Christian responses to Islam?

In his comparative work on European Christian and Sunni Arab Muslim reactions to Judaism, Mark Cohen writes "Combating Judaism and Jewish interpretations of scripture was essential to Christianity; it was incidental in Islam" (cf. Bernard Lewis' discussion of Muslim anti-Judaism as not theological -- unlike European anti-Semitism).²⁹ Nevertheless, Christian anti-Jewish polemic was not unknown to Muslims and Muslims and Christians not infrequently agreed on the 'perfidious' nature of the Jews. For, in addition -- and related -- to the aforementioned 'Christian' theological concerns (e.g. the Trinity and Christ), is the role played by ancient Christian polemics

²⁹ Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross*, xviii, 145.

against Judaism in the Christian-Muslim debate literature: particularly prominent are Christian attacks on the Jews' persistent adherence to the "old" law and Jewish complicity in the death of Christ (as discussed by Abū Qurra but also by his 'Nestorian' contemporary, al-Kindī, as well as their predecessor, the Nestorian Catholicos Timothy I).

While the extant body (and, presumably, the historic totality) of Jewish-Muslim polemics is far smaller, and largely less virulent than the Christian-Muslim polemics (or the Christian-Jewish debates), Jews were not absent from the more prevalent Muslim-Christian debates. In the Christian polemical literature against Islam, the Muslim interlocutor – playing a role similar to the Jewish antagonist of earlier centuries -- not infrequently demands why Christians do *not* follow the law. In Theodore Abū Qurra's debate, for example, Muslims are portrayed as criticizing Christians for deserting the 'law'. The Muslims are also portrayed as challenging Christian anti-Jewish sentiment – for example, was it not necessary for Christian salvation theology that Christ be killed? (a theme found in both Abu Qurra and Timothy, as discussed below).

Qur'ānic – and Islamic – evidence of contra Judaeos sentiments?

Although, juridically speaking, the *jizya* (and sword) verses (Q 9:5 and 9:29) are understood as having abrogated those verses that commend other religions (including cohabitation therewith), Jews and Judaism, and Christians and Christianity, are not uniformly represented in the Qur'ān. People of the Book – Children of Israel – Naṣāra

– believers?: from the qur’ānic perspective, all are terms which may designate Christians (as well as ‘People of the Gospel’: Q 2:47). There is the occasional commendation of individual Christians (Q 5:82), yet general criticism of Christian doctrine (especially Trinitarian and Christological thinking) and abuses (e.g. unduly exalting religious leaders, and deviations of Jewish practices: Q 9:31). Individual Jews (“Yahūd” – or Children of Israel – or People of the Book) are not commended - with the marked exception of the prophets who were sent to the Children of Israel. But, unlike Christianity, Jewish *doctrine* is not criticized. Rather, *Jews* are castigated for not having heeded God or his prophets. For example, Q 5:51 does warn the believers against taking Jews or Christians as friends, since they are friends to one another, yet Q 5:82 asserts that Christians are “closest in love” to the believers – but the strongest enemies are Jews and polytheists.

In Islamic tradition, the varying estimations of the qur’ānic text to the adherents (if not the tenets) of Islam’s biblical counterparts (Judaism and Christianity) are explained through the “occasions of revelation”: While individual Christians and Christian tribes provided refuge to Muhammad’s persecuted followers (in the first *hijra*, to Abyssinia), or entered into treaties with Muhammad (the Christians of Najrān), the three notable Jewish tribes of Medina were rather uniform in their rejection of Muhammad and his followers, secretly – and openly – collaborating with his Meccan opponents. Therefore, although those who first heard and heeded the qur’ānic message shared with Judaism many practices (e.g. circumcision, or the proper method of slaughtering an animal; the Qur’ān even makes licit the food and women of the People of

the Book – presumably Jews and Christians - in Q 5:5) and the basic belief (the oneness and utter transcendence of God, and even the “election” of the Children of Israel: e.g. Q 44:30-33), encounters with individual Jews *in Muhammad’s own lifetime* are described as unsatisfactory. This, in turn, plays in classical discussions on the classification of individual verses for the purposes of jurisprudence³⁰: abrogating or abrogated; general or specific (as well as clear or ambiguous – which last category is not relevant for the discussions relating to relations with/treatment of non-Muslims). If Jews in Muhammad’s own life were “perfidious”, does that mean that *all* Jews should be understood as such? (The establishment of the state of Israel, and her expansion in 1967 beyond the 1948 boundaries has brought the question of the qur’ānic – and Islamic – estimation of “Jews” and “Judaism” into unprecedentedly stark relief.³¹) How should one understand the qur’ānic estimation of Christians as “closest in love” to the believers, and its warning not to take Jews and Christians as “friends”, since they are allies to one another - or the injunction to fight “believing people of the book” until they “submit” and pay the “*jizya*”?

But, theologically speaking, classically, Muslims clearly knew of, and were puzzled by, the Christian rejection of Judaism. To paraphrase one of Theodore’s

³⁰ Cf. Hallaq, “Was the Gate of Ijtihad Closed?” for a discussion of al-Ghazzālī’s classifications in his *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn* (“Revival of the Religious Sciences”).

³¹ See, for example, the discussions of Yūsuf Qaraḏāwī’s opinions on <http://www.investigativeproject.org/profile/167>; http://www.adl.org/main_Arab_World/al_Qaradawi_report_20041110.htm?Multi_page_sections=sHeading_4 (accessed February 15, 2011).

interlocutors: If the Jews killed your Messiah, whose death effected your salvation, why do you hate them so?³²

For, while the details of the general narrative of the two pivotal events in Christian salvation history: incarnation (annunciation to Mary by the angel Gabriel, and then the birth and ministry of her son, Jesus) and Jesus' crucifixion/resurrection closely follow Christian tellings of the life of Christ, the interpretation of these events in the Qur'ān and later Islamic tradition differs dramatically from the Christian understandings. Unlike in Christian theology, Mary (who, in the Qur'ānic account, "guarded her chastity": Q 21:91) most definitely suffers the pangs of childbirth in the Qur'ān (Q 19:22, which, to a Christian auditor, would repudiate any claims of her own immaculate conception – e.g., her conception without original sin). And, while the Qur'ān attests to belief in – and maybe the fact of – a crucifixion, it affirms that "they did not crucify him; it only appeared so unto them" (Q 4:156 ff.). Whom the Qur'ān intends by the third person plural masculine pronoun is unclear; much exegetical effort has been expended in its elucidation.³³ But, what is clear is that the third person masculine singular pronoun indicates Jesus. Is the Qur'ān correcting those Christians who misunderstood the Bible, and believed the Jews crucified Christ? Or, is it denying the fact of Christ's crucifixion (by Romans or Jews)? Is it refuting Jewish claims to have killed Christ, as well as Jewish impugnations of Mary's chastity, as described in *Toldoeth Yeshu*? For, while the Qur'ān acknowledges the virtues of Jesus and Mary (presumably against Jewish calumnies), like Judaism, it is emphatic in asserting their absolute humanity, and categorically denies any

³² Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 116-19; see also the discussion of *jihād* Theodore's discussion of free will in Lamoreaux's translation, *Theodore Abū Qurrah*, 195-210.

³³ Cf. e.g. Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, ad loc.; Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, ad loc.

part of divinity to Christ. (It does, however, term him a “word” and “spirit” – on which Christians writing in Arabic were quick to pick up, as mentioned above.)

Arab Christian ‘anti-Semitism’ in Paul, Theodore and the anonymous monk?

(Q 61:14; 49:14; 1:6-7)

While Arab Christian remarks against Islam center on the nature of Muslim rule, as well as discussions of the ‘true’ religion (prophets, scripture, etc.), Arab Christian remarks on Judaism in an Islamic context seem intent on excoriating Judaism to the benefit of Christianity. Three areas in particular stand out: Hebrew Bible justifications of a Triune vision of God (and possibly the Incarnation), a motif that echoes earlier Christian anti-Jewish polemics, and which could also be employed in Christian polemics against Islam; competing messianic claims; and the reading of those who are ‘astray’, and those with whom God is ‘angry’, referenced in the closing verses of the opening chapter of the Qur’ān (with concomitant understandings of *īmān/islām*). As here we are exploring the extent to which the new situation of life under Arab, Muslim rule colored anti-Jewish theological articulations in Melkite writings, we will focus on the latter two points, given their close intersection with elements in the Islamic tradition.

Banī Isrā’īl – the party who believed, and those who did not (Q 61:14)

While all three of our authors emphasize Christian justifications of Trinitarian discussions of the Godhead, and of the divine sonship of Jesus, both with respect to the

Incarnation, as well as in discussions of him as the Messiah, they do so in markedly different ways. Theodore (rather like the earlier Nestorian Catholicos, Timothy I) uses logic to prove the eminent reasonableness of Christianity. Almost in response to the logical and a-scriptural approach of authors like Theodore, the anonymous monk of Jerusalem explicitly emphasizes his desire to adhere to scripture, rather than descend into the pitfalls of over-reliance on human logic.³⁴ Similarly, Paul adheres – relatively – closely to the text of the Qur’ān (and the Bible), indicating how a ‘proper’ (i.e. Christian) reading of the ‘Old’ Testament, as well as the Qur’ān, would yield a Christian understanding of Trinitarian and Incarnation theological understandings.

But, to what extent do these scriptural – Qur’ānic/biblical – or logical – categories reflect *engagement with Judaism* on the part of our Christian Arabophone authors? While Paul and Theodore seem more familiar with – or interested in – Judaism as a known trope – that which Christianity replaced and/or that onto which Islam could be mapped, it is with respect to messianic discussions that the anonymous monk of Jerusalem indicates the deepest familiarity with Jewish categories – presumably from intimate contact with known Jewish communities of his day and milieu.³⁵ Furthermore, Sinai Ar. 434 is the only text here in which Hebrew is clearly transcribed into Arabic.

Messianic claims

³⁴ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 175r: “I did not arrive at anything from my intellect (*‘aql*), but rather from the books of God (*kutub allāh*), my lord.”

³⁵ Under Muslim rule, Jews were allowed back in Jerusalem, reversing the policies of Christian Roman emperors. As indicated above, in the *majlis*, Theodore is presented as interacting with a Jew – or Jewish convert to Islam; Paul’s text has no indication of contact with actual, living Jews or Jewish communities.

In the Qur'ān, Jesus is consistently termed 'al Masīḥ 'Īsā b. Maryam': "The Messiah, Jesus, Son of Mary"³⁶. The qur'ānic retention of a Messianic title for Jesus, the Son of Mary, and the role of Jesus in later Islamic eschatological narratives argue for a qur'ānic, and Islamic, awareness and evaluation of Christian, and Jewish-Christian, discussions of Jesus of Nazareth – be it as Messiah, priest/prophet/king, Son of God. What were Christian reactions to Islamic discussions of Jesus, the Son of Mary? How did socio-political realities influence theological formulations? And, to what extent were Christian and/or Muslim discussions formulated in response to interactions with Jewish communities in *dār al-islām*?

The anonymous author of Sinai Ar. 434 notes the qur'ānic designation³⁷, but speaks primarily of 'al-Masīḥ' (as does Theodore), alluding to him as 'Emmanuel'³⁸, 'the crucified'³⁹ and 'Yasū' al-Masīḥ'⁴⁰ (termed thus by the disciples), 'Yasū' b. Allāh'⁴¹ (addressed as such by the demons whom he put into the swine at Tiberias), '*kalimat allāh*' ("word of God")⁴², as well as 'our Lord' (*sayyidunā*)⁴³, 'our God' (*ilāhunā*)⁴⁴ and 'our Savior'⁴⁵. Paul's edited text also speaks frequently of 'the Messiah' as the 'son of God' (*ibn Allāh*)⁴⁶, but also of 'the Lord Messiah' (*al-sayyid al-masīḥ*)⁴⁷ and the 'word of

³⁶ The Arabic form of Jesus' name is the subject of dispute in both classical works of qur'ānic commentary penned by Muslims, as well as in non-Muslim qur'ānic scholarship. Cf. e.g. the discussions in *EQ*, s.v. "Jesus" and Mingana, "Syriac Influence on the Style of the Kur'ān."

³⁷ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 174v.

³⁸ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 176v.

³⁹ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 178r.

⁴⁰ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 174 v.

⁴¹ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 178v.

⁴² Sinai Ar. 434, f. 179r.

⁴³ Sinai Ar. 434, ff. 181r, 181v.

⁴⁴ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 181r.

⁴⁵ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 181r.

⁴⁶ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, pars. 33, 35.

⁴⁷ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, pars. 8, 12, 30, 37, 47.

God' (*kalimat allāh*)⁴⁸, the 'son' (*ibn*) as the 'spoken word' (*nuṭq*)⁴⁹, but only the qur'ānic Arabic form of 'Jesus' appears ('īsā, rather than *yasū* '), and in the qur'ānic nomenclature: 'Īsā b. Maryam'⁵⁰. And, in addition to discussions of the 'word of God' and the qur'ānic 'Īsā/'Īsā b. Maryam'⁵¹ – or 'Īsā al-Masīḥ'⁵², Theodore's text also terms Jesus 'Yasū' al-Masīḥ, our lord (*rabbunā*)⁵³ or 'our master (*sayyidunā*), Yasū' al-Masīḥ'⁵⁴ or, finally, 'my master, Yasū' al-Masīḥ, my lord and my God, creating word of God (*sayyidī yasū' al-masīḥ wa-rabbī wa-ilāhī kalimat allāh al-khāliqa*)⁵⁵.

For the purposes of our discussion, it is the anonymous monk's remarks on the Messiah that warrant further attention. Much of the monk's discussion could be deemed historical exegesis on the veracity of Jesus of Nazareth as fulfilling the prophecy of Moses⁵⁶ - as being a 'man like Moses, but with God in him'⁵⁷. Over and against the claims of the Jews, Zion – Jerusalem – only attained importance when the Messiah was made manifest, dwelling and born there, God's *jawhar*, working his miracles and wonders therein.⁵⁸ Following this strain of thought, the messiah is the word of God – his *jawhar*, but also 'God situated in Zion, making *āyāt* and refuting the Jewish people on account of their disobedience: from power to power, from vanquished Judaism to complete Nasrāniyya.'

⁴⁸ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, pars. 12, 36.

⁴⁹ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, pars. 29, 33, 61.

⁵⁰ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, pars. 10, 23, 31, 40.

⁵¹ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 84, 88, 89, 121.

⁵² Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 110.

⁵³ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 83, 93.

⁵⁴ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 93.

⁵⁵ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 124.

⁵⁶ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 180r.

⁵⁷ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 180v.

⁵⁸ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 180v.

These comments arise in the context of a discussion of the qur'ānic mention

(Q 61:14) of the 'believing' party of the Banī Isrā'īl – who, according to the monk, were the Christians⁵⁹. He continues to describe the wrongs of the Jews, with respect to Jesus:

wrongdoers (*ẓālimūn* - among the Jews) tried to quench the light [of Jesus], hating his grace (*ni'ma*), variously declaring it to be 'hidden' or 'secret' (*sirr*), or saying he was a magician (*sāḥir*), or that he took the names of God from the Temple (*bayt*) and worked with them, or that he worked through the *Shāmūt*, a 'book of their magic' for the "sinful Jews."

But, according to the monk, 'others, truthful, rejoice, believing, and they are the

'Isāwiyya.'⁶⁰ Others, according to the monk, say he is the Messiah, but 'the son of Joseph⁶¹, not of Judah, the Messiah of truth.' A bit further on, providing a brief discussion of the *tafsīr* of Israel – Jacob's name – he elaborates on the messianic identity, affirming that 'the Messiah is from Jacob, and from the *jawhar* of God'.⁶² In sum, the very differences in Jewish estimations of the nature of Jesus are, according to the monk, proofs against any knowledge they purport to have.⁶³

In this passage, the monk touches upon a number of traditional Jewish polemics against Jesus of Nazareth, and Christian claims of his divinity; i.e. explaining his "miracle" as attributable not to God, or a divine nature, but to underhand arts: secret (as

⁵⁹ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 180v.

⁶⁰ See *EI*, s.v. "Isāwiyya," for this term in classical sources. Following S. Pines (the author of the *EI* article) who alludes to a 'Jewish Christian' presence in Jerusalem during Mu'awiya's time, our monk's placement in Jerusalem, and his seeming understanding of the 'Isāwiyya as those *Jews* who believed in Jesus of Nazareth as the 'true' Messiah (as well as his silence on their belief in Muhammad), may indicate a continued 'Jewish Christian' presence in Jerusalem.

⁶¹ On this theme, see <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=510&letter=M#1628>; more recently, see I. Knohl, "The Messiah Son of Joseph, 'Gabriel's Revelation' and the Birth of a New Messianic Model," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 34 (2008).

⁶² Sinai Ar. 434, f. 180r.

⁶³ Sinai Ar. 434, ff. 179r-v.

opposed to open, or apparent, arts), or as a magician⁶⁴, or one who – illicitly – took the “names of God” from the Temple⁶⁵. He also evidences familiarity with the apocalyptic rabbinic tradition: e.g. the – suffering – ‘Messiah b. Yūsuf’ (to which the Gospel of Mark may also allude - as opposed to the victorious Messiah, Son of David/Judah), elaborated upon by Saadia and Hai Gaon, both of whom lived in Abbasid Iraq⁶⁶; and of Hebrew: e.g. the Hebrew term ‘*shāmot*’ for [God’s] names; and, possibly, normative Judaism’s disdain for the mystical (or magical?) interpretations of the names of God. For, this ‘*Shāmot*’, the book for the ‘sinful Jews’, might be the *Sepher Yetzirah*, an esoteric exposition of the various names of God and the order of creation, based upon the mystical numeric value of their letters, and popular in Kabbalist circles⁶⁷.

The deep knowledge of Judaism evidenced by the anonymous monk of Jerusalem, and his inclusion of Hebrew terms and biblical quotations (in Arabic transliteration) are worthy of note, and further study. While his assertions of Jesus as the Christ are certainly referring to the Jerusalem of Jesus’ time, are his refutations of ‘vanquished Judaism’ and defenses of ‘complete Naṣrāniyya’ also centered in the past, or are they allusion to Jewish-Christian debates of his own day? Are they indications that perhaps the text that is in our hands today is the product of a Jewish convert to Christianity? Or that the “*Refutation of the Christians*”, which he is refuting, had Jewish roots? Or, is it testimony

⁶⁴ Cf. e.g. Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 43a, available on http://www.israelect.com/Come-and-Hear/sanhedrin/sanhedrin_43.html.

⁶⁵ Cf. *Toledoth Yeshu*, available on <http://jewishchristianlit.com//Topics/JewishJesus/toledoth.html>.

⁶⁶ Cf. *Jewish Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Messiah,” on <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?letter=M&artid=510>

⁶⁷ Cf. Knut Stenring, trans. and annot., *The Book of Formation (Sepher Yetzirah) by Akiba ben Joseph. Incl. the 32 Paths of Wisdom, their Correspondence with the Hebrew Alphabet and the Tarot Symbols*, intro. Arthur Edward Waite (New York: Holmes Publishing Group, 1970). My thanks to Yifat Monnickendam for pointing out this correlation to the Hebrew.

of the intimate familiarity with Judaism of Christians in the ‘Semitic Orient’ – particularly Jerusalem?

The Fātiḥa – and *īmān/islām*

“For a group of the Children of Israel believed, and a group disbelieved” (Q 61:14). The anonymous monk glosses the former as the Christians – those who, during Jesus’ life, believed he was the Messiah – whose works are attested both by the testimony of the apostles (*anṣār Allāh*) and the Qur’ān and Injīl, as well as the righteous wise men. Furthermore, those who believed “were glorified over their enemies, purified until judgment day (*yawm al-dīn*)”⁶⁸. How does this ‘complete Christianity’ deal with its re-equation (in political terms) with ‘vanquished Judaism’ – and under Islam? Politically, after the initial apocalyptic understanding of the Arab Islamic conquests, Christians soon turned their pens to critiquing the methods of their overlords for the fact of the conquest (violence, but also persuasion), and also in an effort to explain conversions to Islam: tax benefits, marital rewards (both in marrying Muslim women, and the ability to divorce unwanted wives), the lack of an asceticism within Islam, as well as the heavenly rewards promised Muslims. Theologically, Christians responding to Islam were quick to pick up on the – Qur’ānic - distinction of *īmān/islām*, and seeming preference of faith (*īmān*) to mere (outward) submission (*islām*; in Islamic tradition, this verse – Q 49:14 - is elaborated upon in a nuanced fashion, so that neither *islām* nor *īmān* is seen as ‘better’

⁶⁸ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 181 r.

than the other⁶⁹). But, what would they do with traditional Islamic glosses of Q 1:6-7, in which Jews are understood to be those with whom God was angry, and Christians as those who were astray?

Our three authors – particularly Paul and Theodore – appear intimately familiar with Islamic glosses of the last verses of the Fātiḥa, and proffer readings of their own: Theodore contests that, rather than being ‘astray’, Christians are ‘rightly-guided’. Furthermore, he counters the Muslim designation of Christians as *mushrikūn*, by glossing a qur’ānic condemnation of the hypocrisy of the “desert Arabs” as an indication that they, and not the Christians, were the ‘associators’ who were astray. He goes even further, and makes a direct claim to the superiority of (Christian) faith (*īmān*) – in Jesus as the Messiah, Son of God – over (mere) Islam.⁷⁰ He further maintains⁷¹ that the Jews were both those at whom God was angry, and those who had gone astray.

Paul asserts⁷² that the Jews were those with whom God was angry (and, in another context, he includes them as ‘unjust’ on account of their prostrating before the head of a calf – the account of the calf of gold occurring at the beginning of our other two texts⁷³, being unfaithful to God, having killed his messengers and prophets, having adored idols, and, citing Psalm 105, sacrificing even their sons and daughters to demons: Q 29:46⁷⁴), but the polytheists are those who have gone astray.

⁶⁹ See the tradition in al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, 1:2:47.

⁷⁰ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 85.

⁷¹ e.g. Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 75.

⁷² Khoury, ed. and trans., *Paul of Antioch, Risāla*, par. 24.

⁷³ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 171 r; Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 71.

⁷⁴ Khoury, ed. and trans., *Paul of Antioch, Risāla*, pars. 18-19.

Like Paul⁷⁵, the anonymous monk does identify the Jews who disbelieved in Christ as the Qur'ānic “party of the Banī Isrā’īl” who “disbelieved,” and the Christians as those who “believed” (Q 61:14)⁷⁶. While he does not cite the text of the Fātiḥa explicitly in this context, he does claim *īmān* for the Christians. The monk also describes the Jews as the *umma* of Jesus, who provided an ultimate proof of Christ’s divinity and truth, when, in their own *jāhiliyya*, in fear and envy, they tried to quench the light of God – unsuccessfully, for on the very day of his crucifixion, the “world and the Injīl and the prophets and the Qur’ān and the Satans and the angels and the dead” testified to his signs and glory.

If Paul were at both a chronological and geographic remove from significant Jewish communities, might his “anti-Jewish” rhetoric be formulaic repetition of classic Christian refutations of Judaism? For, Paul tends to speak of Jews/Judaism in the context of the Hebrew Bible (akin to their treatment in many Islamic texts), and not the community that rejected Jesus as the Messiah. The anonymous monk and Theodore, however, speak at some length on the Jews’ treatment of Jesus of Nazareth. If the anonymous monk of Jerusalem were in contact with Jewish communities, might Jewish-Christian debates, particularly those centering on Messianic claims, have been a real issue for him? Might, however, his condemnation of Jews have been somewhat tempered by his very familiarity with a living Jewish community? Theodore, however, levels a strong attack on both Jews (i.e. Jews were those with whom God was angry *and* those who were astray) and Muslims. Might this indicate a need by the first Christians writing in Arabic,

⁷⁵ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, par. 13

⁷⁶ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 181 r.

and living under Muslim rule, to justify their relatively recent (political) re-equation with Judaism, a situation already well-established by Paul's day, with continuing reminders of the theological failings of Judaism, as well as the mere political strength, rather than theological virtues, of their Muslim overlords? In this reading, might *īmān* have been equated first and foremost with proper understanding of Jesus – as the Messiah: the faith of Christian texts? For, while Muslims would claim Jesus as a prophet, they were, in Christian eyes, not far different from the Jewish denial of Jesus as the Christ.⁷⁷

Christians as the true - and truthful? - believers?

The Qur'ānic discussion of the Children of Israel of the People of the Book does not always distinguish between Jews and Christians, but, instead, contrasts the “believers” among them with those who do not believe. Not surprisingly, Christians would take up this Qur'ānic distinction, and present themselves as the “true” believers – in contradistinction with both Muslims and Jews.

Of our authors, Paul outlines most concisely a - Christian – (re)reading of the Qur'ān that both supports Christian doctrine and argues against any “Christian” following of Muhammad, adoption of “Islam” – or heeding any scripture but that which the Qur'ān itself says Christ brought. For, upon reading the (Arabic) Qur'ān, the non-Arab Christians whom he met in his travels had seen that

⁷⁷ For further discussion of prophets in Arab literature, cf. Sarah Stroumsa, “The Signs of Prophecy: The Emergence and Early Development of a Theme in Arabic Theological Literature,” *Harvard Theological Review* 78 (1985): 101-14.

[Muhammad] had not been sent to us, but to those Arabs who were in Ignorance ... and that it was not obligatory for us to follow him, for messengers had been sent to us before him, who addressed us in our own languages, who had warned us and transmitted the Torah and the Gospel in our own tongues. Since it is evident from the book itself that Muhammad was not sent except to those Arabs who were in Ignorance – Thus, when it says that “Anyone who follows a religion other than Islam, it will not be accepted by him, and he will in the next life be among the lost”, it means that, in accord with justice, it is intended for his people, to whom he was sent, in their tongue – not for the others to whom he did not come, as it is stated in the book.⁷⁸

Furthermore, Paul’s non-Arab Christians continue, “We also found in the book great praise of the Lord Christ and his mother ...”⁷⁹, as well as “for our Gospel, preference given for our monasteries and churches over the mosques, and testimony to the frequent invocation of the name of God therein.”⁸⁰ These affirm “the necessity of remaining in their (Christian) religion, and not to abandon their vow, nor reject that which they had, nor to follow any one other than the Lord Messiah, Word of God, and his apostles which he sent to warn us”⁸¹.

Paul’s letter explains how, in the reading of his non-Arab Christian interlocutors, the Qur’ān – far from criticizing the Gospel, or the apostles, or Christian practices or doctrines – praises and supports Christian teachings on these matters. Mixing scripture with philosophy/logic - as with Theodore and the anonymous monk - in defense of Christian Trinitarian theology, Paul uses a line of reasoning that would be familiar to a Muslim audience: In response to Muslim challenges to Christian ability to say God is ‘one’ when they claim three persons/hypostases⁸², Paul asks how Muslims avoid

⁷⁸ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, par. 7.

⁷⁹ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, pars. 8-10.

⁸⁰ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, par. 11.

⁸¹ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, par. 12.

⁸² Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, par. 49.

anthropomorphism and claim incorporeality for God when they maintain he has two eyes (Q 11:37), two hands (Q 5:64), a leg (cf. Q 68:42), a face (Q 2:115), a side (39:56), and that he comes in the shadow of the clouds (Q 2:210)⁸³. And, as with our other two authors, Paul, too, asserts the validity and veracity of Christianity, not only against Islam, but also against Judaism. Citing Psalm 106 (105):37-39, Paul details how the Jews “prostrated before the head of a calf, were unfaithful to God, killed his prophets and messengers, worshiped idols, immolated not only dumb animals, but even their own sons and daughters, to demons.”⁸⁴ In contrast to God’s own condemnation of the Jews in the mouth of David, Paul (as with Theodore⁸⁵) cites Qur’ānic proof (Q 5:82) of a preference of Christianity over Judaism (“the worst enemies of those who believe are the Jews and those who are ‘associators’, and you will find the best friends of those who believe to be those who say ‘We are Christians’”) and of Christian virtues – the piety of monks and priests, as well as the “honesty of our actions and the goodness of our intentions.”⁸⁶ In the final analysis, Paul’s non-Arab Christians are “astonished at these people who with their acquired culture and merit, do not know that there are two sorts of laws: a law of justice, and a law of grace”⁸⁷ – and that, with the sending of the law of grace, God’s own word, in the form of the noblest of God’s creatures: man, whose nature he assumed through the most-pure Lady, Holy Mary, most chosen of the women of the world⁸⁸ - “after this

⁸³ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, par. 50.

⁸⁴ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, par. 19.

⁸⁵ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 85.

⁸⁶ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, par 20.

⁸⁷ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, par. 59.

⁸⁸ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, par. 62.

perfection, there was no longer any need” for all that which came before (i.e.

Judaism) and after (i.e. Islam)⁸⁹.

Theodore is far more direct in his chastising of Muslims for their disbelief, and their chastising of Christians: Despite Qur’ānic attestations to the virtues of Christians/Christianity,

due to your unjust treatment of us and your envy of us, you call us *mushrikūn*, so as to give the lie to your prophet, to disavow your Qur’ān, and to neutralize whatever God has ascribed to us in it...How can you say that we are *mushrikūn* since we had previously accepted what was sent down to us of the Psalms and the Gospel? We are much older than you, and your prophet used to attest to the truth and wisdom we have. He would say, ‘We sent down the Qur’ān as a light and guidance, a confirmation of what was before it of the Torah, the Psalms and the Gospel (Q 5:48; 10:37)...Your scripture attests, while you disavow your scripture, give the lie to your prophet, disown your Qur’ān, and nullify what it ascribes to us.’⁹⁰

Twice the anonymous monk alludes to the virtues of Christians/Christianity: the “belief” of the Christians in Christ (as opposed to the disbelief of the Jews) – supported by Qur’ānic testimony, and the spread of Christianity without the aid of worldly power (an implied criticism of, or comparison with, Islam?). But, overall, the anonymous monk spends little time castigating Muslims – either for their own practices and beliefs, or for their non-adherence to Christianity, or even for their behavior towards Christians. Rather, he devotes most of his energies to a thoughtful defense of the veracity of Christian doctrine.

Anti-Semitism?

⁸⁹ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, *Risāla*, par. 63.

⁹⁰ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 80.

In contrast to Europe's relatively successful enforcement of a creedal homogeneity, but without an accompanying linguistic unity (in which Jews were both ethnic and religious outsiders), the diverse religious and ethnic groups of *dār al-islām*, under the Muslim caliphate, came to speak the Arabic language. And, particularly up to the Mongol destruction of Baghdad (1258), classical Arabic texts – Christian and Muslim – testify to an inter-confessional milieu in which educated members of various confessions⁹¹ would study together, learn from, and debate with, each other. Indeed, 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 – much as Christian Arabic apocalyptic discussions of the ‘beast’ with reference to Arab/Muslim conquests rarely intends an actual horned animal but, rather, an allegorical explanation for a new set of political circumstances, attributed, variously, to the impiety of different Christian groups, or a temporary spell of ‘infidel’ rule before the restoration of the rule of Christ⁹². For, would rulers as tyrannical as those portrayed by some Christian Arab texts⁹³, have allowed such criticisms to circulate under their very noses? To return to the topic at hand: what is the evidence for an historic “Arab anti-Semitism ‘- Christian or Muslim?”

⁹¹ For a recent, general overview, see Griffith, *Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*.

⁹² See e.g. Zaborowski, “Egyptian Christians Implicating Chalcedonians in the Arab Takeover of Egypt”; F.Javier Martinez, *Eastern Christian Apocalyptic in the Early Muslim Period: Pseudo-Methodius and Pseudo-Athanasius*, PhD Dissertation (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1985).

⁹³ For an elaborate account, see ‘Abd al-Masīḥ al-Kindī’s *Apology*.

Hypotheses and conclusions: The true religion – and earthly rule

What, then, are we to make of Christian Arab glosses of messianic terminology in the Qur'ān – or in Jewish circles, as well as their reading of the Fātiḥa, and Qur'ānic discussions of *īmān/islām* and the 'believing party' of Banī Isrā'īl? In particular, what impact might the renewed 'equation' with Judaism have had on the revisiting of old theological justifications of political subjugation, especially on the part of those Christians who had enjoyed political power under the Byzantines?

While Theodore's citations and interpretations of Qur'ānic passages do not always accord either with the 'Uthmānic codex known to us today, nor the glosses of what came to be the normative Islamic interpretive tradition, they may provide some indication of the subtext with which classical Muslim Qur'ān exegetes were working. While the aforementioned "Gabriel *ḥadīth*" reconciles public, communal requirements of *dār al-islām* with private, individual matters of the religion of Islam, the Umayyad period had grappled with the position of Arabs who were not Muslims, and the Abbasids were coming to terms with Muslims who were not Arab. And, in the context of 'dhimmitude', how would Arabophone Christians reassert their truth claims over and against those of Judaism? Were there ongoing discussions of *īmān/islām* that would take into account – define, be defined by, and redefine – the understandings of what would come to be normative Islam?

If, in al-Ma'mūn's time, the 'Islam'/*īmān* distinction had, to some extent, been resolved, might there still have been occasion to criticize the 'Arabs' (keeping in mind the increasing prominence of the Barmacids and other non-Arab forces in the early

Abbasid period)? That Theodore's Muslim interlocutors, whom he vanquishes before al-Ma'mūn, all have 'Arab' names may be significant in this regard. And, if Christians were a majority of the Muslim-ruled world, might there have been a political tendency to downplay the 'Christian-Muslim' distinction – with the ambiguities that *īmān*, as opposed to *islām*, might allow, through an emphasis on the commonalities of 'belief', in some quarters? Both the very honorific "Prince/Commander of the Faithful/Believers" (*amīr al-mu'minīn*) and the various accounts of suspicions of al-Ma'mūn's 'Islam' (or faith) preserved in normative Islamic narratives⁹⁴ may merit closer study, as increased attention is devoted to early Christian Arabic texts. And, as with the Baḥīrā legend, and the various accounts of Muhammad's encounters with a monk (either as a proof of his prophethood, or as an explanation for how he came to be informed about Judeo-Christian traditions)⁹⁵, the cycle of cause and effect is difficult to determine. But, the writings of Theodore and other Christians attest to the eagerness with which Christians were picking up on Qur'ānic distinctions between 'faith' and 'Islam/submission'; and, while they demonstrate discontent with Muslim rule, they also testify to the extent of Christian – theological – vitriol against Jews/Judaism. As Christians came to speak and write in Arabic, and as Christians were the largest demographic in *dār al-islām*, and frequently in conversation with Muslims (as attested to by the popularity of Christian-Muslim debate texts), it is not unlikely that Muslim exegetes would have been familiar with these Christian estimations of Judaism. Might such a 'Christian contra-Judaeos' subtext provide a more historically

⁹⁴ Cf. Cooperson, *al-Ma'mun*, esp. 28-36.

⁹⁵ Cf. the comprehensive study of Roggema, *The Legend of Sergius Bahira*.

and theologically satisfactory explanation for the glosses of Q 1:6-7 and other passages than that which the normative Islamic interpretive tradition has preserved?

While pre-Islamic, and post-Constantinian, Christian theological categories would look to earthly military or political victories as proof of God's favor (of course, by those who held theological positions similar to those of the victorious Christian power; significantly different readings of earthly power were held by those who considered the rulers 'heretics'), in Christian Arabic texts, the argument is also made that the proof of the virtues of the Christian *religion* is that it did not need to conquer by virtue of the sword or mere strength of men.

While Theodore extols the virtues of the cross, and Christian adoration thereof, with the claim that "no king who went forth under the sign of the cross was unvictorious in battle,"⁹⁶ in his response to the sheikh's third question, the author of Sinai Ar. 434 in Jerusalem makes an oblique allusion to Christian victory, of a very different nature. For, according to the monk, one of the verifications of the truth of Christianity is to be found in Christ's sending to the four corners of the earth disciples, God's helpers, who "brought to very ignorant nations, without sword or rod, or money or men, a difficult *madhhab*, bringing them from the *dunya* to the *ākhira*." These disciples, in turn, "responded obediently, both in life and after their deaths, and, in the name of the Crucified, raised the dead and worked every kind of miracle," thus proving the divine power behind their words and works.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 92.

⁹⁷ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 178r.

Paul, writing after both Theodore and the anonymous Jerusalem monk, at the time of the crusades, was well accustomed (resigned?) to Muslim rule. At the very end of his letter, he does allude to the superiority of Christianity, with the law of grace, to either Judaism or Islam. Like the author of Sinai Ar. 434, Paul asserts the ultimate truth of Christianity – as a religion and ‘law’. But his emphasis throughout his letter is why Islam, with the Arabic Qur’ān, is not necessary for non-Arab (European) Christians.

Unlike Paul and the anonymous author of Sinai Ar. 434, who appear resigned to life under Islamic rule, in Theodore’s text there is a tension between the ‘suffering servant’ and the triumphal designs of Christianity (i.e. the aforementioned citation of Christian victories under the cross). Politically, the ‘worldly’ power of Islam is not denied by Theodore – but it is reinterpreted. Rather than God’s reward to Muslims, the political dominance of Islam is seen as a sign of divine favor for Christians. Rather than a punishment for Christian infidelity (or a foreshadowing of the anti-Christ), Muslim rule is actually a sign of God’s love of Christians. Theodore is quite comfortable and confident in the virtues of Christianity – so much so that he claims that God is trying those he loves⁹⁸, rather than remarking that he may be punishing those who have not remained true to the faith, a common response of Christian apologists attempting to explain Islamic hegemony⁹⁹. Perhaps indicative of his awareness of a – still-strong – neighboring ‘Christian’ empire, Theodore’s interpretation of the reasons for Islamic hegemony parallels his comments on the virtues of the cross (alluded to above).

⁹⁸ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 123.

⁹⁹ Cf. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*.

If Christians were imbibing the vocabulary, and even the theological categories of the sacred text - and its interpretations - of their overlords, might not Muslims, in their turn, have taken in some of the Christian categories? The Qur'ānic terming of Jesus the Son of Mary as 'the Messiah' and the later Islamic incorporation of the (Syriac) 'al-Masīḥ al-Dajjāl' as the 'anti-Christ' that 'Isā b. Maryam will, at the end of times, slay, is a case in point. But, the question of why Christians retained, or even expanded upon, their anti-Jewish rhetoric while under Islamic rule, merits deeper reflection. Although Christians have a fairly well-developed theology of persecution, and life under hostile regimes, the Islamic conquest posed a three-fold challenge: 1) how could the return to political subjugation be explained in the face of a post-Constantinian triumphal theology?; 2) unlike in Roman times, under Islam, Christians were not forced to compromise elements essential to their cult: hence, the option of 'martyrdom' under Islam was less frequent than under Roman rulers of the first three Christian centuries; and 3) how were Christians to understand their equation with Judaism – as equally 'protected persons' – under the Islamic system? Just as the significance of Islamic hegemony had to be discerned by Christians in *dār al-Islām*, so, too, would their re-equation with Judaism have to be interpreted. While the ultimate motives for Christian Arab anti-Jewish sentiment may be difficult to uncover, it is hoped that the continued exploration of Christian Arabic texts may shed further light on the larger Muslim-ruled, Arabic-speaking milieu in which their authors lived.

Having explored our Christian Arabophone authors' readings, re-readings and interpretations of what they and, at times, normative Islamic tradition, read as Judeo-

Christian-themed qur'ānic allusions, let us turn, finally, to our texts' use of qur'ānic passages that neither Christian Arab authors nor Islamic tradition have understood as referencing Judaism or Christianity. If the works at hand read as apologetic assertions of Christian theological positions, what are we to make of their references to non-Judeo-Christian-related qur'ānic passages?

CHAPTER SIX

Qur'ānic "Corruption"?

Christian Employment of Qur'ānic Verses without Judeo-Christian Themes

'You give no credence to what does come in your scripture and what your prophet did utter. So there is then no reason for your boasting to me of your claim for something your scripture did not set forth nor did your prophet mention.'

Al-Ma'mūn asked: 'What is that, Abū Qurra?'

He said, 'His boasting to us, O Commander of the Faithful, of his Islam, and of his claim and allegation of his own entry into a garden in which there are houris whom neither man nor jinn have wed (Q 55:56). This is something of which God would not create anything at all...If this is what is prepared for you, as you relate it, 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 delights 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. God forbid such a thing, mighty and exalted be He, way beyond such a tale as this! Are you not embarrassed at this absurdity, to be linking your Lord with it and to be reporting that He says it?'¹

In order the more fully to understand early Arabophone Christian approaches to the Qur'ān and the light they might shed on contemporaneous Muslim understandings thereof, this final part of our exploration will examine a few passages that neither our Christian authors nor Islamic tradition have interpreted as referencing Christianity. While the first part shed light on Christian approaches to the Qur'ān, and the second, on Islamic interpretive traditions, this final part indicates the potential utility of Christian Arabophone texts for a fuller understanding of the textual (and/or interpretive) history of the Qur'ān. Parts one and two, therefore, emphasize the nature and role of Muslim-

¹ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 77-78.

Christian interactions in the early Arabophone, Muslim-ruled world in their respective understandings of “scripture.” The final part is more particular to the Qur’ān and intra-Muslim debates surrounding its collection and the concomitant (theological? political?) discussions of its nature: inimitable and uncreated – and, ultimately, its (authoritative) interpretation(s).

When Paul and the anonymous monk make reference to qur’ānic passages that neither they nor Islamic tradition understand as referencing Christians/Christianity, they do so not in order to highlight difficulties with the received text of the Qur’ān, but, rather, in order to point to interpretations within Islamic tradition in order the further to support the arguments they are making for the validity/veracity of Christianity. Recall the discussion above of Paul’s citation of Q 109 in conjunction with Q 42:15 as proof of the Qur’ān’s distinctions between those who were given the Book and others² (*We are not the kāfirūn* of Q 109: the Qur’ān itself says “God is our lord and yours!” in Q 42:15). Such allusions may (re)interpret, but do not give any indication of doubts about, or quarrels with, the text at hand.

Paul, for example, employs qur’ānic discussions of its “Arabic” nature as proof that (non-Arab) Christians need not heed the Arabic recitation³. He stops short of – explicitly – stating that Arabs, too, need not heed the Qur’ān. In his argument at the conclusion of his text⁴, that the law of grace replaces those of justice (Judaism or Islam), this argument is, however, implicit – or, rather, if Muslims only read their Qur’ān correctly, they would recognize the validity of

² Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, pars. 17-19.

³ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, pars. 6-7.

⁴ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, pars. 59-63.

Christianity as, in fact, Muhammad and his Arabic Qur'ān - did⁵. Paul points out how the Qur'ān has established the "equality" of all people, Muslims and non with verses such as Q 2:62, and particularly with Q 49:13: "O mankind, we have created you male and female, and have divided you into peoples and tribes, so that you might know each other. The most noble among you, in the eyes of God, is the most pious."⁶ While the anonymous monk is intent on discussing the veracity of Christianity, and only obliquely references the superiority of Christianity to Islam – and does not refer to any doubts about Islam, Muhammad or the text of the Qur'ān itself – Paul is more assertive in defending the continued validity of Christianity, while also asserting its veracity; Theodore is the only one of our authors who ventures in any way to provide an explicit critique of Islam, extending (as discussed below) also to the person of Muhammad and the received form of his message (if not the original). And even Theodore – generally - stops short of criticizing Muhammad himself, or that which he is understood to have received (although he is quite comfortable criticizing the Muslims of his day).

Regarding our authors' utilization of qur'ānic passages that neither they nor Islamic tradition understood to reference Christians or Christianity – but which they employ in order to compare with (and/or defend) elements of Christian faith, Paul and the anonymous monk reference qur'ānic discussions of various body parts ascribed to God. For the monk, this is no different from

⁵ The bulk of Paul's text, esp. Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, pars. 8-12, 14-16, 20-21, 23-24 38-40, 47-48.

⁶ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, par. 22.

God's Word (Jesus)⁷; for Paul, there is the warning that criticism of Christians of polytheism in Trinitarian discussions is as mistaken as accusing Muslims of anthropomorphism (a common polemic among various Muslim groups in early Islamic theological discourse) when pointing to Qur'ānic passages that speak of God's leg, or face, etc.

Anthropomorphism?

After a discussion of incarnation of the Word of God as Jesus, the Son of God⁸, and an assertion of Christians as the true believers⁹ – Paul returns to the theme of the Trinity¹⁰:

I say, 'The Muslims say, If your belief regarding the Most High Creator is that he is one, what do you mean by naming three hypostases, calling one Father, the other Son, and the other Spirit, making your auditors believe that you believe that God is composite of three persons (*ashkhāṣ*), or three gods, or three parts, and that he has a son – which makes someone who does not know your belief think that you mean by that a son by copulation and reproduction – you impune to yourself an accusation of which you are, in fact, innocent?' [The foreign Christian interlocutors] would say: 'But they too, their belief about the Creator – exalted be his Might – that he is incorporeal, that he has neither limbs nor organs, and that he is not contained in a place, how then can they say that he has two eyes with which to see (cf. Q 11:37), two hands which he extends (cf. Q 5:64), a leg which he uncovers (cf. Q 68:42), a face which he turns in all directions (cf. Q 2:115), a side (cf. Q 39:56), and that he comes in the clouds (cf. Q 2:210) – making their auditors believe that God most high is a body, with organs and limbs, and that he moves himself from one place to another in the clouds – which makes those who hear them speak without knowing their belief that they ascribe a body to God most high – to the point that some of them have even believed that and adopted it as a belief – and he who does not investigate their belief accuses them of that of which they are innocent.

⁷ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 176r.

⁸ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, pars. 33-46, discussed above.

⁹ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, 47-48, discussed above.

¹⁰ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, pars. 49-50.

The Muslims, according to Paul, would respond that they only assert these things about God because

the Qur'ān employs these expressions, but anyone who would interpret these in the sense that would imply anthropomorphism (*tajassum*) or mere resemblance (*tashbīh*), we curse and declare to be a *kāfir* – and when we declare someone who believes that or something similar to be *kāfir*, our detractor can no longer accuse us of that after we do not believe it.¹¹

To which the foreign Christians respond¹²:

Similarly, the reason we say that God is three hypostases: Father, Son, Holy Spirit, is that the Gospel employs these expressions, but what we intend by the hypostases is something other than composite persons, divisions, parts, or any other thing that would imply association (*shirk*) or multiplicity (*takthīr*), and by Father and Son, something other than paternity or spousal filiation, reproduction, carnal union, or copulation. Anyone who believes that the three hypostases are three gods, separate or united, or three bodies gathered together, or three separate parts, or three composite persons, or accidents or powers (*quwā*), or any other thing that would imply associations (*ishrak*), division (*tab'īd*) or merely a likeness (*tashbīh*), we curse, anathematize and declare *kāfir*. And, if we declare *kāfir* anyone who believes these things or something else of the same genre that would imply association and assimilation, our detractor could not impute the charge to us, since we do not believe it. Thus, if they impute association and assimilation for our assertion that God most high is one *jawhar*¹³ and three hypostases, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, because the apparent sense of these words implies multiplicity and assimilation, we would impute anthropomorphism and assimilation to their assertion that God has two eyes, two hands, a face, a leg and a side, and that he sits on the throne (cf. Q 2:255) after he was not there, and other things as the apparent sense implies anthropomorphism and assimilation.

Here (as with the discussions of the 'Injīl' as Jesus' 'book', seen in Chapter Four, above), Paul melds traditional Christian repudiations of 'heretics' ('anathema': *nūhrimuhu*) with what, from a contemporary perspective, appears as an 'Islamic'

¹¹ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, par. 51.

¹² Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, pars. 52-54.

¹³ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, pars. 55-58 discusses Muslim objections to this concept, opening with a deferential remark on the part of the foreign Christians: [Muslims] are people of merit, culture and knowledge; if, however, they were to read the philosophers and logic, they would not object. As no qur'ānic verse is invoked here, it is beyond the scope of the present discussion; cf. Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 110 for a parallel – and brief – allusion to this element of Islamic discussions about God and God's word.

tactic (*takfīr*: one Muslim terming another Muslim a non-believer: *kāfir*)¹⁴.

That both the Christians and the Muslims are portrayed as ‘cursing’ (*nul ‘inuhu*) and ‘declaring to be an unbeliever’ (*nukfiruhu*), but only the Christians are ‘anathematizing’ (*nuḥrimuhu*) anyone who maintains the - blasphemous - position of which they are being – falsely – accused by their detractors (Muslim anthropomorphism, Christian polytheism and/or divine-human carnal generation/sexual interactions) merits further reflection. Both parties appear to acknowledge the existence of parties within their community who did, in fact, hold the beliefs of which they are being accused, but are intent on asserting their disavowal of continued ‘communal connection’ to them (curse – anathema – declaration of such persons as unbelievers). The relatively late provenance of Paul’s text (as compared to that of Theodore or the anonymous monk) may contribute in part to this distinction: various ‘party’ lines were, by Paul’s day, firmly drawn – so neither Christian nor Muslim could paint the other with a broad brush. Furthermore, does Paul’s employment of both the anathema familiar to Christian tradition, as well as the traditional Islamic declaration of nonbelief, indicate an ‘Islamification’ of Christian Arabic thought? Or, an ‘Arabic’ thought shared by Christians and Muslims?

Created Word of God?

While Theodore does parallel the “Names of God” familiar to Islamic tradition with Christian Trinitarian understandings, he does not “threaten” his

¹⁴ Recall, for example, an Egyptian offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, “Takfīr wa-l-Hijra.”

Muslim opponents that, if he is called a polytheist, he could call them anthropomorphists. In his arguments, Theodore tends towards closer parallels: Trinity = Names / Attributes of God; Son of God = Word of God = Qur'ān. But, Paul's methodology discussed above ('if you call us associators, we can call you anthropomorphists') is similar to Theodore's "trapping" of his Muslim opponents with respect to the understanding of the Word of God as creative, rather than created¹⁵ (Paul, too, parallels the Islamic understanding of the Qur'ān as Word of God with Christian understandings of Jesus as such, but as "living, rational", rather than as Creator / creative¹⁶; although, in this discussion, neither Paul nor Theodore relies on the Qur'ān itself, but, rather, on post-qur'ānic, Islamic *kalām* discussions relating to the Qur'ān as the Word of God). Basing his argument on the qur'ānic assertion of the "equivalence" of Jesus to Adam (neither had a human father; both were "created" by God), but reading Q 4:171 to imply that (unlike Adam) Jesus was created from "the Word of God and His Spirit", Theodore then asks his Muslim interlocutor whether the Word of God is "created" or "creative". If the Muslim discussant says "creative", he cedes the point to Theodore (that Jesus, as God's Word, is – as "one-in-being" with God the Father - Creator, rather than creature); if, however, he were to say the Word of God were "created", he would be at odds with what would become the normative Islamic teaching on the Qur'ān, as the speech of God – but not, incidentally, the position of al-Ma'mūn himself (already discussed above).

¹⁵ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 73.

¹⁶ Houry, ed. and trans., *Paul of Antioch*, par. 31.

Reality of eternal punishment and continued governance of the universe?

Other instances of Theodore's interpretive quarrels with his Muslim interlocutors center on the reality of the eternity of the punishment of hellfire, in which he puts forth pointed criticisms of trends within Islamic theological discussion, rather than disputing with the text of the Qur'ān (you neutralize this threatening promise which your scripture makes very clear {e.g. Q 19:71-72}, and you anticipate what it does not specify for you)¹⁷. Similarly, his allusion to the interpretative difficulties surrounding Q 53:8: "When he came closer and descended" - who would have governed the universe had he crashed?!,¹⁸ Theodore repudiates Islamic challenges to Christianity by attempting to evoke qur'ānic "support" for the Christian theological position: Christians, unlike Muslims, affirm the eternal reality of hell; when Muslims challenge Christian belief in Jesus as God, and the Son of God, by asking who governed the world while Jesus was in the tomb, could not a Christian – disingenuously – ask a Muslim to defend the Islamic assertion of God's transcendence and eternal power in the light of a certain – hypothetical - reading of a qur'ānic passage? The 'impossibility' of God's 'crashing' when he descended would parallel a Christian interpretation of God's being 'absent' from the governance of the universe, even when Christ was in the tomb.

¹⁷ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 78.

¹⁸ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 98.

“Carnal pleasures” - Houris, Zayd’s wife and polygamy

In addition to pointing out elements of convergence between Christian and Islamic beliefs, Theodore employs Qur’ānic references to contrast Islam and Christianity – in the favor of the latter. Chapters Three and Four discussed areas in which Theodore highlighted Christianity as the “true” faith, particularly regarding its profession of Jesus as the Incarnate Word – and Son – of God. (As discussed above, Paul, too, engages in this method of argumentation, although more subtly and in less detail than does Theodore.) But Theodore goes beyond matters of Christian faith and praxis, to criticize the (mis)beliefs and (wrong) praxis not so much of Muhammad – or his (original) message – but of later Muslims. The quotation at the beginning of this chapter is a case in point: it is not Muhammad, or even his – original – message with which Theodore is portrayed as taking issue; rather, it is the *Muslims’ reporting that God said this* that evokes his criticism. In the light of some recent discussions of the Qur’ānic *ḥūr ‘ayn* as a (Christian) Syriacism referencing not wide-eyed virgins, but, rather, white grapes, it should also be noted that Theodore, an early Arabophone Christian who also knew Syriac, takes issue not with the Arabic term itself as rendered in the Qur’ān, but with the concept of such corporeal paradisiacal delights as elaborated upon in Islamic tradition.¹⁹

A similar criticism of a Qur’ānic – and later Islamic – injunction that clashed with Christianity, but praxis – rather than visions of paradise - centers around the permissibility of polygamy – both that Muhammad had multiple

¹⁹ On such a reading of Syriac into the received text of the Qur’ān, see (now, in English translation) Christoph Luxenberg, *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran: A Contribution to the Decoding of the Language of the Koran* (Berlin: Verlag Hans Schiler, 2007).

wives, and that Muslims are allowed up to four.²⁰ This is worked into a larger criticism of Muslims' refusal to follow the Messiah while they "even confess that our Lord the Messiah in heaven has precedence over all the prophets"²¹:

The most astonishing thing is that you mock us for our following the Messiah whom you yourselves acknowledge to be the Spirit of God and His Word. And you accept the statement of one who grew old and died over one who neither dies nor grows old, who is in the heavens, just as you yourselves say (cf. Q 4:158)²².

Theodore then goes into a discussion of Jesus as the – truthful/ verifying – Word (and Spirit) of God (discussed above). He continues:

God is the one verifying and telling the truth, while you are falsifying and contradicting what he says. A mere follower is the one who grew old and died and was buried in the ground: none of his deeds manifested a sign by means of which he would benefit us. Rather, 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." (Q 33:37) God, mighty and exalted by 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, while in your prayers you pray in his behalf and you ascribe to him the speech of God, may He be exalted!"²³

Thus, Theodore minces no words in expressing his disapprobation of a prophet of God using 'revelation' to further his own desires. This is not dissimilar to his criticisms of Muslim socio-political dominance over Christians:

Due to your unjust treatment of us and your envy of us, you call us *mushrikūn* so as to give the lie to your prophet, to disavow your Qur'ān, and to neutralize whatever God has ascribed to us in it...Your scripture attests (to the Christians'

²⁰ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 86; perhaps this number is a parallel with Byzantine views of remarriage? Cf. John Meyendorff, "Christian Marriage in Byzantium: The Canonical and Liturgical Tradition," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 44 (1990): 99-107.

²¹ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 75.

²² Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 86.

²³ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 86.

faith), while you disavow your scripture, give the lie to your prophet, disown your Qurʾān, and nullify what it ascribes to us.²⁴

You are passing judgment against God when you say that the Messiah raised the dead at the bidding of God, whereas your scripture says that the Messiah is the Spirit of God and His Word...Know O Muslim that whoever denies that the Messiah is God has already fabricated lies against God, against His Word, and His Spirit...You in your insolence and ignorance act ignorantly, give the lie to the angels and deny what your own scripture says when in Sūrat al-Zukhrūf it says (The Merciful One has taken a son, Q 43:81)...So, O Muslim, I think of your messenger only as one who acknowledges a son, so why do you deny what your messenger confesses, and that to which your scripture testifies, except that you want to annoy us and to deal haughtily with us? That is not permissible, for your scripture and your prophet both give you the lie in connection with what you say.²⁵

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 and hostility you harbor feelings of hatred against me, and you will not listen, then listen now to what your own scripture utters. Do not act haughtily against me, or disdainfully, out of concession, once it is clear to you from your scripture you should address me "only in the best way", just as your prophet commanded you in your scripture, speaking to the Christians whom he met earlier: "We believe in what He sent down to us and to you; our God and your God are one." (Q 29:46) But you, due to your conceit, 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, and your defamation of us. 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 ...But you, in your unfairness and hostility to us, associate us with the worshipers of idols ... Yet your scripture testifies in our behalf that we were People of the Book before you, believing in the Gospel and 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. And if you say that you are a follower of the Messiah, and you follow his prescripts, you invalidate what you say of your own scripture. I recognize you are far from being a follower of the Messiah; you are estranged from him by reason of abandoning his commandments.²⁶

²⁴ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 80.

²⁵ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 115.

²⁶ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 74-75.

As seen from the above passages, this socio-political criticism is not far removed from theological criticisms:

Do you say that we fabricate falsehoods about God? Yes. You give God associates and whoever gives God associates fabricates falsehoods against him. Is it with His permission, or without His permission? If you say that we fabricate falsehoods against Him and disbelieve in Him with His permission, then we have no blame with Him, and no punishment. And if you say it is without His willing, and without His permission, then it would already be right according to those who are present that He is a weak God, since He did not lead us to the right faith...Your messenger testifies in behalf of your Lord that He said, Whomever We lead astray has no one to guide him aright, and whomever we guide aright has no one to lead him astray.²⁷

But, for the most part, the criticisms of the Muslims of his day are leveled at the *interpretation* of the Qur'ān, rather than the text itself:

You do not credit what the prophets and the scriptures have brought of the punishment on the day of judgment and of standing in the presence of the sovereign God. You believe in a paradise in which there is food and drink and sexual intercourse, and this is something that will never happen nor is it possible that it would come to be. Then you say, 'You have corrupted the Gospel', but you pass over your prophet's sayings. For the refutation is one which invalidates itself...*You do not credit what was sent down in the Torah, nor do you credit what is in the Psalms, nor do you credit what was sent down in the Gospel, nor do you credit what is articulated in your own scripture.*'²⁸

While the Qur'ān chastises Jews and Christians for attempting an exclusive claim to paradise, Theodore, in turn, charges Muslims (and Jews and Samaritans) with the same sin:

On what basis is your allowance of what God has forbidden in his holy Gospel? You treat his sublime revealed scriptures contemptuously. You find fault with the *sunnan* of the Messiah. There is also the fact of your neglect of the prophets'

²⁷ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 117.

²⁸ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 110-11.

testimony to the Messiah²⁹, mighty and exalted be He. And you do not think that any other creature will enter Paradise along with you? By my life, it is certainly a fact that likewise God, mighty and exalted be he, is not going to bring us and you into one and the same paradise, since you do not follow his Messiah, nor do you believe in his word and his spirit. [That the Messiah is the Word of God and His Spirit] is in your book, your Qur'ān ... if you had the Qur'ān by heart.³⁰

As already discussed, Theodore's text (like Paul's and that of the anonymous monk) is primarily a defensive Christian *apologia*³¹ for Christian faith in the face of an Islamic – qur'ānic – challenge thereto: “Your own scripture puts all Christians far from *shirk* and *kufṛ* when it mentions them with nobility and favor.”³² As such, Theodore's refutation of Muslim (mis)interpretations of the Qur'ān (and their subsequent denial of entrance to Paradise and their ultimate corruption of the true religion) center around their refusal to acknowledge Jesus Son of Mary the Messiah as the Word and Spirit – and Son – of God, which, in Theodore's reading, the Qur'ān supports:

You, in your conceit, charge God with not having the power to send His Word wherever He wants without becoming separated. Praised be He, the doer of what He wants, as He wants, since all His actions are Wisdom and Mercy for all His servants. Now, your scripture says: “Do you ask about what He does: they will ask even though their minds do not comprehend His will, blessed be God much apart from what they ascribe to Him.”³³

You O Muslims belittle God's Word and His Spirit. You maintain that they are a created entity, owned chattel. You disbelieve in Him and you give the lie to the saying of God, exalted be He, in your own scripture, on the tongue of your own

²⁹ cf. Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 118, with the same accusation leveled against the Jews.

³⁰ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 95-96.

³¹ cf. Acts 26:2; 1 Peter 3:15; Philippians 1:7, 16 – and the inability of nonbelievers to defend their unbelief, in Romans 1:20.

³² Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 85.

³³ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 97.

prophet, when He says that He created creation by means of His Word and His Spirit (discussed above). You oppose His command, rank us with the unbelievers, and put us with the *mushrikūn*.³⁴

Theodore reverses this Muslim charge of Christian ‘corruption’ of their religion, by demonstrating – from the Qur’ān – how true believers would, in fact, assert the divinity of the Messiah (“ If I have spoken the truth, so does your scripture tell the truth. And if you deny what I say, so also do you deny your prophet and depart from your own religion.”³⁵):

Your scripture testifies in our behalf that we were “People of the Book” before you, believing in the Gospel and in the one who sent it down to us. You confess that our Lord the Messiah in heaven has precedence over all the prophets.³⁶ Therefore, those who follow him have precedence over all religions. And if you say that you are a follower of the Messiah, and you follow his prescripts, you invalidate what you say of your own scripture...³⁷

Did the angels lie, who testified to [the Spirit of God having dwelt in the belly of a woman and woman’s organs to have enveloped it], when the angel Gabriel said, ‘O Mary, the Lord will settle in you and the exalted Spirit will dwell within you?: (cf. Lk 1:35; Q 66:12). So tell me, who is the Lord of Gabriel? Your scripture also says, “Mary guarded her chastity, and We breathed of Our Spirit into her. She affirmed the truth of her Lord’s words and she came to be among the obediently humble ones. (cf. Q 66:12) If in your impudence you want to disallow this, then at one and the same time you will be making your own spirit equivalent with His Spirit, and at the same time you will be disallowing His majesty. I do not understand how you can give the lie to that Spirit of whom the angels testify that He is her Lord while you make Him into a created, owned ‘*abd*. You hope by this means to come near Him and you exercise your hope by your denial of His Word and His Spirit and by your fabrications about His offspring and His beloved! Your own scripture says that the Messiah is like Adam (cf. Q 3:59) then it names him the Word of God and His Spirit (cf. Q 4:171). This name indicates the nature, the effectiveness of command for dominion, the grandeur in heaven, the magnitude of power and the majesty of *jawhar*. Would you, O vain braggart, have the power to say that God said that the Messiah is my servant/slave (‘*abdī*: cf. Q 43:59) or my creature/creation (*khalqī*)? Rather, he named him His Word or His Spirit (cf. Q 4:171). Were I to have any justice from

³⁴ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 101.

³⁵ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 91.

³⁶ cf. Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 112.

³⁷ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 75.

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.³⁸

It is incumbent upon you, O Muslim, to be content with the sayings of your prophet and the testimony of your scripture and not to impute servility to the Word of God and His Spirit, nor to expect to obey him and to please him, all the while you are exasperating His Word and His Spirit, enjoying your disobedience to him and your divergence from His ways.³⁹

You give the lie to the trust-worthy Spirit and the truthful Word which God sent with the angel Gabriel...Follow the Messiah and enter into obedience to him. For he is God and His Spirit which he directed the prophets to summon to obedience to God...You do not credit what was sent down in the Torah, nor do you credit what is in the Psalms, nor do you credit what was sent down in the Gospel, nor do you credit what is articulated in your own scripture. So I am amazed at your corrupt belief and your vile speech, your conceit and your denial of what God, mighty and exalted be He, says. You want to urge people to credit your utterances, which have no soundness, yet you do not see anyone crediting what you say unless he is someone like you, believing your belief. Had Adam's spirit been like the spirit of the Messiah, he would certainly have held himself back from disobeying God and he would not have heeded Iblīs to the point that God got angry at him, expelled him from paradise, and caused him to die. The matter also came to the point that, according to your corrupt allegations, he would be in heaven along with our master, the Messiah, death having been held back from him, and he brought himself to life just as the Messiah brought himself to life along with others of the dead. But you know that no one of the progeny of Adam is able to fend off death from himself nor is he able to save himself from anything.⁴⁰

As the Qur'ān does, in fact, term Jesus a servant (Q 43:59), does this indicate that the version of the Qur'ān known to Theodore did not contain that passage – or that it was a disputed passage? Or, does it indicate Theodore's selective reading of the Qur'ān, and culling of passages that support his Christian arguments?

The overall tone and nature of Theodore's debate would indicate that, in this

³⁸ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 89-90.

³⁹ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 79.

⁴⁰ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 110-11.

instance, he was engaged in “proof-texting” – selectively reading the Qur’ān for those passages that would support his apologetic argument. But, outside of his Christian apologetic agenda, what might Theodore’s text tell us of intra-Muslim discussions surrounding the received text of the Qur’ān (and also its transmission)?

True scripture? True religion?

Both Paul⁴¹ and Theodore⁴² reference – and respond to – Q 3:85 (“Whoever follows any religion other than Islam, it will not be accepted from him, and he will be one of the losers in the hereafter.”). Paul responds by highlighting Qur’ānic praise of Christianity, Jesus and his mother, the Gospel and even later Christians. Theodore employs another Qur’ānic verse (Q 3:83: God made what is in the heavens and on the earth submit) to refute the claim of Q 3:85: how could “Islam” have precedence over other religions, when devils, and animals are as much “submitters” as are “Muslims”? It is “faith” (*īmān*)– and not “submission” (*islām*) that is God’s religion, and, it is belief in God’s Word and His Spirit (i.e. Jesus as the Messiah) that constitutes faith (discussed above) – and, if, as Q 2:6-7 states, God has sealed the hearts, eyes and ears against this faith, no prophetic warning will avail⁴³.

The culmination of these arguments indicate that Muslims do not understand the “true” (original?) message of the Qur’ān: “God is the one

⁴¹ Khoury, ed. and trans., *Paul of Antioch*, par. 5.

⁴² Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 76.

⁴³ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 76.

verifying and telling the truth, while you are falsifying and contradicting what he says.”⁴⁴ As with Paul’s allusion to the Law of Grace vs the Law of Justice, Theodore also has a strong message that only appears in passing: it is the Gospel, and not the Qur’ān, which has been “brought down” (from God) – as it is the Qur’ān, and not the Gospel, that has been corrupted. And, the discussions of the “corruption” or falsification of scripture are tied into claims of the revealed status of the books. In the words of the “man from Iraq” to Abū Qurra: “Your scripture is not the one sent down, but our scripture is the one.”⁴⁵ What does this claim mean for Theodore’s allusion to “heavenly books,” or to his apparent non-inclusion of the Qur’ān among the “books of God”? Conversely, what does this assertion mean with respect to the Jerusalem monk’s seemingly open category of “books of God”? In Theodore’s text, the – exclusive – claims to revelation are predicated upon the understandings of paradise, and exclusive claims thereto.

O Muslim, your prophet and your scripture testify about God, mighty and exalted be He, that He excluded you from faith. So, if your prophet gave testimony about God, your God, other than what he said, tell us and make it known. You give no credence to what is not written in your scripture and what your prophet did not utter. So there is then no reason for your boasting to me of your claim for something your scripture did not set forth nor did your prophet speak of it (i.e. Muhammad’s Islam – and houris – “something of which God would not create anything at all”).⁴⁶

For, frequently, rather than questioning the received qur’ānic text, Theodore reinterprets a qur’ānic verse, taking issue with the accepted Muslim interpretation thereof (as in his discussion of Q 1:6-7, examined above). While

⁴⁴ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 86.

⁴⁵ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 109.

⁴⁶ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 77-78.

he alludes to theological debates known to the Islamic community, the central concern is the Islamic denial of Jesus as the son of God: *you disallow the psalms, the qur'ān and the gospel, and you deny the word of God due to the hardness of your heart and the coarseness of your soul, by means of your imagining that you are in the right*⁴⁷. As discussed above, Christian, Jewish and Muslim “scripture” are all brought to service the Christian claim of God’s generative ability. And, while Theodore will speak of the Word of God (*kalimat Allāh*), he does not speak of the books of God (*kutub Allāh*), as would the anonymous monk of Jerusalem (except when the Qur’ān speaks in support of Christian beliefs: then, according to Theodore, “God says”).

Continuing the thread of these Christian-themed arguments, the bulk of Theodore’s allusions to qur’ānic passages that are not read as referencing Christians/Christianity point to infelicities in Muslim interpretations thereof – as well as, possibly, seeming preservation of infelicities in the received text itself. Perhaps because of his desire to use the Qur’ān in support of his claims for the veracity of Christianity, while Theodore is ready to criticize the practices and beliefs of the Muslims of his day, the brunt of the criticism is leveled at the *interpretation* of the Qur’ān by the Muslims after Muhammad. Muslims (not the Qur’ān or Muhammad) debase the Word (and Spirit) of God – do not believe in the Son of God – falsely accuse Christians of *shirk* and *kufir*.

But, if the “right” religion is tied to salvation (and, arguably success in this world), how is that “right religion” known, if not through God’s own Word?

⁴⁷ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 87-88; cf. Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 91, in which the charge of *tahṛīf* is leveled – disingenuously - at the Muslim interlocutor who refuses the Christian understanding of Jesus of Nazareth.

And, how can the later believers know that the version of that Word in their possession is the one that was, in fact “sent down” from God – and that it has not been “corrupted” in some way?⁴⁸ This, in fact, is one of the qur’ānic and Islamic challenges to Christianity: Jesus did indeed come with the true message from God, but you (and, often, Paul, in particular) corrupted that message (cf. Q 5:116). Theodore’s engagement with this charge is of particular interest, for his response engages Islamic traditions of qur’ānic “textual history,” rather than Christian apologetics. As such, it may be an indicator of the potential utility of Christian Arabic texts for the textual (and theological) study of the Qur’ān, its reception and transmission.

Tahrīf al-Qur’ān?

While all of our authors “re-read” the Qur’ān, it is only Theodore’s text that levels direct criticism at the received text itself. The most frequent charges of Muslim incorrect rendering of Muhammad’s original message centers around Christian-themed passages. Theodore asks one of his Muslim interlocutors:

Tell me about your saying that God said to Jesus: ‘O Jesus, son of Mary, did you say to people, “Take me and my mother as two gods, instead of God?” And he said, “Praise be to You...If I had said it, You would know it. You know what is in my soul and I know what is in your soul.”’ (Q 5:116) You know that our master the Messiah did not say to people, ‘Take me and my mother as two gods.’ Rather, he said, “Take me [for your] God,” which is the truth.⁴⁹

Theodore’s subsequent discussion of this passage picks up on one of the classical points of discussion of the Qur’ān’s own inimitability, and the nature of Muhammad himself. Is the Qur’ān eternal if it asks questions about different

⁴⁸ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 105-10.

⁴⁹ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 84.

points of time? Could Muhammad be “preserved from error” if the scripture revealed to him exhibited doubts? Does it mean that God – or Muhammad later – did not have “certain knowledge”? Or, is it a matter of misinterpretation of the Muslim community?

Here, the exchange between Theodore and his Iraqi interlocutor who accuses Christians of having corrupted their scriptures is worth quoting in full⁵⁰:

You arrived at this [conclusion] from the words of your own scripture, O Muslim, glory be to God Almighty. How worthless is your opinion, how insignificant your thinking, how blind your heart, and how weak your argument, for you demean your own scripture. You give the lie to the sayings of your own prophet when he says, ‘You will find the People of the Gospel are firm in the beliefs, handed down by their Lord. Among them are priests and monks and they do not act arrogantly. They are closest in affection to those who believe.’ Your scripture calls us believers (cf. Q 5:82), but you name us infidels (*kāfirīm*⁵¹), polytheists (*mushrikīm*), ‘blasphemers’ (*mujaddifīm*). You mean to blame us falsely and you hope thereby to be saved from blame. If you knew the certain truth, you would know that your scripture is the one that is corrupted (distorted).

The Iraqi said, “How is that, O Abū Qurra?”

You will certainly know it, if God, exalted be he, so wills. Tell me, O Muslim, how you speak a lie against your lord in that he says, ‘We have given you abundance [1], so pray to your lord and slaughter [a sacrifice] [2]. The one who hates you⁵² is the one without offspring. [3]’ (Q 108:1-3) Tell me, O Muslim, who is this enemy, the one without offspring (*al-abtar*)? Also, where it says, ‘Perish the hands of Abū Lahab, perish⁵³. [1] Neither what he has⁵⁴ nor what he has

⁵⁰ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 107-10.

⁵¹ Cf. Q 5:70-71.

⁵² *Shānaka*; in the ‘Uthmānic codex, this word is read “*shāni’aka*”; but cf. e.g. the variant readings listed in A. ‘Umar and ‘A. al-‘Ā.S. Mukram, *Muḥjam al-qirā’at al-qur’āniyya*, 8 vols. (Kuwait: n.p. 1992), viii, 253.

⁵³ *Tabbat yadā Abī Lahab wa-tabbat*, rather than the *tabbat yadā Abī Lahab wa-tabba* of the ‘Uthmānic codex. Although no similar canonical variants are recorded, the “perishing” of Abū Lahab indicated by the third masculine singular perfect *tabba* in the ‘Uthmānic codex was problematic for later [theologically-tinged?] exegetical discussions on this verse. For an overview of the exegetical problems with the “‘Uthmānic” *wa-tabba*, see U. Rubin, “Abū Lahab and Sura CXI,” in *The Qur’ān: Style and Contents*, edited Andrew Rippin (Aldershot: Ashgate Variorum, 2001), 269-86, esp. 274-8 (cf. also the *tafāsīr* of Muqātil b. Sulaymān [d. 150/767]; Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Tha‘labī [d. 472/1035], *al-Kashf wa-l-bayān*, 10 vols. [Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 2002]; al-Rāzī [d. 606/1210]; and Abū ‘Abdallāh Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Qurṭubī [d. 671/1272], *al-Jāmi‘ li-ahkām al-Qur’ān*, edited Aḥmad ‘Abd al-‘Alīm al-Bardānī et al., 20 vols. [Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1965-67], ad loc.).

acquired enriches him. [2]...[3]⁵⁵ His wife [is] a carrier of firewood. [4] A rope of palm fiber will be upon her foot⁵⁶. [5]' (Q 111:1-5) This is something bearing no resemblance to inspiration and revelation. It is not true that your messenger said any of this. Rather, he said, 'I was sent the Qur'ān confirming what came in the Gospel and the Torah.' (cf. Q 3:3) And he also spoke of Muslim men and women, and of men and women believers (cf. Q 33:35). So tell me, O Muslim, who are the Muslims and who are the believers?

The Irāqī said to him, "We, O Abū Qurra, are the Muslim men and our wives are the Muslim women; we are the believing men and they are the believing women."

So Abū Qurra said, Tell me O Muslim, is Islām one or two?

The Irāqī said, "Islām is one and faith is one."

Abū Qurra said, "You have corrupted [it] O Muslim."

The Muslim said, "How is that, O Abū Qurra?"

Abū Qurra said, "Were Islām one and faith one, your prophet would not have been making a distinction between Islam and faith, nor would your prophet have had any preference over all the Muslims. If it were as you say, you would not have guaranteed for yourself a paradise in which there are houris. If the matter is as you say, then who will be the mates for your believing wives in the hereafter, when you will have the houris instead of them? You should not want to have substitutes for your wives, neither in this world or in the hereafter, since they are, as you say, Muslim women and believers. Islam and faith are not a single religion. You are the Muslims and we, the community of the Christians, are the believers. Therefore, 'the Arabs said, 'We believe'' and your messenger said to them, 'I refuse you that. You do not believe. Say rather, 'We submit',' meaning their Islam, so that they would come to believe in the Word of God and His Spirit. The Messenger promoted our preservation, so he abandoned raising objections to our religion and debating with us, 'except in terms of what is fairest.' (Q 29:46) But you abandoned his command and you have dealt in anger and astonishment, so due to your anger you discarded our scripture, sent down to us.

The man from Iraq said, "Your scripture is not the one sent down, but our scripture is the one.

⁵⁴ In the 'Uthmānic codex, this verse reads: *mā aghnā 'anhu māluhu wa-mā kasaba* ("neither his wealth [*māluhu*] nor what he has acquired enriches him"). In Dick's edition of Theodore, this passage is rendered: *mā aghnā 'anhu wa-mā lahu wa-mā kasaba*. The insertion of an additional *waw* after the verbal phrase encourages the reading of [*wa-*]mā lahu, "[neither] what he has" -- instead of *māluhu*, "his wealth." No such variants are recorded.

⁵⁵ Abū Qurra omits the third verse of the 'Uthmānic version of this sūra: "He will enter a fire of burning flame" (*sayaṣṣā nāran dhāta lahabin*). As this verse is understood to foretell Abū Lahab's eschatological punishment, and as it became one of the *crux interpretata*, pointing to the "miraculous" predictive value of this sūra, its omission is noteworthy. See below for further discussion of the arguments for the miraculous nature of this chapter.

⁵⁶ Instead of "her foot" (*rijlīhā*), the 'Uthmānic codex reads "her neck" (*jādhīhā*).

Abū Qurra said to him, How is that? It is on your own testimony on behalf of yourself that no one will enter paradise except you! You will enter it and you will see that it is right just for you alone, by reason of your insolence toward God, your shedding forbidden blood, your sleeping with many women who are forbidden to you, your turning your face away from the east, your sodomy with the son of your friend, your marrying divorced women, your regarding your brother's wife as lawful after his death, your shunning your own wife in divorce and then having sex with her after another man, other than yourself, a stranger, comes into her, and enjoying yourself in the month of Ramaḍān. There is also your saying, "Have sex on assembly day [i.e., Friday]" and the fact that you do not credit what the prophets and the scriptures have brought of the punishment on the day of judgment and of standing in the presence of the sovereign God. You believe in a paradise in which there is food and drink and sexual intercourse, and this is something that will never happen nor is it possible that it would come to be. Then you say, 'You have corrupted the Gospel and you pass over your prophet's sayings.' The refutation is one which invalidates itself.

It is noteworthy that – with the exception of the practice of polygamy by Muhammad and later Muslims and, possibly, the purported "dual" godship of Mary and Jesus - Theodore's text is careful to place the blame for the false teachings/beliefs, particularly those relating to Christianity, on the later Muslim community, rather than Muhammad or the original message itself: *The messenger promoted our preservation, so abandoned raising objections to our religion and debating with us, 'except in terms of what is fairest' (Q 29:46). But you abandoned his command and you have dealt in anger and astonishment, so due to your anger you discarded our scripture, sent down to us.*⁵⁷ Whether this is due to respect for the (non-corrupted original) religion, if not the prophet, of the Muslim ruler in whose *majlis* he is debating, this approach – like that of Paul and the anonymous monk – is eminently logical if the Qur'ān is being evoked in support of Christianity: the argument would certainly be weakened if one of the "prooftexts" were to be

⁵⁷ E.g. Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 109-10.

(too) discredited. Given the overall tone of Theodore's text – particularly the free reign al-Ma'mūn appears to give Theodore⁵⁸, such restraint in criticizing Muhammad or the Qur'ān or even (true) Islam is likely not due to the "fear" of Christians under Muslim rule that is often the subject of contemporary discussions of the "protected" "Peoples of the Book" of the Islamic world.

Where the Prophet of Islam is criticized, it is mainly to demonstrate how claims about Muhammad's prophecy might stretch credibility in the light of details of his personal life that appear enshrined in God's revelation. This criticism of the Qur'ānic text known to later generations is found in the highly polemical account of al-Kindī, and may reflect ongoing debates within the Muslim community, such as those over the "createdness" vs. "uncreatedness" of the Qur'ān, together with the various accounts of the process of its collection and eventual codification⁵⁹. And, just as with the difficulties in the articulations of Christian Christological formulae in the early centuries of the history of the Church⁶⁰, these debates over the form – and formation – of scripture were not devoid of political content.⁶¹

But, when there are no concerns of justifying Christianity, what might early Christian Arabic texts tell us of the debates over, as well as the actual text of, the received *muṣḥaf*? For, one of the most striking features of Theodore's

⁵⁸ cf. e.g. Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 81, which describes al-Ma'mūn's expulsion of a Muslim disputant for his impudence towards himself and Theodore.

⁵⁹ Cf. e.g. Modarressi, "Early Debates on the Integrity of the Qur'ān."

⁶⁰ Frend, *Monophysites*.

⁶¹ Cooperson, *al-Ma'mun*; cf. Clare Wilde, "The Qur'ān: Kalām Allāh or Words of Man? A Case of *Tafsīr* Transcending Muslim-Christian Communal Borders," *Parole de l'orient* 32 (2007), 401-18, on which this chapter draws heavily - this discussion was first presented in September 2004, at the Seventh International Conference for Christian Arab Studies at Sayyidat al-Bir in Beirut. My thanks to the participants at the conference for their extremely helpful comments, and to Fr. Francis Moloney, then dean of CUA's STRS, for enabling me to attend.

argument is the charge of *tahriif* – corruption – leveled at the Qur’ān. Like his heavy emphasis on reason, and the freedom with which he criticizes not only Muslim interpretations of the Qur’ān, but also Islamic practices and beliefs, this charge of corruption⁶² sets the account of Theodore’s debate before al-Ma’mūn apart from the letters from the author of Sinai Ar. 434 and Paul.

While many of the non-Christian-themed passages cited by Theodore and, to a lesser extent, also by Paul, are reflective of familiarity with intra-Muslim debates, Theodore’s text purports to take place during the caliphate of al-Ma’mūn, a caliph known for his promotion of Mu‘tazila thinking, which would shape – even if as “that against which” it came to be defined - what would eventually be “normative” Islamic thinking in a number of ways. As such, most of his non-Christian-themed Qur’ānic references exhibit a deep familiarity with a wide range of Mu‘tazila-colored discussions. He not infrequently (disingenuously?) asks his Muslim interlocutors whether they “give the lie” (*iftarat*) - to God, his angels, their prophet, their scripture, even paradise itself (note the parallel with the requirements of faith – *īmān* – in the *ḥadīth* of Gabriel, discussed above), when they claim “x”. In addition to intra-Muslim debates, Theodore points to the mistake Muslims make when they do not accept, let alone adopt, the Christian understandings of God and, even more frequently, of Christ. And, it is never al-Ma’mūn who receives the brunt of Theodore’s criticisms, but the various Muslim interlocutors.

⁶² cf. e.g. Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 107, and Paul’s refutation of such charges, referenced above.

True revelation and Qur'ānic "corruption" (*taḥrīf al-Qur'ān*)

Although early Arab Christian use of and familiarity with the Qur'ānic text has been demonstrated – particularly by Samir⁶³, and a convincing argument has been made for a direct Christian influence on theological trends in Islam⁶⁴ in the first 'Abbāsīd century (i.e. 132-235/750-850), due to the allusive nature of Theodore's charge, classical Islamic works of Qur'ān exegesis (*tafsīr*) may help understand his reference. But, conversely, the Christian text may help us obtain an insight on the approaches to the canonical text of the Qur'ān that existed in the formative period of classical Islamic civilization, which is fuller than that put forth by what came to be Islamic orthodoxy.

The accepted understanding of the codification of the Qur'ān for the majority of Muslims is as follows: within a generation of Muḥammad's death, the Qur'ān text that we have today had been established. This tradition places the codification of the Arabic Qur'ān in the reign of the third 'rightly guided caliph' - 'Uthmān (r. 23-35/644-56)– and prior to the sectarian/political divisions arising during 'Alī's rule (r. 35-40/656-61), and well before the Umayyad (40-132/661-750) – or 'Abbāsīd (132-655/750-1258) dynasties. For the most part, western

⁶³ E.g. Samir, "Earliest Arab Apology for Christianity"; Swanson, "Beyond Proof-texting"; Sidney H. Griffith, "The Qur'ān in Arab Christian Texts: The Development of an Apologetical Argument. Abū Qurrah in the *maḡlis* of al-Ma'mūn," *Parole de l'Orient* 24 (1999): 203-33.

⁶⁴ Although "[t]here is as yet no completely satisfactory general history of the growth and development of the Islamic *ilm al-kalām*... (cf. Sidney Griffith, "Faith and Reason in Christian Kalām: Theodore Abū Qurrah on Discerning the True Religion," in *Christian Arabic Apologetics during the Abbasid Period (750-1258)*, edited Samir and Nielson [Leiden: Brill, 1994], 1-43, 1 n. 1), [o]ne has every reason to believe that the Islamic *ilm al-kalām* originally grew out of the early participation of Muslims in the styles of scholarly discussion Christian academicians and intellectuals employed in the Greco-Syrian milieu of the Christian centres of learning in the oriental patriarchates" (Griffith, "Faith and Reason," 2; cf. also J. Van Ess, "Disputationspraxis in der islamischen Theologies, eine vorläufige Skizze," *Revue des études islamiques* 44 [1976], 23-60; Cook, "The Origins of Kalām").

scholarship accepts this traditional Muslim account of the compilation and codification of the qur'ānic text⁶⁵ (arguing that even epigraphic traces and recent finds of early Qur'ān manuscripts -- such as those in the mosque of Ṣan'ā' -- do not yield significant textual variants on the so-called 'Uthmānic codex in use today). The more radical examples of modern revisionist scholarship, however, question the place and date of this process⁶⁶ – and some even express skepticism as to the original “Arabic” nature of the Qur'ān⁶⁷.

In the light of these conflicting claims, an intriguing --- but little-studied -- aspect of Christian Arabic apologetic works is the charge that Muslims have distorted the Qur'ān, an accusation belonging more properly to inter-Muslim polemics. For such a charge of scriptural corruption implies an original scripture that was not corrupt, or that at least was more correct than the scripture used by contemporary Muslims (an echo of the Muslim/Qur'ān charge that Jews/Christians have distorted their scriptures⁶⁸). Although the claims that

⁶⁵ cf. John Burton, *The collection of the Qur'ān* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) and his more recent *Sources of Islamic Law*, who places the codification of the qur'ānic text even earlier than the Muslim account: within the lifetime of Muḥammad. According to Burton's thesis, the traditional Muslim placement of the codification of the qur'ānic text after the death of Muḥammad allowed for legal exegetical “wobble room.”

⁶⁶ 8th century Iraq: John Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) and his *The Sectarian Milieu* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); 7th century Palestine: Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic world* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

⁶⁷ e.g. Günter Lüling, *Über den Ur-Qur'ān. Ansätze zur Rekonstruktion vorislamischer christlicher Strophenlieder im Qur'ān* (1974, Erlangen: H. Luling, 1993), in which the words of the qur'ānic text are sometimes altered to better fit the author's thesis that underlying the Qur'ān is a Christian hymnic composition (Eng. trans. *A challenge to Islam for reformation*, Delhi 2003); Christoph Luxenberg's German original *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran. Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache* (Berlin: Das Arabisch Buch, 2000); here, the argument is sometimes proffered that certain of the “difficult” (Arabic) qur'ānic terms are better understood (and, at times, rewritten), as *Syriac* lexemes. For a recent overview of these theses, see e.g. Cl. Gilliot, “Un non-musulman cultivé et un chercheur occidental face au Coran,” *Lumière et Vie*, Lyon July-Sept 2002 (255), 29-54.

⁶⁸ cf. e.g. Q 2:42, 59, 75-9; 3:71, 78; 4:46; 5:13, 41; 6:91; 7:162.

Muḥammad knowingly led people astray, and that the Qurʾān is a heretical and/or erroneous book are far more frequent in Christian polemical or even apologetic writings⁶⁹, some early Christian Arabic texts charge later Muslims with distorting or corrupting the received qurʾānic text – a theme also found in the works of heterodox Muslims, such as Khārijīs or Muʿtazila⁷⁰.

While this charge is similar to the Shiite claim that the Sunnis suppressed certain passages – particularly those that mentioned ʿAlī or the imāms – or slightly altered the reading of certain words in the received text of the Qurʾān (e.g. replacing *āʾimma*, leaders, with *umma*, community⁷¹), it must be noted that (at least since the 4th/10th century) the Imāmī Shīʿīs claim only that passages have been omitted⁷². They do not claim that the accepted canonical/codified text of the Qurʾān contains any passages that should not be there. And, although some scholarly attention has been devoted to the Shiite claims of Sunni distortion of

⁶⁹ E.g. the classic Greek diatribe on “the heresy of the Ishmaelites,” which is attributed to John of Damascus. This text, found in Sahas’ translation, *John of Damascus on Islam*, 132-41 (Greek original and English trans.), enjoyed wide circulation outside of the Arabic speaking Islamic world. For a listing of and excerpts from other such early texts from within and outside of the Islamic world, see Gaudeul, *Encounters and Clashes*, esp. ii, 15-39.

⁷⁰ Khārijīs would say that the twelfth sūra, Yūsuf, is not part of the Qurʾān as it is a love story – similar to the rejection of the Song of Songs on the part of certain Jewish and Christian groups (my thanks to Prof. Neuwirth for drawing my attention to the former point, and to Prof. I. Shahīd, for this last point). See below for discussion of Muʿtazila claims that the received text of the Qurʾān has been tampered with.

⁷¹ E.g. at Q 3:110; 2:143.

⁷² My thanks to David Thomas for prompting the clarification of this comparison with Shiite charges of scriptural corruption. See *EQ*, s.v. “Shīʿism and the Qurʾān,” for further discussion of Shiite claims that the ʿUthmānic codex in the possession of the Sunnis, while incomplete, does not contain falsifications. See also Etan Kohlberg, “Some notes on the Imāmīte attitude to the Qurʾān,” in *Islamic Philosophy and the Classical Tradition: Essays Presented to Richard Walzer*, edited S.M. Stern, A. Hourani and V. Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 209-24.

the original Qurʾān⁷³, to date little attention has been paid to *heterodox* Muslim or early Christian Arab discussions about the “established” qurʾānic text⁷⁴.

And, in one instance, Theodore explicitly levels the charge of *tahrif* against the Qurʾān itself – regarding passages (the above-cited Q 108 and 111) that have nothing to do with Christians or Christianity, and for which Islamic tradition has preserved but a vague memory of debates surrounding it: *This is something bearing no resemblance to inspiration and revelation. It is not true that your messenger said any of this.*⁷⁵ Can – or should - Theodore’s criticisms of the later Islamic community be read apart from his criticisms of the received text of the Qurʾān? Can they be understood apart from a Christian resentment at having lost political dominion with the rise of Arabophone Islam? Should they be read as distinct from, or part of, discussions current in the larger Arabic-speaking world?

For, once the “uncreated” nature of God’s speech became the normative Islamic understanding thereof, discussions of infelicities in the received text of the Arabic Qurʾān were subsumed into discussions of its inimitability. Passages that had posed interpretive or lexical challenges were considered “difficult” and, ultimately, accorded a particular respect. Vague memories of the early debates

⁷³ Although arguably more work could be done on Shiite claims of qurʾānic corruption prior to the fourth/tenth century, see “Shīʿism and the Qurʾān” for a current bibliography of such scholarship.

⁷⁴ For the heterodox Muslim concerns, see e.g. Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*; cf. also *EQ*, s.vv. “Khārijīs” and “Muʿtazila”. The relevant passages found in the early third/ninth (?) century correspondence between [the Nestorian?] “Abd al-Masīḥ b. Ishāq al-Kindī” and the Muslim “Abdallāh b. Ismāʿīl al-Hāshimī,” is perhaps the earliest of such Christian discussions; cf. Newman’s translation, esp. 452 f.; see also Sidney H. Griffith, “The Prophet Muhammad: His Scripture and his Message according to the Christian Apologies in Arabic and Syriac from the 1st Abbasid Century,” in *La vie du prophète Mahomet. Colloque du Strasbourg [Octobre 1980]*, ed. Bibliothèque des Centres d’Études Supérieures Spécialisées (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1983), 99-146.

⁷⁵ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 108; for further discussion of this passage, see my “The Qurʾān: Kalām Allāh.”

surrounding such passages have survived, but often the details are lost.

Might Christian Arabic texts, which would have had less concern in maintaining a doctrine of the inimitable nature of the Qurʾān, help to shed light on such debates?

This passage, to which the Muslims presumably have no response, concludes the section on scriptural corruption (it should be noted that the major part of this section is devoted to the Christian defense of the Bible against such charges, rather than an attack on the Qurʾān).

Q 108 and 111

In the passage just quoted, Abū Qurra cites two short qurʾānic sūras (Q 108 and 111) albeit – in Dick’s edition - with some slight variations⁷⁶ – as proof of the “corruption” (*taḥrīf*) of the Qurʾān. His choice of these passages is first of all noteworthy because they have nothing to do with traditional arguments found in Christian apologetics. Secondly, although Abū Qurra’s treatment of the passages cannot itself be termed *tafsīr*, the allusive nature of his remarks indicates that he is echoing a discussion already present in his milieu.

For, in Muslim Qurʾān exegesis, much ink has been spent on these brief chapters – of 3 and 5 verses, respectively. Q 108 is the enigmatic chapter of “al-Kawthar” – a concept that later Muslim tradition went to great lengths to explain – the general consensus being that it is a river in paradise. It is frequently put

⁷⁶ My thanks to Professor Angelika Neuwirth for her encouragement with this research. A detail worthy of note is that throughout the debate, sūra is spelled with a *ṣād* and not a *sīm*, a peculiarity also reflected in some early Latin works on the Qurʾān emerging from Spain (cf. Burman, *Religious Polemic*, 87-88).

forth as proof that people cannot produce anything comparable to even the shortest sūra. For example, al-Qurṭubī (d. 671 / 1272) praises the predictive value, knowledge of the unseen and style of these 3 verses.⁷⁷ Intriguingly, Abū Qurra is more concerned with the identity of *al-abtar* than with a definition of *al-kawthar*. The next passage that Abū Qurra quotes, Q 111, is traditionally understood as a curse on one of Muḥammad's uncles who did not heed his prophecy: al-Qurṭubī also commends Q 111 for its 'miraculous' predictive value, i.e. of Abū Lahab's unbelief and ultimate fate⁷⁸.

While both of these passages came to be used by Muslim exegetes to "prove" the miraculous or inimitable nature of the Qur'ān, "heterodox" strains in the Islamic tradition also reflect doubts as to the inimitable merits of these two chapters: Within a century after the death of Abū Qurra, Ibn al-Rāwandī (d. ca. 298/910-1), records a tradition that claims that there is "better than" Q 108:1⁷⁹. Although possibly a "freethinker" (*zindīq*)⁸⁰ at his death, early in his life this elusive figure⁸¹ was a proponent of the Mu'tazila, the so-called "rationalist" Muslim theological trend that by the fourth/tenth century was considered

⁷⁷ cf. Claude Gilliot, "Le Coran. Fruit d'un travail collectif?" in *Al-kitāb. La sacralité du texte dans le monde de l'Islam. Actes du Symposium International tenu à Leuven et Louvain-la-Neuve du 29 mai au 1 juin 2002*, edited D. DeSmet, G. de Callatay and J. van Reeth (Brussels: Peeters, 2003), 185-231, esp. 220-22; see also Qurṭubī, *Jāmi'*, ad loc.; cf. also al-Tha'labī, *Kashf*, ad loc.

⁷⁸ For a recent discussion of scholarship on this sūra, see Rubin, "Abū Lahab."

⁷⁹ cf. J. van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra: Eine Geschichte des Religiösen Denkens im frühen Islam*, 6 vols. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991-97), vi, 472-3. For a brief discussion (and a recent 'revisionist' reading) of this "troublesome" chapter, see Gilliot, "Non-musulman," sect. 6: 'La lecture syro-araméenne du Coran.'

⁸⁰ For an overview of this concept, see Sarah Stroumsa, *Free Thinkers of Medieval Islam. Ibn al-Rāwandī, Abū Bakr al-Rāzī and their Impact on Islamic Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

⁸¹ Abū 'Isā l-Warrāq is a somewhat better attested individual who was likely behind Ibn al-Rāwandī. See Thomas, *Anti-Christian Polemic in Early Islam: Abū 'Isā al-Warrāq's 'Against the Trinity'*, esp. 3-30. My thanks to David Thomas for bringing this connection to my attention.

heterodox. Other such “rationalist” Mu‘tazila rejected “those parts of the Qur’ān in which the prophet utters curses against his enemies”⁸² as being part of the holy book revealed by God. According to them, God could not have called passages such as Q 111 “a noble Qur’ān on a well-guarded tablet” (Q 85:21-2). Rubin argues that Q 111:1 “seems to be the main reason for the Mu‘tazila’s rejection” of the sūra because “it excludes from the outset any possibility of repentance on the part of Abū Lahab.”⁸³ In this context it is interesting to note that al-Qurṭubī (d. 671 / 1272) addresses the question of whether the passage could have been in the *umm al-kitāb* – but with a twist: he reports an objection that the *umm al-kitāb* could not contain reference to something not yet created, and responds that there is another example: God wrote the Torah before he created Adam – but Adam is still mentioned in the Torah.⁸⁴

Early exegetical works (those of Muqātil [d. 150/767] or al-Ṭabarī [d. 310/923]) record no traces of a conflicted understanding of these verses. Such early works are intent on explaining the meanings of certain “difficult” words – but theological issues are largely absent from their discussions of these passages. Rather, the works of later exegetes retain traces of Mu‘tazila arguments (even if, in some cases, only to refute them) and have the most detailed account of (often theologically-charged) interpretations of these verses. But – like much of early Islamic intellectual history – “normative” Islamic tradition is not forthcoming as

⁸² cf. Goldziher, *Introduction*, 173. My thanks to Walid Saleh (University of Toronto), who first brought the Mu‘tazila rejection of Q 111 to my attention. For a recent overview of the early history of Qur’ānic exegesis, see his *Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition*.

⁸³ Referencing al-Rāzī’s *tafsīr*: Rubin, “Abū Lahab,” 274 n. 36.

⁸⁴ Qurṭubī, *Tafsīr*, ad Q 111.

to the reasons for the varied interpretations. Might a Christian Arabic text -- such as Abū Qurra's debate -- that presumably was not subject to the dictates of what came to be Islamic orthodoxy, enable us to gain a heretofore-unexplored insight to the history of this interpretative tradition?⁸⁵

For the present discussion, two points of Abū Qurra's comments are noteworthy:

1. The question, *man huwa hādihā l-ʿaduww al-abtar?* ("Who is this enemy, the one cut off/without offspring?")
2. His conjunction of Q 108 and 111 as proof of qur'ānic corruption.

Abū Qurra's question "Who is this enemy, the *abtar*?" indicates that *al-abtar*, rather than *al-kawthar*, may have been a crux interpretum for Q 108:3. While exegesis on Q 108 devotes much space to definitions of *al-kawthar*, it is fairly unanimous in its identification of *al-abtar*: al-ʿAṣṣ b. Wāthir, a Qurashī vehemently opposed to Muḥammad. But, a lone tradition in al-Rāzī's (d. 606/1210) *tafsīr* brings us to the second point – the conjunction of Q 108 and 111 as proof of qur'ānic corruption.

For al-Rāzī, an encyclopedic and highly logical exegete who has preserved much Muʿtazila material in his arguments⁸⁶, records a minority understanding of *al-abtar* as Abū Lahab, the individual explicitly cursed in Q 111. Abū Qurra's debate, which takes place in the court of the well-known proponent of the

⁸⁵ Although our sūras do not appear, compare the similar charges in the "Apology of al-Kindī," as discussed in Griffith, "The Prophet Muhammad."

⁸⁶ See *EQ*, s.v. "Muʿtazila," for other such exegetes who have preserved Muʿtazila material.

Mu‘tazilīs, the ‘Abbāsīd caliph al-Ma‘mūn, may help establish the background for al-Rāzī’s minority understanding of *al-abtar* in Q 108:3 as Abū Lahab, and also the conflicting interpretive tradition on Q 108 and 111.⁸⁷

For, as neither Q 108 nor 111 have any bearing on the particulars of Christian apologies in an Islamic milieu, Abū Qurra’s conjunction of Q 108 and 111 as proof of the Qur’ān’s “corruption” may indicate an *Islamic* interpretive trend (not clearly preserved in later, “normative” Islamic tradition – once the doctrine of the uncreated and inimitable nature of the Qur’ān was firmly established): namely, Q 111 (and, seemingly, other qur’ānic passages that could be interpreted as denigrating the Hāshimī relatives of the prophet) was not part of the original revelation to Muhammad.

For, if Q 108 and 111 were at some point understood to refer to the same person – an uncle of Muhammad who rejected Muhammad’s prophecy -- this qur’ānic condemnation of a Hāshimī may have been used by Umayyads to show that (Hāshimī) kinship to the Prophet was not sufficient guarantee of piety/virtue, and thus ‘Alī and his descendants could not claim the right to rule the Muslim community on that basis. It should be noted that an oblique argument, however, against Q 111’s being understood as an Umayyad “invention” is the curse on Abū Lahab’s wife. She was herself another Qurashī -- but the sister of Abū Sufyān, the father of Mu‘āwiyya (the first “Umayyad”). But, due to the predominance of tracing kinship through male lineage (Shī‘īs are a notable exception, as they insist on the descent from Muḥammad through his

⁸⁷ For further discussion of this, see Wilde, “The Qur’ān: Kalām Allāh.”

daughter Fāʾima), even in the light of their own *ahl al-bayt* claims, this aspect of Q 111 would likely not have posed problems for the Umayyads. That the passage did not trouble the Umayyads is supported by its emergence as a “problematic” chapter only in ‘Abbāsīd times: to my knowledge, Abū Qurra’s allusion is the earliest such indication of any doubt as to the legitimacy of its placement in the Qur’ānic codex.⁸⁸ Detractors of the ‘Abbāsīds could also use the verse(s) to show that ‘Abbāsīd – i.e. Hāshimī – kinship to Prophet was not a guarantor of virtue (nor, therefore, of ‘good’ or ‘virtuous’ leadership).

In response, supporters of the ‘Abbāsīds initially may have said that such verses were the product of human – possibly Umayyad – tampering⁸⁹: They were not part of the original revelation to Muhammad, an argument that Abū Qurra picks up in his own – Christian – efforts to refute the Muslim charge that the Bible is a corrupt scripture. But, once the ‘Abbāsīds became more firmly situated and as they came to rely on the Qur’ān as support for their authority, the established Qur’ān text could not be questioned. Q 111 (and – seemingly – 108) had to be interpreted in a way that did not detract from the Hāshimīs as a whole. And, particularly as the doctrines of the uncreated and inimitable nature of the Qur’ān became more firmly entrenched, these imperfect and/or contingent

⁸⁸ cf. al-Jāhīz, *al-Bayān wa-l-tabayn*, 4 vols. in 2 (Cairo 1975), ii, 326: “Mu‘āwīyya said one day, ‘O people of Shām, have you heard the saying of God – blessed and exalted – in his book {*tabbat yadā Abī Lahab wa-tabba*}?’ They said, ‘Yes.’ He said, ‘Verily Abū Lahab was his uncle.’ And he said... ‘Have you heard the saying of God great and mighty {*wa-amratuhu ḥammālatu l-ḥaḥābi*}?’ They said, ‘Yes.’ He said, ‘Verily she was his aunt’....”

⁸⁹ My thanks to Professor Shahīd for first drawing this point to my attention, by his suggestion that the curse on Abū Lahab, in contradistinction to Abū Qurra’s claim, actually supports arguments for an early dating of the passage – but to an Umayyad, rather than ‘Uthmānic provenance.

verses had to be understood as perfect and uncreated: hence, the origin of the arguments for the *faḍīla*, i.e. exceeding virtues, of these “difficult” chapters.

As the variations noted in Dick’s edition of Abū Qurra’s text do not conform to any of the known variant readings and serve no obvious theological agenda, it seems most likely that his citation errors have no intended polemical purpose, but are rather merely the result of the vagaries of human memory. But, might examination of the works of the first Christians to write in Arabic continue to inform our understanding of the early Muslim approaches to the Qur’ān? For, even taking into account the (intentional or accidental) misrepresentations of their opponents’ views, as the Christian writings were not subject to the strictures of what came to be the accepted position of Muslim “orthodoxy,” as demonstrated by Theodore’s allusion to Q 108 and 111, such works may very well preserve a record of Islamic heterodoxy that is more varied than that found in even the most comprehensive of the encyclopedic *tafāsīr*.

Jihād

As discussed above, one under-explored entrée into the formative period of Islamic thought is the testimony of those who were not Muslims, but who wrote in Arabic and lived within ‘*dār al-islām*’ – or, under the ‘caliphate’. Our three authors acknowledge the political reality of living in a Muslim-ruled realm, but they also engage Islam as a religion in its own right. They express frustration at their lack of political dominion, but with a frankness that attests to an

atmosphere of ‘freedom of expression’ of which Europe began to dream only during the ‘Enlightenment’, and sadly lacking in many Muslim-majority countries today.⁹⁰ In the Arabic-speaking, Muslim-ruled, but majority-Christian ‘*dār al-islām*’ of the first Islamic centuries, how were qur’ānic verses about ‘Muslims’ and ‘believers’, Jews, Christians, Children of Israel, Peoples of the Book, understood? What role might Christians such as our authors have had in exegetical, theological – or legal – discourse?

That Theodore’s debate purports to take place on the border with Byzantium, as the caliph was going to wage *jihād* against the *Rūm* – and as Theodore’s disputants likely were in the caliphal entourage – the freedom with which an Arabophone Christian under his domain is able to express his criticisms of the Qur’ān, Muhammad, Islam and Muslims – but not the act or fact of *jihād* is worthy of mention, given the frequency – and manner - with which a number of Western/Christian authors mention ‘*jihād*’ in contemporary discussions of Islam, and the fact that the Islamic understanding thereof was freshly articulated during Theodore’s life. The only one of our authors to mention *jihād*, Theodore does so in order to make a deeper point, defending Christian antipathy to Jews, in the context of the relationship between actions and intentions:

... a Hāshimite man approached and said to him, ‘Tell me, O Abū Qurra, did the Jews crucify the Messiah with his consent or without his consent? I see you, the community of Christians, maintaining that the Messiah is your God and that the Jews crucified him. If the Jews did crucify him with his consent, then there is no crime imputable to them for it, but if it was without his consent, then he is a weak Lord. So tell me, O Abū Qurra, about what I have asked you.’...

⁹⁰ For a (caricature) of the repressive nature of Islam so popular in certain contemporary circles, see <http://perfectlyhuman.multiply.com/video/item/8> (accessed March 1, 2010).

Abū Qurra said, 'Do you, O Muslim, say that we "fabricate falsehood" about God"?'

The Muslim said, 'Yes, you ascribe to God associates, and whoever gives God associates "fabricates falsehoods" against Him.'

Abū Qurra said, 'Is it with His permission, or without His permission? If you say that we "fabricate falsehood" against Him and disbelieve in Him with His permission, then we have no blame with Him, and no punishment. And if you say it is without His willing [it] and without His permission, then it would already be right according to those who are present that He is a weak God, since He did not lead us to the right faith.'

Al-Ma'mūn said, 'By God, you have spoken truly, O Abū Qurra.'

Then the whole assembly cried out and said, 'This is not like what our master says, and there is no satisfactory answer except the fact that God gave you guidance, but you would not be guided.'

Abū Qurra said, 'Your messenger testifies in behalf of your Lord that He said, "Whomever We lead astray has no one to guide him aright, and whomever We guide aright has no one to lead him astray". Tell me, O Muslim, when you undertake a military campaign into the territory of the Romans (i.e. Byzantium), is it not a fact that you are "on *jihād* on the way of God", and you are of the opinion that this will bring you to Paradise?'

Al-Hāshimī said, 'By my life, it is so.'

Abū Qurra said, 'When you are on the expedition, you and your brother, the son of your paternal aunt and of your paternal uncle, and an uncouth infidel (*'ilj*) comes up to you and strikes your brother a damaging blow and he brings him close to death; tell me, if you could overpower that lout (*'ilj*), would it not be the case that you would take your revenge on him?'

Al-Hāshimī said, 'I would certainly kill him in recompense for my brother.'

Abū Qurra said, 'It would not necessarily be the case since he granted your brother his destiny because, given the fact that he killed him, he secured his entry into paradise? So why would you kill someone who had brought you to your destiny and caused you to attain your intended [destination]? The fact is that ruffian (*'ilj*) was the cause of your brother's entry into Paradise. So you do not have to kill him.'

The Hashimite was perplexed for a long while; he bowed his head toward the floor. Then he said to Abū Qurra, 'That lout (*'ilj*) sought only to kill my brother; he did not want him to enter Paradise. He only sought his destruction.

Likewise, I would requite him in accordance with what he did to my brother.'

Abū Qurra said to him, 'Now understand this and make the proper distinction.

The Jews, when they crucified our master the Messiah, did not want to accommodate him and to bring to fulfillment what the prophets foretold about him. Their only certain concern was his destruction, the obliteration of his name, and the elimination of his memory from the world. So he will judge them and requite them.'

The whole assembly of those present conceded the point and they said, 'By God, our master is exposed. This is a sound answer.'⁹¹

Here, two points are worth elaborating: the evidence of what would be identified as Mu‘tazila teachings on justice and free will (and the unity of God), as well as the technical – but non-censorious - use of *jihād*.⁹² When Christian Arabic texts allude to *jihād fi sabīl allāh* – without any criticism of this as being “not from God”, nor with any complaint of the manner in which Muslims behave when engaged in it, while also speaking of the “conquests” effected by Christians under the sign of the cross, might their understandings of (the realities of?) “church” and “state” nuance contemporary discussions such as those of the short movies “*Obsession*”⁹³ or “*Fitna*”⁹⁴? That Theodore’s discussion of *jihād* is in marked contrast to Theodore’s criticisms of the sexual license of Muhammad or later Muslims may also shed light on the social and political realities in which he – and other Arab Christians – operated.

Concluding remarks

Although each of our authors demonstrates an intimate familiarity with the Qur’ān, and each purports to be a conversation with, or response to, Muslim

⁹¹ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 116-18; cf. also Theodore’s employment of a similar “*jihād*” example in Lamoreaux’s translation of some “Questions on Free Will,” 207-8.

⁹² Cf. Heck, “Jihad Revisited.”

⁹³ (“Radical Islam’s war against the West:”) <http://www.obsessionthemovie.com/>.

⁹⁴ Dutch MP Geert Wilder’s 2008 film, available on <http://www.jihadwatch.org/2008/03/here-is-fitna.html> (accessed February 15, 2011).

challenges to, or questions about, Christianity, the overall structure of each text is quite distinct. Thus, given the three questions that frame the discussion of the anonymous monk in Jerusalem:

1. Is the Eternal Being (*jawhar*) one of the hypostases (*aqānīm*)?
2. What do you claim about the truth of the (hypostatic) union (*ittihād* - i.e. the uniting of divine and human in Christ)?
3. What is the proof (*dalīl*) for the veracity (*ṣiḥḥa*) of what they say about the truth (*ṣiḥḥa*) of the actions (*af‘āl*) of the Masīḥ from what they put forth, that is, what they claim?

it is not surprising to find little reference to Qur’ānic verses that do not deal, or are not interpreted as dealing, with Christianity: they would be irrelevant to the discussion at hand - the veracity of Christian doctrinal claims about the Triune God and His Incarnate Word, through revealed and rational proofs. Paul, too, is more – explicitly – intent upon proving the continued validity of Christianity (allegedly for non-Arabs, but, in fact, his argument is very quickly extended to all Christians), rather than on disproving Islamic doctrine or praxis. While he, too, employs logic, the Bible and the Qur’ān in this endeavor, he notes that the strongest proofs are those found in the Qur’ān⁹⁵ - although he also alludes to Muslim criticism of this sort of Qur’ānic “proof-texting” in support of Christian doctrine.⁹⁶ Qur’ānic passages understood to be referencing non-Christian themes would, therefore, be irrelevant to his argument, and excessive explicit criticism of the received text of the Qur’ān would only serve to severely

⁹⁵ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, par. 47.

⁹⁶ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, par. 45.

undermine the point he is trying to make. Rather than a written response to questions about, or a defense of, Christianity, Theodore is portrayed as engaging in a “live debate” with a number of Muslim interlocutors, before the Muslim caliph who came to be known for attempting to force public officials to profess belief in the “created” nature of the Speech of God – possibly as that caliph is on his way to wage jihad against Byzantine Christians. As with Paul and the anonymous monk, Theodore employs arguments drawn from reason and from scripture in support of his position. His concentration, however, is on the former – and, when the Qur’ān is cited, it is often qualified as “your Qur’ān” or “you say that.”

Theodore is the only one of our authors to fault the Arabic recitation (and the Arab prophet) as flawed, and to charge the Muslim community with corrupting the original message brought by Muhammad – in addition to proffering a Christian re-reading to correct Muslim misreading/misunderstanding of the received text, the approach favored by Paul and, far more gently, the anonymous monk. And, in this endeavor, Theodore goes beyond qur’ānic passages read as referencing Christians/Christianity (although those passages, too, are not spared his “textual” or content criticisms) to those that neither he nor Islamic tradition understand as containing Christian themes, reflecting in his discussion a more-than-passing familiarity with issues that were points of contention within Muslim circles.

Is this discrepancy between Theodore, on the one hand, and Paul and the anonymous monk on the other, indicative of a general disdain in which Theodore, or early Arabophone Christians, held the Arabic recitation? Is it indicative of trends that culminated in, or were spawned by, the *mihna*? Might it be an indication of why Christians were prohibited from “teaching the Qur’ān to their children? (Or, might that injunction be the result of Muslim rulers’ responding to the pleas of Christian religious authorities who were lamenting a decrease in their numbers due to conversions to Islam, or a fear on the part of Muslim rulers that the Christian tax revenue would decrease should too many Christians convert to Islam?) Whether the discrepancy in our authors’ approach is due to the recognition, in Paul’s day, of the futility of convincing Muslims of the veracity of Christianity as Christians (rather than the Qur’ān or later Muslims) understand it, or of persuading Muslims to give up their – more recent and weak - religion in favor of – the far more established and solid – Christianity, the particularly gracious and thoughtful disposition of the anonymous monk, and/or the extraordinary freedom of expression (on the part of certain non-Muslims, at least) under al-Ma’mūn, is a matter of speculation. What can, however, be observed, explored and further discussed with benefit is Theodore’s use of these non-Christian-themed qur’ānic passages, and particularly the charge of *taḥrīf* leveled at the Qur’ān.

Not infrequently, Christian political leaders have weighed in on theological issues – particularly relating to the second person of the Trinity, the Incarnate Word of God (Constantine and subsequent emperors calling various

“ecumenical” councils to resolve theological disputes; Charlemagne and the “filioque” of the Nicene Creed). Similarly, various Muslim political leaders have deemed it necessary to enter into disputes over the Word of God – the Arabic Qur’ān. From the various “collections” under the early caliphs, to Uthman’s official “codification” of the *muṣḥaf* we have today, to the caliph-instituted (and disestablished) *mihna* (whether or not the Speech of God is “created in time” or not), to eventual caliphal edicts declaring anyone who professes licit the blood of anyone who maintains – without repenting – the “createdness” of the Qur’ān, Islamic tradition is replete with instances of political leaders’ taking a stand on the nature – and contents – of the Qur’ān. But, we have no extant remnants of the original versions of the excised or altered verses. While the memory of such debates has been preserved, once the Qur’ān came to be accepted as uncreated and inimitable, the text of the received *muṣḥaf* soon became sacrosanct. Effort was expended in explaining the text-at-hand, rather than looking for alternative contents. Moddarressi has written a compelling article highlighting early debates within the Muslim community regarding the contents of the received text of the Qur’ān. Might Christian Arabic texts that deal with the Qur’ān shed light, not only on how the Qur’ān was read or heard or understood by its early auditors (Muslim and other), but also on debates over its structure or contents in which the early community engaged?

Early debates within the Muslim community (what would later be termed Sunni/Shiite) or between caliphates (Rāshidūn – Umayyad – Abbasid) allude to debates over the contents or interpretation of the Qur’ān: did Sunnis excise

passages praising or alluding to the imams? Is it appropriate for the Abbasids to rule the *umma* when Abū Lahab, their relative, is cursed in the Qur'ān? Are the Umayyads the “evil tree” of the Qur'ān? The various accounts of different collections, and the necessary omission of some contents under ‘Uthmān’s codification due to an insufficient number of living witnesses who agreed on the wording of various passages – particularly if there was no scribal record (famously, the “Stoning Verse” regarding adultery – which ruling is, however, preserved in *ḥadīth*), the “mysterious” “disconnected” letters that begin some sūras, and the very order of the chapters themselves are among the issues that indicate an ongoing process of determining what form the final Qur'ān would take. Might Christian Arabic allusions, such as Theodore’s to Q 108 and 111, open hitherto-underexplored windows onto this process? Or, should such Christian Arabic mentions (disparagements?) of the Qur'ān be relegated to the realm of polemics, rather than an indication of discussions of the Qur'ān in Muslim circles?

For both Christians and Muslims, the “right” religion leads to the afterlife – and the way that right religion is known is through the proper interpretation of true revelation. For our Christian authors, as Christians are the only community that believes in, and heeds, the incarnate Word of God, they are the true believers. Islam would challenge this understanding, by claiming that, although the original message that Jesus, or Moses, had received was, in fact, from God, later Jews and Christians distorted, or corrupted their books. For example, the (original) Bible gave the good news of a prophet – Ahmad

(Muhammad) – who would come. The Arabic Qur’ān, however, is preserved from such errors. Rather, it is the original message that the Prophet Muhammad received through Gabriel. As such, it is the Word of God preserved in its pure, inimitable and original Arabic. As such, the religion of the Arabian prophet, Islam, is the only one that is “acceptable” to God.

But, in the reading of our Christian authors, even if the Arabic Qur’ān were preserved from errors, Muslims do not heed it properly. And, one of our authors accuses the Muslim community (after Muhammad) of having altered the message that Muhammad had brought - with specific examples. While most of Theodore’s examples map onto elements of Christian doctrine and read as a litany of Christian wishful thinking regarding qur’ānic statements that criticize Christian doctrine, and, as such, are suspect as to whether or not they would be certain indicators of alternate forms of the qur’ānic text, in one instance, he does allude to Q 108 and 111, two passages that neither he nor Islamic tradition reads as relating to Christianity, but which have been “difficult passages”. Might, therefore, Christian Arabic texts be useful in indicating areas of dispute within the Muslim community, particularly when they are not engaged in apologetics? Just as Theodore, Paul and the anonymous monk demonstrate familiarity with arguments present in Muslim *kalām* and *fiqh* and *tafsīr*, might they also have been very well aware of discussions about the contents or structure of the text of the Qur’ān itself that were current in the Muslim circles of their day? Might intra-Muslim discussions of possible textual questions have provided fertile ground for a larger Christian argument, namely, that the original message that Muhammad

brought in fact honored and revered both the Messiah *in the manner in which Christians understood him* and Christians themselves? This argument, however, would arguably have little potency once the doctrine of the Qur'ān's inimitability – and uncreatedness – was fully articulated.

The preceding has attempted to outline four areas in which Christian Arab authors employed the Qur'ān: explicit qur'ānic allusions to Christian themes; passages that Christians (re)read as alluding to Christian themes; references to Judaism; and, finally, non-Judeo-Christian qur'ānic themes. While Arabophone Christian employment of (Judeo-) Christian-themed qur'ānic allusions may shed light on Muslim interpretive trends and Christian-Muslim interactions (rather than the precise text[s] of the Qur'ān in circulation), being indistinguishable from a (Christian) apologetic (or polemical) agenda in response to “Muslim” hegemony (including a vehement assertion of Christian superiority to, and distinction from, “vanquished” Judaism), the attention paid by Christian Arab authors to qur'ānic themes *unrelated to Christianity (or Judaism)* may indeed shed light on the qur'ānic *muṣḥaf* at their disposal, as well as early Muslim disputes over the received text of the Qur'ān. Such references might, therefore, assist the efforts of those interested and engaged in historical, form, or text criticism of the Qur'ān (particularly those from Christian Arabic texts that predate the “establishment” in “normative” Islam of the doctrine of the Qur'ān's uncreated and inimitable nature). But, to summarize and conclude, let us return to the qur'ānic quotation that forms part of the title of this dissertation: to what extent

did early Arabophone Christians utilize the Qur'ān as a "*burhān*" (revealed – scriptural – "proof") *for Christian truths*?

CONCLUSION

Qur'ān as - Christian - *Burhān*?

And they say: None will enter Paradise except a Jew or a Christian. That is their belief.

Say: Bring your burhān [proof] if you are truthful.

(Q 2:111)¹

Having examined the approaches to the Qur'ān found in 3 apologies for Christianity attributed to Arabophone Melkites living under Muslim rule, prior to the Mongol destruction of Baghdad, what conclusions might be drawn? These texts of Theodore, Paul and the anonymous monk were chosen for the extent to which the Qur'ān is referenced, and for the relative absence of gratuitous polemics against the person, policies or religion of their “Muslim” rulers. But, as seen from the following quotation, the authors’ primary concern was an apologetic defense – in Arabic, the language of their rulers, and also that of the sacred text of the religion of the conquerors - of the veracity of Christianity.

I confess that the Messiah is God. The Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are a single God, to be recognized in His essential oneness (*wihdāniyya jawhariyyatihi*), to be served in his three properties (*thālūth khawāṣṣihi*). There is nothing equal (*naẓīr*) to Him, nor on a par (*‘adīl*), nor a match (*kufuww*, Q 112:4); there is no way, no opposite, no rival. [God is] the knower whose knowledge has no term. He is the powerful One whose power has no imperative. He is the first, who has no beginning, the last, who has no term, the abiding One, who has no cessation. He is the great One, who has no end, the Creator, who has no helper, the exalted One who is not to be surpassed, nor attained, the mighty One, who is not to be overcome, the knower, who is not unknowing. He is the attentive One, who is not negligent, the strong One, who is indescribable, the truthful One, who does not disappoint, the living One, who does not die, the lasting One, without

¹ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 179r; Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 72.

extent. He is the abiding One, without limits, the powerful One, the Conqueror, known for mercy and compassion, at whose Word the heavens stood forth, whose might the stubborn heed, in service to whom the earth and what is on it remain, whom [our] eyes are too dull to see. His are the 'Beautiful Names' (Q 7:180), the eternal God, who does not suffer, does not change, is not altered, does not die, whom no eye attains, no imagining encompasses, whom no one can know, and no one can reach. Him do I confess and acknowledge in [terms of] lordship, divinity, might, majesty and power. I confess that the 'Living One' (*al-ḥayy*) is the Father, because fatherhood is the primal [reality] (*al-aṣliyya*), and that the Word of God and His Wisdom is the Son, (every property of fatherhood being also the property of a son,) and the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God, because the Living One would not be living without a spirit. I believe that the 'being/substance' (*al-jawhar*) makes eternity, lordship, divinity, majesty, glory, and power accrue to the Father; and to the Son and the Holy Spirit as to the Father. The Word of God, one (*al-wāḥid*) in His essence (*dhāt*), worshiped (*al-ma'būd*) in the trinity (*tathlith*) of His properties (*khawāṣṣ*)², the Creator of all creatures, is resident in the pure Mary without separation (*infaṣāl*) or removal (*intiḳāl*), within or without, without or within, apparent or hidden (*zāhira wa-bāṭina*). This should not be too overwhelming for you, O Commander of the Faithful... You surely know that the sun, the moon, and the fire are created, and the force of their light is generated from them without any separation. Their heat is clearly from them without any severance. The 'substance/being' (*al-jawhar*) is not prior to their light and their heat, nor are the light and the heat more recent than the 'substance/being.' The 'substance/being' is known only with the light and the heat, and the light and the heat are only known with the 'substance/being.' Likewise, God, mighty be He and exalted be His praise (‘*azza wa-jalla thanā’uhu*), he and His Word and His Spirit, without any separation (*iftirāq*) between them. He is not prior (*aqdam*) to His word and His Spirit, nor is His Word and His Spirit prior. God, praised be He (*ṣubḥānahu*), is only known with His Word and His Spirit, and His Word and His Spirit are only known in Him. So the Commander of the Faithful should know this, and our statement is verified, that the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit are one (*wāḥid*) God, one Lord, one Creator. As for the Father, He is God (the Father), and the Son is the Word, and the Spirit is the Holy Spirit, by means of which all creation comes to perfection. We believe in His name, we are satisfied by His sustenance, we are pleased with His judgment, and we prostrate at the throne of His glory (*kursi majdihī*). To Him be glory (*al-taṣbīḥ*), praise (*al-tamjīd*), thanks (*al-shukr*) and honor (*al-ikrām*), to the ages of ages (*dāhr al-dāhrīn*), Amen.”³

In this profession of faith, attributed to Theodore as he has almost vanquished the last of his Muslim interlocutors, we also find a sophisticated and detailed

² Or, with Dick's parenthetical (*wa-rūḥahu*): “the Word of the one God, together with His Spirit, in its worshiped essence, in the trinity of its properties”.

³ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 103-5.

articulation of Christian doctrine in Arabic, using vocabulary familiar to anyone who has read the Qur'ān or Islamic theological discourse. The reader versed in Jewish or Christian discussions of God - in Hebrew or Greek (or Latin⁴) - will find much that is familiar in Theodore's Arabic panegyric to the glory of God; strong parallels are also found with the 99 Arabic "beautiful names" of God of the Islamic tradition.⁵ For, in this culmination of previous strands of his argument, Theodore confronts head-on the Qur'ānic challenges to the central Christian doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation, discussed mainly in Chapter Two:

Q 4:171 O People of the Scripture, do not commit excess in your religion or say about God except the truth. The Messiah, Jesus ibn Maryam, was but a messenger of God and his word which he directed to Mary and a soul/spirit from him. So believe in God and his messengers. And do not say, 'Three'. Desist - it is better for you. Indeed God is but one God. Exalted is he above having a son. To him belongs whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth. And sufficient is God as disposer of affairs.

Q 3:59⁶ The likeness of Jesus with God is the likeness of Adam. He created him from dust, then said to him 'Be' and he came into being.

Q 5:116-117: And when God said: 'O Isa b. Maryam, did you say to the people: "Take me and my mother as two gods without God"?, he said: "Glory be to you, it was not for me to say that about which it was not true for me to say; had I said such a thing, you would have known it, for you know what is in my soul, but I do not know what is within you – for you, you, are the knower of the hidden. I never said anything to them other than that which you ordered, rather: 'Worship God, my lord and your lord.' And I was a witness over them while I dwelt among them, but when you took me up, you were the watcher over them – for you are witness over all things."

Q 112:1-4 Say: 'He is God, one, God, the self-sufficient (al-samad); He does not beget, nor is He begotten; and there is no one comparable (kufuwu) to him.'

Because of the tone of these three texts, it was hypothesized that the authors might have been fairly responsible – respectful - careful in their use of the

⁴ Cf. e.g. Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.4.4; see the discussion of James O'Donnell (*Augustine of Hippo*), online at <http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/jod/augustine/aug-god.html>

⁵ Conveniently found on <http://www.sufism.org/society/asma/>.

⁶ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 175v; Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 70, 72, 88, 90.

Qur'ān – and that these Arabophone Christian authors therefore might shed light on the form of the Qur'ān known to them, and/or (Muslim) interpretive trends of their day.

Keeping in mind the particular situations of the authors of the texts, the Qur'ānic passages were categorized thematically: those with explicit reference to Christianity; those that were (re)read by our Christian authors as referencing Christianity; those referencing Judaism; and, finally, those Qur'ānic passages employed by our Arabophone Christian authors that had no reference, or relevance, to Judeo-Christian themes.

In Chapters Three and Four, our authors' discussions of those passages that were understood – or (re)read – to reference Christian themes were deemed valuable not for the light such discussions might shed on the form of the Qur'ān known to our authors, but, rather, for their indications of approaches to, as well as interpretations of, the Qur'ān in their respective milieux. In a parallel manner, Judeo-themed Qur'ānic passages referenced by our authors were highlighted, in Chapter Five, as having potential significance for obtaining a nuanced approach to some contemporary trends in Islamic interpretations of those very passages. Finally, however, in Chapter Six, our texts' references of non-Judeo-Christian themed passages were examined for the light they might shed, not only on the approaches to, and interpretations of, the Qur'ān known to our Arabophone Christian authors, but also to the very form of the Qur'ān circulating in their days.

As discussed in Chapter Two, the eventual “normative” doctrine of the uncreated and inimitable nature of the Qur’ān came to bear on the approaches to, and understandings of, the received text itself. As Christian texts, even those in Arabic, would not necessarily have been subject to caliphal edicts such as the following:

“Know that the word of God is not created. He has spoken and revealed it to His messenger through the voice of Gabriel after Gabriel had heard it from Him and then repeated it to Muhammad. Muhammad then repeated it to his companions and his companions repeated it to the community. The repetition of the word of God by created beings does not make it created because that speech is in its essence still the speech of God and it is uncreated. So, in every situation, repeated or memorized or written or heard, it remains that way. Anybody who says it is created in any way is an unbeliever whose blood may be shed after he has been called on to repent [and refused].”⁷

might they be of use to scholars of the textual history of the qur’ānic *muṣḥaf*? Might the prohibition of Christian “teaching the Qur’ān to their children” as contained in the Covenant of ‘Umar indicate that Christians had, in fact, been participating in debates (with Muslims) concerning the nature, if not the contents of the Qur’ān? But, how might Arabophone Christians have viewed the Qur’ān?

***Burhān* and books of God?**

The qur’ānic quotation with which this chapter opens contains an exhortation to Jews and Christians to bring their “*burhān*” – commonly glossed as “scriptural proof” – in support of their (exclusivistic) paradisiacal claims. The early exegete Muqātil b. Sulaymān explains this command to produce their

⁷ The caliph al-Qādir bi-llāh’s edict, proclaimed by his son, the caliph al-Qā’im bi-Amr Allāh in 430/1039. See Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Muntazam fī ta’rīkh al-mulūk wa-l-umam*. English translation in *Classical Islam: A sourcebook of religious literature*, ed. and trans. Norman Calder, J. Mojaddedi and A. Rippin (London: Routledge, 2003), 159-62, on 160-61.

“*burhān*” (glossed as *ḥujja*) if they are “truthful” (*ṣādiqīm*) as a directive for the Jews and Christians to show – from the Torah or Gospel – support for their belief that they are the exclusive denizens of Paradise. They are, however, not “truthful,” as neither is able to show scriptural support for their belief, thus giving the lie to their claims. The later, encyclopaedic al-Ṭabarī provides a lengthier discussion of the grammatical complexities of the passage, and elaborates upon the fallacy of this position of Jews and Christians: it is merely a “belief” (*amāniyy*) which they hope about God (*yatamannūnahā ‘alā llāh*) – without “truth” (*ḥaqq*) or “proof” (*ḥujja*) or *burhān*. What they claim is not knowledge established in veracity (*lā yaqīm ‘ilm bi-ṣaḥḥa mā yad ‘ūn*); rather, it is established on claims of empty things and belief of lying souls (*bi-iddi ‘ā’ al-abā’ūl wa-amāniyy al-nufūs al-kādhiba*). Glossing *burhān* as *al-bayyān* and *al-ḥujja* and *al-bayyina*, al-Ṭabarī goes on to explain that God deemed Jews and Christians liars in their claim and saying, as they were never able to produce – make present (*iḥḍār*) – *ḥujja* or *burhān* for this claim of an exclusive Paradisiacal promise. A few centuries after al-Ṭabarī, the rationalist and cumulative al-Rāzī also expounds upon the meaning and grammar of the verse, and cites a line of Arabic poetry in support of his conclusion that this belief of Jews and Christians is vain, as they were unable to produce (make present) their proof (*al-dalīl wa-l-burhān*):

man ad ‘ā shay’an bi-lā shāhid

lā budda an tabḥal da ‘wāhu

Unlike Muqātil, neither al-Ṭabarī nor al-Rāzī specifies from where the *burhān* must come. This is indicative of the milieu in which the later exegetes were writing: a multitude of belief systems were engaged in conversation with

one another, in which reason and “proofs” other than scriptural could be invoked in support of a particular position. Writing in the Persianate realms of the Islamic world during and after the major works of Greek philosophy had been translated into Arabic, both later exegetes preserve the scriptural/traditional/theological, rational and grammatical traditions that were employed in the exegesis of a given verse.

Muqātil, on the other hand, is writing at a time in which the previous scriptures, as well as the life and times of Muhammad himself, were common tools at the service of the exegetes. In this context, it is interesting to note the skepticism and censure with which Muqātil’s work has come to be viewed by some “orthodox” Muslim circles. Compared to the extensive and detailed exposition of the 30+ volumes of both al-Ṭabarī and al-Rāzī, Muqātil’s four volumes pale in comparison: a number of verses are simply not glossed in his commentary, making for a rather modestly sized work of exegesis. But it is not its length, but the sources, that have been at the root of the hesitancy (in recent discussions) to rely on Muqātil’s *tafsīr*.

Muqātil is known for his reliance on the so-called “tales of the Children of Israel” (*isrāʾīliyyāt*) in order to support or clarify a particular qurʾānic verse or a certain understanding thereof. In keeping with the qurʾānic exhortation to “ask those who were given the book before you”, Muqātil seems to have turned to “those who were previously given the book” – the Jews and Christians – for further information/clarification for particular verses. As time went on, Islamic theological discussions were cemented and political circumstances evolved, the

books of the Jews and the Christians, and the Jews and the Christians themselves, came to be viewed with greater skepticism by normative Islam. Such fallible sources were therefore looked upon askance. But, as the employment – in the formative period of Islam - of qur'ānic verses on the part of Christian apologists such as our three authors demonstrates, Christians (and, presumably, Jews), were not strangers to qur'ānic exegesis. And, their writings may shed light on traditions preserved not only in the writings of “suspect” exegetes such as Muqātil, but also those preserved in the works “approved” by later Islamic orthodoxy.

In addition to Q 4:171 and 3:59 (discussed above), Theodore and the anonymous author of Sinai Ar. 434 both reference Q 2:111. This verse is referenced in the course of the anonymous monk's response to the third question in Sinai Ar. 434. Following a discussion in which the biblical mentions of Jesus' “signs” (*āyāt*) is shown to be substantiated through none other than a *qur'ānic* attestation to the veracity of the Bible – and Jesus as the “word of God”, the author of Sinai Ar. 434 asks, “What is stronger as a proof (*burhānan*) than these proofs?” The anonymous monk's allusion to Q 2:111 is in keeping with a traditional exegetical understanding of this verse as referring to a “scriptural” – divinely inspired – “proof”, demonstrating his familiarity with Muslim exegetical – and theological? – discussions, echoing his allusion to scriptural proofs (and references to such concepts as *hāfīz/tafsīr*).

Q 2:111 is also invoked at the beginning of Theodore's discourse – but by the caliph himself. In response to the assertion of his Hāshimī interlocutor, that

the equivalence of “the Messiah, the word of God and his spirit which he sent into Mary” is that of Adam: “he created him from dust” (Q 3:59) and “he blew into him of his spirit” (Q 32:9), Abū Qurra is initially silent, hesitant to speak until the Commander of the Faithful commands him to do so. To reassure Abū Qurra, the caliph says that his is a *majlis* of “justice, equity and proof” (*‘adl wa-inṣāf wa-burhān*). He elaborates this designation, stating that Abū Qurra will be answered in only the “best way” (*bi-allatī hiya aḥsan*, cf. Q 29:46), concluding by saying that “This is the day of proof (*yawm burhān*) in which the truth (*al-ḥaqq*) will be made manifest (*yūḍah*); whoever has the verification of his religion (*taḥqīq dīnī*), let him speak”.

Although far from ignorant of the scriptures and scriptural authority for and attestation to Christian ‘truths’, neither Theodore nor the author of Sinai Ar. 434 restricts himself to scriptural - qur’ānic or biblical – “proofs”. The understanding of “*burhān*” does not, however, appear identical for the anonymous author of Sinai Ar. 434 and Theodore. Whereas the anonymous monk cites the qur’ānic “verification” - of not only the Gospel (and its stories of Jesus’ “signs”), but also of Jesus as the very word of God - as the “proof of proofs”, Theodore proffers a highly rational, syllogistic argument as his “proof” against the qur’ānic/Islamic assertion of the “equivalence” of Adam and Christ (discussed above). While the author of Sinai Ar. 434 (for whom, however, rational argumentation is not a foreign concept) appears to stay close to the qur’ānic understanding of a scriptural *burhān*, Theodore reaches into the “neutral” territory of rational – logical – argumentation to produce his *burhān*.

This is in keeping with the caliph's 'open' invitation for bringing the truth to light in his just and equitable *majlis*.

In the course of Sinai Ar. 434, the anonymous monk in Jerusalem, in his response to a *Contra naṣārā* tract, is more hesitant to show the logical flaws of anything contained in the Muslim scripture. While he is not shy about citing the Qur'ān, he does so only to support a Christian position. He attempts to reconcile apparent divergences between the Christian Bible (Hebrew and New Testaments) and the Qur'ān, by putting a Christian gloss on qur'ānic passages. Never seeming to question the received text of the Qur'ān, he is bent on showing the logic of – and, in fact, the need for – the Incarnation and the Trinity. Writing at a time in which the divine template for the Qur'ān had come to be understood as the uncreated, eternal word of God, and in which an allegorical understanding of the Qur'ān itself was heavily frowned upon, this tactic is not surprising. In such an atmosphere, particularly if the Crusades are borne in mind, careful defense of Christianity, with an explicit need not to offend Muslim sensibilities, would seem the more prudent course of action. If Muslims were coming to feel threatened from outside, and if Christians were in a tenuous position, and if Islamic orthodoxy itself had already been formulated in such a way as to discourage alternative readings/understandings of scripture, a blatant attack on perceived flaws within the Islamic position would not be advisable.

In contradistinction with the anonymous monk of Sinai Ar. 434, however, Theodore is not above using the tools of logic to show the weaknesses of the Islamic arguments. While the Jerusalem monk uses logic in support of the

Christian positions (a tendency of Theodore, as well), Theodore also uses logic to attack the Muslim positions. This is perhaps reflective of the milieu in which Theodore lived, the memory of which is evoked by this debate. For, in the time of the *miḥna*, rational, philosophical theological discussions were evoked, as well as those of a pietistic, traditionalist nature. In the discipline of *kalām*, the allegorical, rather than the literal, meaning of the scripture came to be emphasized. And, the Qurʾān itself was viewed as ‘created in time’ – by the Muʿtazila (whose interpretation al-Maʾmūn favored), a position that encouraged ‘human’ interpretation beyond the inscribed words and could allow for the possibility of a human hand to be a factor in the transcription and transmission of the sacred text itself. When the caliph terms the day of the debate a “day of *burhān*”, neither Theodore nor his Muslim interlocutors appears to have understood this as a call for a battle of the scriptures alone. Rather, they employ both rational and scriptural ‘proof’ - both in support of their own positions, as well as against those of their opponents.

And, although Paul does not invoke Q 2:111, nor (in Khoury’s edition) employ the term “*burhān*”, he explicitly cites the utility of employing the Qurʾān in the Christian apologetic agenda (while also acknowledging the criticisms that Muslims have of such Christian “prooftexting”):

“If we take arguments (*ḥujja*) from those that are in the book (i.e. the Qurʾān), the Muslims say: ‘If you take an argument from one part of our book, you must accept it in its entirety.’ ... Our strongest arguments (*ḥujja*) are those we find in the book brought by this messenger, which testify in our favor ... How, then, could you ask us to abandon that which is in our hands ... to follow someone

who was sent, not for us, but for others, as it says clearly in the book (i.e. the Qur'ān), and which the demonstration of reason (*dalīl al-‘aql*) shows? ...”⁸

Does Paul indirectly answer the question that opened this section? Would Arabophone Christians have seen the Qur'ān as a *burhān* – and for Christian truths? Would this have implications for Christian estimations of the veracity, or validity, of the Qur'ān – either as the original “recitation” known to Muhammad, or in the version(s) known to later generations?

Following along these lines, our three authors demonstrate a marked difference in their willingness to cite selectively from the Muslim scripture. For example, while Theodore expressly and explicitly turns the traditional Muslim accusation that Christians (and Jews) have ‘corrupted’ their scriptures against his Muslim interlocutors, saying that some parts of the Qur'ān were not sanctioned – or uttered – by Muḥammad⁹, Paul only goes so far as to defend his selective use of Qur'ān citations, *implying* that some parts of the Qur'ān are more valid than others.¹⁰ He also acknowledges Muslim criticism of such selective proofs. The anonymous author of Sinai Ar. 434, however, does not venture into the realm of Qur'ānic criticism, preferring to allow the scriptures to speak for themselves – always respectfully, and always in support of Christian truths.

The significance of these nuances is seen when a later rendition of Paul's letter is compared to his letter to a Muslim friend, in which version any allusion to some parts of the Qur'ān as being preferable to others is carefully omitted.

⁸ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, pars. 45-47.

⁹ Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 108 (discussed above).

¹⁰ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, pars. 45-47, cited in full below.

For Paul's 'Muslim friend' was most certainly not the only set of eyes to peruse his text – as demonstrated, for example, by al-Qarāfi's "Proud answers to insolent questions" – a 7th/13th century Egyptian response to his letter. In 712/1321, a letter from Christians in Cyprus was sent to Shams al-Dīn Abū 'Abdallāh Muḥammad b. Abī Ṭālib al-Aṣārī al-Ṣūfī, a Muslim scholar in Damascus. The 'Cypriot Christians' modeled their letter on Paul's text, but with some significant editorial emendations. One of these was the almost complete omission of paragraphs 45-47 of Khoury's edition of Paul's letter that we have been following, and which contain reference to Muslim criticisms of Christian "prooftexting" of the Qur'ān, and the metaphor of a note of debt that has been paid (discussed below).

Might the omission of this passage indicate that the Cypriot Christians – or, rather, the editor of their 'letter' – thought it best not to offend Muslim sensibilities by even implying that some parts of the text were more valid than others? In fact, the later version of the letter only includes the reference to the Qur'ānic mention of God's recognizing Christians above unbelievers (Q 3:55) and the passage taken from Q 4:171, mentioning Jesus as the spirit and word of God – Qur'ānic citations, without any sort of qualifying gloss, unlikely to offend Muslim sensibilities. Writing after the Mongol destruction of Baghdad, in the milieu that would produce the famous reformer of Islamic orthopraxis, Ibn Taymiyya (in fact, it is al-Dimashqī's response to the Cypriot's letter that Ibn Taymiyya references in his *Radd 'alā l-naṣārā*)¹¹, such caution was merited – at least, if Ibn

¹¹ See the edition of Thomas and Ebied.

Taymiyya's strong assertions are any indication of the general feeling of 'normative' Islam towards not only non-Muslims, but – perhaps more pertinently – towards non-orthodox Muslims and their beliefs or practices in the wake of the destruction of the caliphal seat.

But the trajectory from Theodore to Paul is what interests us here. What does Theodore's allusion to qur'ānic *tahrīf* tell us of the milieu in which he was writing? What does Paul's oblique assertion that some parts of the Qur'ān are more 'valid' than others – at least, from a Christian perspective – say about the purpose of his writing? What conclusions might we draw from the relative silence of the author of Sinai Ar. 434 in Jerusalem when commenting on Islam's book?

While Theodore appears to have been actively engaged in – or, at the very least, knowledgeable of – Muslim discussions concerning the formation – compilation, collection and codification – of the sacred text of Islam, such discussions seem to have been resolved by the time that Paul and the Jerusalem author of Sinai Ar. 434 were writing. For, while Paul does allude to a certain 'preference' for some qur'ānic verses over others, it is clear that he does so only from the perspective of a *Christian* reading of the Qur'ān. He makes no attempt to contextualize his claims about the relative merit of qur'ānic verses in a larger milieu, with reference to any Muslim arguments about the relative merits of qur'ānic verses. And the Jerusalem monk who wrote Sinai Ar. 434 – perhaps also due to the nature of his discussion (explicit defense of Christian doctrines, as opposed to Paul's attempted justification of why Christians – particularly

‘foreign’ [non-Arab] Christians - need not convert to Islam) – never touches on the merits of the Qur’ān itself. Might, therefore, as posited in Chapter Five, scholars of the Qur’ān mine Christian Arabic texts for additional hints as to the textual history of the Qur’ān, and the circulation of non-Uthmanic codices thereof?

Qur’ān: Arabic book of God, Muhammad or Muslims?

Despite their varying emphases in argumentation, and seemingly disparate evaluations of the ‘merits’ – or authenticity - of (parts of) the Muslim scripture, how did the anonymous monk of Sinai Ar. 434 and Theodore and Paul allude to the Qur’ān? Was it ever considered from God, or as among the “books of God”?

For all three of our authors, both Jews and Muslims are misguided in their refusal to accept Jesus Son of Mary as the Messiah. And, while our Christian authors are equally critical of Jews’ and Muslims’ refusal to listen to the testimony of their own scriptures on this matter, their estimations of these scriptures are not the same. For Theodore and the author of Sinai Ar. 434, the divine “books” are certainly the Torah (and the “prophets”) and the Injil, as well as the Psalms. For example, Theodore and the anonymous monk allude to Isaiah as “the prophet”¹², and, in one instance, Theodore speaks of the Bani Isra’īl as God’s *umma* and his prophets – that is, prior to the coming of the Christ¹³; in all three of our texts, while David or other prophets from the Hebrew Bible would

¹² Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 122; Sinai Ar. 434, f. 174v.

¹³ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 123.

have the appellation “*al-nabiyy*” following their name: “the prophet”¹⁴, Muhammad is termed “the messenger” – “*al-rasūl*”; both of these categories are distinct from that of Christ’s apostles – termed in our three Christian Arabic texts with the qur’ānic designation of “God’s helpers” – *anṣār Allāh* - or *ḥawāriyūn*. But, the interpretation and function of those books that preceded the New Testament is, in the Christian reading, to prove, foretell and validate the Christian understanding of the Divine Unity, in three persons – and Jesus as the Messiah, for example: “The book of the Torah knew that God is one *jawhar*, manifest in many *aqānīm*”¹⁵ and “In the Torah, Moses called God Father... and in the Psalms, what the ancient Hebrews mentioned, that the word of God is his wisdom, and the holy spirit is his knowledge.”¹⁶ Similarly, Paul’s references to the biblical books of the Children of Israel fall into two categories: either as testimony against the Jews (Psalm 106)¹⁷, or as vindication for Christian Trinitarian and Christological categories (Deuteronomy, Genesis, Psalms, Job; and, in the New Testament, Luke and Matthew)¹⁸. But, far more frequent are his allusions to the *Qur’ān* as validation of Christian theological categories. Might this be due to a real presence – and pressure / challenge – of Muslims, as opposed to Jews?

But, for our Christian authors, even when they are citing the Qur’ān as proof of the veracity of Christianity, are they deeming this Arabic recitation as

¹⁴ e.g. Sinai Ar. 434, f. 174 r: David the prophet; 174v, 175r, 176v: Isaiah; 178r: Micah, Jeremiah.

¹⁵ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 172 v.

¹⁶ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 173 r.

¹⁷ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, par. 19.

¹⁸ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, par. 30.

from God, as one of his books? Paul speaks of “our Gospel” and “our books”¹⁹ as seemingly separate categories. Whether the “books” of which he speaks are the ‘Old’ Testament and/or the ‘New’ Testament books other than the Gospels is difficult to precise from the passage at hand. What is certain, however, is that the Qur’ān is not included in this category – but, in Paul’s estimation, the Qur’ānic assertion that it has come to “confirm” what came before, of the Torah and the Injīl (Q 3:3), as well as the exhortation, when in doubt, to “ask those who read the book before” (Q 10:94), vindicates “our Gospel” and “our books” against the charge of corruption - *tabdīl* and *taghyīr* – a theme that Theodore, too, addresses (see chapter 5). In response to those who would say that perhaps the changes came after the revelation of the Qur’ān²⁰, Paul maintains that the very fact of the diffusion and translation of “our books” already for six centuries prior to the Qur’ān preserves them from subsequent alteration: for how could anyone change all of the existing versions? When speaking of the Qur’ān, does Paul say “this book”²¹ or “this messenger” (*hadhā l-rasūl*) and “the book you have that he brought” (*al-kitāb alladhi ātā bi-hi ‘indikum*), “their book”²² or “the book” (*al-kitāb*)²³ – as a mere rhetorical device? Or because it is clear from the context that he intends his letter to be a guide to a Christian reading of the *Qur’ān*, and in support of Christianity?

The anonymous monk of Sinai Ar. 434 speaks of the “books of God”, and appears willing to include the Qur’ān in this category. But, while he will speak of

¹⁹ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, par. 14.

²⁰ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, par. 15.

²¹ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, pars. 24, 31, 46.

²² Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, par. 45.

²³ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, pars. 6, 7, 8, 29, 32, 36, 38, 40, 46, 47, 48.

the “Injīl”²⁴ (as the Messiah’s book²⁵) or the “Tawrāt”²⁶ or the “Zabūr”²⁷ or even the “Anbiyā’”²⁸ without any further qualification, he also terms the Qur’ān “your book” or “(your) Qur’ān”²⁹.

Likewise, for Theodore, the Qur’ān is often termed “your book”³⁰, and Muhammad “your messenger / prophet”³¹ – and, once, “the messenger”³², as well as “the Qur’ān”³³ or “your Qur’ān”³⁴, or “your saying”³⁵. And, these are also identified with “your religion”³⁶ – i.e., Islam (as opposed to the religion of Theodore, Christianity³⁷). Additionally, Muhammad – rather than God - is said to have written/said³⁸ in “his book”³⁹. But, in points of Christian doctrine that Theodore reads the Qur’ān as supporting, qur’ānic phrases are attributed to God.⁴⁰ Additionally, “Islam” itself is said to confess that the Messiah (whom Theodore follows and whose commandments he keeps) is the word of God and his spirit – and that he is of the *dhāt* and *jawhariyya* of the Creator, uncreated.⁴¹ While Theodore invokes the book(s) of the Children of Israel in support of

²⁴ e.g. Sinai Ar. 434, ff. 177r, 178v, 181r.

²⁵ e.g. Sinai Ar. 434, f. 178v.

²⁶ e.g. Sinai Ar. 434, ff. 172v, 173r, 173v.

²⁷ Sinai Ar. 434, ff. 173r.

²⁸ Sinai Ar. 434, ff. 173r, 176v, 181r.

²⁹ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 174v, 178v: your Qur’ān; 177r, 177v, 181r.

³⁰ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 80, 86, 87, 89, 90, 91, 93, 96, 97, 99, 101, 107, 108, 111, 114, 115.

³¹ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 74, 77, 79, 80, 84, 85, 87, 91, 93, 101, 107, 108, 115, 117.

³² Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 109.

³³ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 80, 96.

³⁴ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 96, 121.

³⁵ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 83, 84, 98.

³⁶ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 91.

³⁷ cf. eg. Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 99.

³⁸ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 79, 80, 87.

³⁹ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 79; cf. 91.

⁴⁰ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 90, 101.

⁴¹ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 90.

Christian theological categories, he clearly deems the “*Injil*” as having superceded the “*Tawrāt*”.⁴²

What, then, happens to the category of “scripture” when Christians are confronted with a book that claims divine provenance, and which can be read as respecting and validating Jesus – and his mother – over and against the calumny of the Jews, but which also adamantly denies any divinity, or divine sonship, to Christ? How would theological claims work themselves out in a milieu in which Christians were “protected” by the state who claimed this book as their scripture – and which - legally – placed Christians on a par with Jews, but not quite equal to Muslims?

Qur’ānic prooftexts?

For our purposes, what might the willingness of all three of our authors to turn to the Qur’ān for support of their arguments say of the estimation of the Qur’ān – among both Christians and Muslims? How, in the final analysis, might Christian Arabophone authors’ terming of the Qur’ān as among the “books of God” be understood? While the author of Sinai Ar. 434 seems to cite the Qur’ān *in its received form* as an authority of equal weight to that of the Bible (even though his interpretations of the verses he cites are not always compatible with a Muslim reading thereof), and could be understood to include the Qur’ān in the “books of God”, Paul is careful to invoke qur’ānic support of why Christians should not, in fact, abandon the *Injil* for the Qur’ān, and Theodore’s text (which consistently specifies the Qur’ān as “your Qur’ān” and Muhammad as “your

⁴² Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 71.

prophet”) goes so far as to point out inaccuracies or infelicities in the received qur’ānic text (and Muslim interpretations thereof).

If the three texts under examination here are, in fact, attempts to prove the merits (veracity and continued validity) of Christianity, how, then, should we understand the qur’ānic *burhān* put forth by our – Christian - authors? Paul and the anonymous monk explicitly address their employment of the Qur’ān, in slightly different ways:

When Paul’s foreign Christian interlocutors state: “We are blameless and commit no error [in our understandings of God] when we do not abandon that which we have received, nor refuse that which was transmitted to us, in order to follow something else – especially when we have these clear testimonies and evident proofs taken from the book that this messenger brought,”⁴³ he responds⁴⁴: “If we take arguments from that which is in their book, the Muslims say: ‘If you take argument from one part of our book, you must accept all of it.’”, to which the foreign Christians reply: “This is not the question. Rather, if, for example, someone takes from another a receipt for a 100 dinar debt, and it is stated therein that the debtor has paid it off, if the creditor then comes and shows the receipt, attempting to claim 100 dinars from the (former) debtor, would it be permitted, with the debtor arguing from the receipt that he had already paid the debt, for the creditor to say ‘Since you admit the last clause, you must also admit the clause that says you owe 100 dinars, and return them to me’? Not at all – rather, the (former) debtor will be held absolved of the 100 dinars written on the receipt, on account of what was also written in the receipt: namely, that he had paid the debt. In the same fashion, whatever one charges or holds against us from this book, we repudiate with the book, as well – from what we find therein of proofs for us. This is why we say that our strongest arguments are those which we find in the book brought by this messenger, and which testify in our favor, that God has placed us ‘above the infidels until the day of resurrection’ for having followed the Lord Christ, ‘spirit of God and his Word’; that we are ‘the friends closest to those who believe’ and that God ‘has placed in our hearts mercy and piety’; along with the great praise that it gives to our Gospel and our Books, to our monasteries and our churches; in sum, that nobody has the advantage over us; and other things, which do not charge us with anything but our merit and the honesty of our deeds.” Paul continues⁴⁵ (apparently still in the words of the foreign Christians), asking “how, then, it could be permitted or good to abandon their traditions, including the ‘Table’ that God sent as “a feast for the first and the

⁴³ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, par. 44.

⁴⁴ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, pars. 45-47.

⁴⁵ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, par. 48.

last [of the Christians?], and a sign from Him" (Q 5:114), when [the book] threatens them that, were they to become unbelievers, they would have to endure "a torment unlike that inflicted upon anyone in the worlds", should they follow that which had come not to them, but to others, as it says clearly in the book and for which is found proof from reason which is like the touchstone and standard?"

The anonymous monk of Jerusalem, who also invokes arguments both from scripture and the works of Greek philosophers, gives pride of place to the scriptural arguments:

Whoever does not read the revealed books of God will put forth out of ignorance what he does not know, but for the intelligent, reasonable, learned *ḥāfīz*, he will understand because I did not arrive at this from my own reasoning, but rather from the books of God my lord, and what they teach, as came to me from his apostles – to him glory forever! Amen!"⁴⁶

For, (concerning the actions of the divine nature of Christ)

"in the Qur'ān there is much of this, and this [proof] is sufficient, thus there is no need to prolong the discussion (*mā fī ḥāja ilayhi idh anta ta'arrifahu li'allā aṭīl al-kalām fīhi*). What could be a stronger *burhān* than these, or a mightier *dalīl* than the elucidation of the Messiah and his deeds from his own *umma*, the Jews, when the world and the Injīl and the Prophets and the Qur'ān and devils and the Angels and the dead on the day of his crucifixion testified to the signs of the Messiah and his glory?"⁴⁷

And, although Theodore's text contains no such blatant reference to his methodology, he, too, (sometimes highly selectively) employs the Qur'ān in support of Christian beliefs – and (as seen especially in Chapter Five) goes further than Paul and the anonymous monk in criticizing the received text of the Qur'ān, as well as Muslim interpretations thereof. Al-Ma'mūn assures him that his is

⁴⁶ Sinai Ar. 434, ff. 174v – 175r.

⁴⁷ Sinai Ar. 434, f. 179r.

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 except that it [might] be a better proof (cf. Q 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. Q 2:111), in which the truth is to be made clear. So whoever is in possession of the verification of his religion, let him speak.⁴⁸

And, periodically, Theodore reminds his Muslim interlocutors (notably, never is the caliph portrayed as mistreating him – he even dismisses from the *majlis* a Muslim participant who insults Abū Qurra: a certain Salām b. Mu‘āwiyya al-Hamazānī⁴⁹) both of their proper demeanor, and their misinterpretation of scripture:

...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 and hostility you harbor feelings of hatred against me, and you will not listen, then listen now to what your own scripture utters. Do not act haughtily against me, or disdainfully, out of concession, once it is clear to you from your scripture you should address me “only in the best way” (cf. Q 29:46), just as your prophet commanded you in your scripture, speaking to the 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*”. But you, due to your conceit, 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, and your defamation of us. 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...⁵⁰

Theodore’s Muslim interlocutors are portrayed as baffled and overcome⁵¹:

O Commander of the Faithful, Abū Qurra’s religion is genuinely old and its adherent is neither weary or 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, at which my thinking is baffled, and for which I have no answer.”

⁴⁸ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 72.

⁴⁹ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 81-82.

⁵⁰ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 74-75.

⁵¹ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 80.

To which al-Ma'mūn responds: "Abū Qurra is a sea of knowledge; it is impossible for anyone to withstand him in *kalām* or in the knowledge of religions."

And, indeed, Theodore's interlocutors are unable to refute his charge:

Whoever wants to boast of his religion and to maintain that God has guided him away from error into the light, must explain what his religion enjoins and give proof of it by means of disclosing some sign available to him, that God discloses in his religion, for the purpose of specifying its superiority over any other one. You are only boasting of your sovereignty, your swagger, and the smart appearance of your religion, O Muslim, and you find fault with our religion. That is something that rebounds against you, because your own scripture testifies in behalf of the Messiah, my lord and my God, and in behalf of God, the one called upon to give help to you.⁵²

Thus, Paul, the anonymous monk and Theodore, each invoke the Qur'ān in support of the truth of Christian doctrine, as well as Christian persistence in adhering to the "religion of the Messiah", even after the advent of Muhammad: whether because the religion of Muhammad and the Qur'ān – Islam – was properly for Arabs of the *jāhiliyya* (Paul), or because the very prophet of Islam and his scripture commended Christian beliefs and practices (Paul, the anonymous monk and Theodore) – even if Muslims themselves gave the lie to their own scripture in such matters (particularly Theodore). There are differences in emphasis: Theodore vanquishes his opponents through his skill in logical reasoning – in which effort his knowledge of scripture and larger tradition is employed, albeit disingenuously, at times; the Jerusalem monk, on the other hand, focuses heavily on explicit scriptural references (again, giving selective readings) to support his arguments; while Paul (who also presents

⁵² Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 99.

logical arguments) will site truncated passages of scripture, he engages in less obvious re-readings thereof than do either Theodore or the anonymous monk of Jerusalem. The extent to which these differences indicate that the earlier texts (Theodore and the monk) reflect a more fluid state of the qur'ānic text, or an environment in which the text was handled with greater fluidity, will likely remain a matter of speculation. But, given the professed intentions of the Christian authors (to read qur'ānic validation, rather than censorship, of Christians and Christianity), any attempt to use Christian Arabic renditions of qur'ānic passages as indicators for the circulation of non-Uthmanic codices, or reading variants that Islamic tradition has not preserved, must be done with great caution, and in conjunction with a close examination of their handling of biblical texts.

The extent to which "Islam" (and Arabification) would come to shape and/or be shaped by Christians (and others) who would come to speak Arabic and live under "Islamic" dominion, but not adopt the religion of their rulers, will likely never be precisely ascertained. Would Christians – as a demographic majority – have approached, and perceived, "Islam" (especially in the early years of Arab/Muslim rule) differently from their co-religionists in later centuries, and different circumstances? Likely. Whether demographic, but not political, dominance would have given a more or less sympathetic attitude towards Islam – or Muslims – or the Qur'ān – might largely depend on the individual in question (as exemplified in the differing tones of Theodore's and Paul's tracts). Similarly, the extent to which an individual believing Christian would have been

willing, or able, to consider the Qurʾān (in its “original”, if not received, form) as being “of” or “from” God would likely depend on the individual in question (compare Theodore and the anonymous monk here; the extent to which our interpretations of the written text that has come down to us, however, unlocks what was truly in the heart or mind of the author is for God alone to know).

Further, while passages such as those just quoted may indeed reflect aspects of the larger socio-political, as well as theological, context in which their authors lived (themes I hope to pursue in the future: for example, what, exactly, is meant by the “smart appearance” of the “religion” of “Islam” in Theodore’s text?), that these texts were written, and circulated, in Arabic, should also be borne in mind. How oppressive, exactly, was the dominion of “Islam” if Christians could – and did – so openly criticize “Islam”, “Muslims” – even, seemingly, at times, the prophet Muhammad? (Recall the brief discussion in Chapter 6 of Theodore’s allusion to *‘jihād’* – casually, and as a technical term, rather than with the frightened tenor that not infrequently marks contemporary discussions of this concept.) The present discussion attempted a comparison of a selection of Arabophone Christian uses of qurʾānic verses read as referencing (explicitly or implicitly) Christianity, Judaism and non-Judeo-Christian themes. In the final analysis, it may be posited that Christian Arabic use of qurʾānic passages in apologetic defenses of Trinitarian and messianic/Christological positions are an indicator of the importance of such discussions in Late Antique - and early Islamic – societies. As such, they may elucidate the fact, if not the details, of theological cross-fertilization – particularly in those eras and areas in

which Christians were active participants in, and a significant portion of, the Arabic-speaking, Muslim-ruled world.

In their (re)reading of qur'ānic passages that are understood explicitly to reference Christians/Christianity, might our authors guide us to an understanding of how the Qur'ān's earliest auditors may have heard such passages? For, the Qur'ān is both a self-aware and conversant scripture (text or revelation). It is critically engaged with the society in which it was first revealed, and the various monotheistic trends therein. Who the Christians and Jews known to Muhammad, his first followers and the Qur'ān were is difficult to discern from the qur'ānic text, which often appears more interested in critiquing, correcting and praising the current (or historical) beliefs and practices of those with whom the first community of believers/Muslims interacted than in providing a detailed description of the various groups or individuals.

With respect to the attitudes of individuals or communities towards God, his messenger(s), scripture(s), and the "*umma*" that heeded the final prophet, "believer" "enemy" "hypocrite" "ally" "pious" "sin(ner)" are among the categorical descriptors the Qur'ān employs⁵³, rather than "orthodox" or "heterodox" "jacobite" "melkite" "Nestorian", etc. But, the Qur'ān is situated in an Arabophone Late Antique environment and, as such, was an active participant in Jewish-Christian, intra-Christian, and mono-polytheist discussions.

⁵³ cf. Kassis, *Concordance*, 1430 (for the various qur'ānic lexemes that denote 'sin': esp. *z-l-m* [1341-46], *'-th-m* [196-97], *k-b-r* [625-27], *dh-n-b* [396], *j-r-m* [606-7]); cf. also s.vv. "*'-m-n*" (149-64), "*w-q-y*" (1285-90), "*'-d-w*" (221-24), "*n-f-q*" (821-22), "*w-l-y*" (1276-81), "*f-h-sh*" (423), "*kh-t*" (714-15); for aspects of the qur'ānic references in question; cf. also *EQ*, s.v. "Sin, Major and Minor"; "Faith"; "Enemies"; "Belief and Unbelief"; "Friendship and Friends"; "Hypocrites and Hypocrisy."

And these were discussions with which early Arabophone Christian authors were themselves already intimately familiar. Thus, when they chanced upon the Arabic Qur'ān, they readily picked up on those passages that echoed the discussions already familiar to them from general Late Antique inter/intra-religious disputations.

But, what was of particular interest to the present discussion is that Arabophone Christians did not stop at those qur'ānic passages that are understood in Islamic tradition explicitly to reference Christians/Christianity. Our Arabophone Christian authors' discussions of passages such as Q 2:1 and 1:6-7 indicate they were party to the discussions that gave rise to normative Islamic exegesis thereof. And, in cases such as Q 108 or 111, Arabophone Christian texts may indeed shed light on Islamic exegesis of "difficult" passages, including the history of how such passages came to be understood as "difficult" in the first place, not excluding the possibility of the circulation of various wordings thereof – or, the various wordings thereof may indicate the difficulty inherent therein, grammatically or theologically.

Utility of Christian Arabic texts for Qur'ānic Studies

What might early Christian Arabic texts that utilize the Qur'ān in their apologetic (and/or polemic) agenda tell us of the text of, and/or approaches to, the Qur'ān, in the early Islamic centuries? By reading Arabic texts – Christian or Muslim – of an early provenance, we may be able better to hear the Qur'ān as its

first auditors did⁵⁴. The writings of Christians in Arabic can correct or enhance our understanding of trends within both the Christian and the Islamic worlds. Just as the Qurʾān (and, presumably, its first auditors) is familiar with trends within the Jewish or Christian communities of the eastern reaches of the Roman Empire (and beyond) that are unfamiliar to many from the Latin world – such as the “Sleepers of Ephesus”⁵⁵ or “Martyrs of Najrān”⁵⁶ – the Christians who first engaged the Qurʾān in its own language were familiar with trends in the Islamic and Christian worlds. Reading their writings, and seeing the Qurʾān and the early Islamic world through their eyes, may complement and nuance, and redefine, contemporary discussions of Late Antique, early Islamic, or even late Patristic trends. Christians writing in Arabic bridged the Hellenic and Semitic worlds; similarly, the Qurʾān may be considered an Arabic closing parenthesis to the Late Antique world, but also a bridge to, and continuation of, the cultural exchanges arguably initiated by the expeditions, and conquests, of Alexander the Great⁵⁷ (with whom, in some interpretations, the Qurʾān also seems familiar⁵⁸, and which has parallels to a 6th century Syriac Christian hymn attributed to Jacob of Serugh, which extols the virtues of Alexander the

⁵⁴ Cf. Madigan, “People of the Word.”

⁵⁵ Q 18:9-26; cf. the discussion of Jacob of Serugh’s *memre* on the same in Sebastian P. Brock, “Saints in Syriac: A Little-Tapped Resource,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 16/2 (2008): 181-96.

⁵⁶ Q 85; cf. Irfan Shahīd, *The Martyrs of Najran: New Documents, Subsidia hagiographica no. 49* (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1971).

⁵⁷ Cf. e.g. W.Y. Evans-Wentz, *Alexander the Great: An Account of his Life and Exploits from Ethiopic Sources and Other Writings* (London: Kegan Paul, 2003).

⁵⁸ cf. Q 18:83-101 (some Shiite – Persian interpretations understand the Qurʾānic Dhū l-Qarnayn to be Cyrus the Great); Aziz al-Azmeh, “Rome, New Rome and Baghdad: Pathways of Late Antiquity,” March 5, 2008 Carl Heinrich Becker Lecture (Berlin: Fritz Thyssen Stiftung, 2008).

“believing king”⁵⁹). But, in contrast to their Latin or Greek (or Armenian) coreligionists, in the Arabic-speaking, Muslim-ruled world, Christians were no longer the ruling party; and, if they were allowed freedom to practice their faith, they were legally equated with Jews, and, theologically, challenged by the Qur’ān and later Islamic theological elaborations.

While, classically, Christians and Jews would speak in terms of “covenant”, the Qur’ān would term them “People of the Book” (perhaps ‘people of the word’ would better reflect some trends of the self-understanding of Jews and Christians, particularly as regards the understandings of the scriptures?)⁶⁰. And here, in an intriguing twist on a classic theme (interpreting previous scriptures – those of the Jews – as attesting to Christian theological categories), our Arabophone Christian authors employ the Qur’ān in the service of their own theological claims - even terming it among the “books of God”. (And, as discussed above, they continue to refute Judaism, even in their response to Islam.) Is this seeming categorization of the Qur’ān as among the “books of God” merely a disingenuous appropriation and prooftexting of the Qur’ān to further their own theological agendas? Or, were Arabophone Christians – as a demographic, if not political, majority – sufficiently engaged with, and part of, “Arabo-Islamic” civilizations that their articulations of their own – Christian – theology – may have resonated with and been defined by, if not even helped to define, “Islamic” categories in a fashion markedly different from that of their

⁵⁹ cf. Jacob of Serugh’s Syriac *memre* (metrical discourse) on Alexander in E.A. Wallis Budge, *The History of Alexander the Great: Being the Syriac Version of Pseudo Callisthenes* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2005).

⁶⁰ Madigan, “People of the Word.”

Greek – or Latin – counterparts? Theologically, aspects of qur’ānic (and Islamic) doctrine are interwoven, and appropriated by our Christian authors, to the extent that they do not contradict fundamentals of Christian doctrine⁶¹. But, as discussed above, in those areas in which a “clear” reading of the qur’ānic text would give the lie to Christian tenets, there is a selective re-reading, or re-interpretation.

The majority of their qur’ānic allusions in our texts were to passages that normative Islamic tradition understands as containing explicit references to Christians and/or Christianity. A number of these passages praise Christians or Christian beliefs; Islamic tradition is divided as to whether or not such praise should continue beyond the time of the qur’ānic revelation, or if it was limited to the centuries before Muhammad (or Paul and his ‘romanizing’ of Christ’s religion). But, others of these passages are correcting, challenging or criticizing Christian praxis or doctrine. Our Christian authors read the former as having general applicability, extending to contemporary Christians; as for the latter passages, our Arabophone Christians either defend Christians against the charges leveled at them by the Qur’ān and/or later Islamic tradition, or (re)read the passages in question in a manner that does not contain criticism of Christians/Christianity.

In keeping with their generally respectful tone, these re-readings are careful not to criticize the Qur’ān; that criticism which is apparent is leveled at the later Muslim community, for misinterpreting the qur’ānic statement. In these qur’ānic passages that contain explicit criticism of Christian doctrine, our

⁶¹ See the above quotation of Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 114-15.

authors not infrequently ignore the passage that criticizes Christian praxis or belief, and focus on those words that, in fact, accord with Christian doctrine. The exhortation not to say “three” of Q 4:171 is a case in point: in the course of their discussions, all three of our authors both emphatically assert their monotheism, and repeatedly utilize the combination of God’s “Spirit” and “Word” of the verse.

Further, again in keeping with their generally respectful tone, our authors tend to steer clear of qur’ānic passages that criticize Christians for beliefs which, in fact, normative Christianity would not hold (Jesus and Mary as “2 gods besides God”) – yet they willingly include as support for Christianity qur’ānic testimonies in favor of Christians/Christianity that normative Christian tradition does not include (e.g. Jesus’ making a bird out of clay and enlivening it with his breath). By and large, our Arabophone Christians’ discussions of these passages are not helpful for a reading of the Qur’ān – or Islamic interpretive traditions. Rather, they are clear examples of the charge that Paul reports: Christians selectively pick and choose from the Qur’ān to support their arguments.

In addition to explicit qur’ānic references to Christianity, however, our authors reference passages that they (and, in some instances, also Islamic tradition) understand as referring to Christians/Christianity. While some such discussions bear no relation to traditions preserved in normative Islamic discussions thereof (e.g. Theodore’s reporting/glossing of Q 10:82 and 8:7: God’s “verifying the truth with his Word *and His Spirit*”), other such discussions (e.g. of Q 2:1) complement allusions found in classical works of Muslim exegesis, and, in

some cases, may contribute to a fuller understanding of the development of the arguments that came to be “normative”. Such passages may either be interpreted as critical of Christianity by normative Islamic tradition (e.g. Q 1:7) or as having nothing to do with Christianity at all (e.g. Q 2:1).

In addition to these Christian-themed allusions, our authors also cite qur’ānic allusions to Jews. Whether these are explicit or implicit allusions, they are – generally – glossed with a very negative interpretation. As Islamic tradition, too, has not infrequently viewed Jews in a negative light – despite seemingly little theological conflict with Judaism, or Jewish doctrine – it was therefore posited that perhaps Christian anti-Jewish sentiment may have crept into certain Islamic theological interpretations early on, contextualizing some of the anti-Jewish sentiment found in Islamic tradition (and emphasized in some – political – discussions today).

And, finally, our authors also refer to passages that neither they nor Islamic tradition understands as referencing Christians and/or Christianity (e.g. Q 108 and 111, or the houris or Zayd’s wife). It is certain of these discussions that may be of particular interest to scholars of the Qur’ān and Islamic interpretive tradition, for they likely reflect trends current within contemporary Muslim circles – namely, passages that, either because of their contents or their style, posed interpretive challenges. For, here, too (just as in the first three categories: explicit or implicit qur’ānic references to Christians/Christianity, and Judaism), our Christian *mutakallimūn/mufasssirūn* evidence intimate familiarity with theological discussions of their Muslim contemporaries (the “uncreated”

nature of the – inimitable – Word of God; the relation of ‘essence’ and ‘attributes’ in God and His Beautiful Names; the challenges of discussing God without devolving into anthropomorphism; reconciling qur’ānic passages that indicate ‘unknowing’ on the part of God with his omniscience, as well as those in which the prophet Muhammad appears in a less-than-stellar light with his being the pre-eminent model of a believer; the distinction between *īmān* and *islām*). It therefore seems evident that these Christians who were intent on defending the truth and virtue of Christianity, including their Scripture, would likely have been very attuned to, and may also have contributed to, any discussions of infelicities in the inimitable and uncreated Word of God. That Christians were eventually prohibited from teaching the Qur’ān to their children may indicate something about the nature or success of their participation in such discussions; alternatively, such prohibition could have come at the urging of Christian prelates, in the light of (fears of) increasing conversions to Islam.⁶²

But, that these texts were written, and circulated, in Arabic, under Arabic-speaking Muslim rulers should not be forgotten. That fact indicates an environment in which Christians were free to challenge Muslims, despite their voiced laments. And, the multiplicity of interpretations or readings of the Qur’ān contained in such Christian Arabic texts as those that we have examined indicate an environment in which such dispute and discussion was alive and well.

⁶² See, for example, the “Apocalypse” of Samuel of Qalamun. As the accounts of the martyrs of Cordoba provide an example of Muslim and Christian officials working together in order to maintain a certain public order, such an hypothesis is not unprecedented.

Christians were a significant demographic presence in the Muslim-ruled, Arabic-speaking regions prior to the Mongol destruction of Baghdad, studying, working and living with Muslims, to the point of Christians' being forbidden from "teaching the Qur'ān to their children". Might such handling of the Qur'ān as that described above have led to such an injunction? Or, should we take at face value the reports of our Arabophone Christians' having 'vanquished' their Muslim disputants - and understand this prohibition as resulting from Christians' having been too fluidly conversant with the qur'ānic text for the comfort of their Muslim overlords?

Concluding remarks

What, exactly, was the place of the Arabophone Christians in early Islamic theological discussions, and vice versa? How would the "challenge of Islam" impact and define the theological understanding of Christians who came to speak in Arabic, the "clear/clarifying"⁶³ language of the Qur'ān? For, not only the Qur'ān, but also pre-Islamic Christian texts from communities that came under Muslim rule, attest to the divisions within the Christian community at the rise of Islam. One method of addressing such differences was "talking" through a problem with someone who held a different idea. Through such discourse, a deeper understanding might be reached. And, in such discussions, reason came to be heavily relied upon, as often the scriptural testimonies (or interpretations thereof) were not considered valid by the opposing side.⁶⁴ With the Islamic

⁶³ Cf. *EQ*, s.v. "Language and Style of the Qur'ān."

⁶⁴ Cook, "Origins of Kalām."

conquests, and the increasing facility in a common language – Arabic – by all who came under Muslim Arab rule, Christians could debate not only with a greater number of Christians, but also with Muslims.

Here, the cultural, liturgical – but also doctrinal – richness of the Greek and Oriental East should be recalled. Unlike the Latin West, which, while allowing a variety of liturgical rites, has had a single Apostolic See, and a resultant rather more uniform doctrinal and even cultural history, the Greek and Oriental dioceses have had three, or, eventually, four Apostolic Sees, and have encompassed an even greater diversity of cultures, liturgical languages and traditions, as well as doctrinal variety.

And, while Greek was the official language of the first six ecumenical (“world-wide”) councils preceding the rise of Islam, and called by the emperors, beginning with Nicea, called by Constantine, it was only after the Arab Islamic conquests that the doctrinally diverse “Oriental” Christian communities began to produce substantial apologetic (and polemic) literature. (Because they were, finally, free from the fears of domination by a Christian king who thought many of them heretical – or because they were faced with a new, and more pressing, challenge – that of Islam?) Thus, while Arabic and Islam may be understood to have severed the Oriental Christians from their Latin and Greek counterparts (and to have destroyed North African Christianity), the Arab Islamic empire can also be seen as continuing Alexander’s legacy, of uniting diverse peoples through a common culture.

The debates in Arabic, among Christians, and between Christians and Muslims, argue strongly for this Alexandrine legacy – but in a Christianized – messianic? - form. For, the unity of God and nature of al-Masīḥ ‘Isā b. Maryam figured prominently in such discussions. The Qur’ān knows a largely Hellenized world⁶⁵, but it also knows monotheistic theological issues (Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian; Jewish ‘calumny’ of Mary; Jesus as the Son of God? Trinity?).

At the outset of this undertaking, one thought had been to examine our three authors’ utilization of the Qur’ān for possible hints as to the form(s) in which the Qur’ān was known to them. A number of factors discouraged that undertaking: my own limitations (not, for example, being a hafiza); the numerous possible interferences in the centuries between our authors’ actual putting down of their thoughts and the form in which they have come to us; and the authors’ own seeming willingness to allude to the Qur’ān from memory, and to paraphrase it. While closer examination, not only of those passages frequently cited by our authors, but also those that appear only once, is most certainly in order, it is this very fact of a seeming casual, yet respectful, approach to the Qur’ān to which our attention should, ultimately, be drawn.

Textual manipulation and interpretation are ancient devices when attempting to trump an opponent’s argument. What strikes a modern reader of these Christian Arabic texts is the liberty that is taken when quoting the Qur’ān. Given contemporary sensibilities not to misquote the Qur’ān (the legacy of what came to be the accepted understanding of the Qur’ān as the uncreated and

⁶⁵ Cf. al-Azmeh, “Rome, New Rome and Baghdad.”

inimitable Word of God), apparent deviations from the received text are puzzling. But, two points should be kept in mind when reading these Christian Arabic texts: 1) these seeming liberties taken with the Qur'ān by our Christian authors are not dissimilar from Shi'i (and even early Sunni) approaches to the Uthmanic codex⁶⁶; 2) the Christians are equally lax in their biblical quotations. Does this indicate an intentional disregard of the Qur'ān, or Muslim understandings thereof? Does it mean that our authors were citing scripture (Bible or Qur'ān) from memory, approximating verses heard or learned at an earlier time? Or, at times, did our authors take interpretive liberties, and, while appearing to cite a verse, do so while also glossing it with a 'Christian' meaning (akin to Muslim 'readings' of biblical passages that contradict qur'ānic assertions: Christ calling God '*rabb*' – lord - in place of '*ab*' – father, etc.)⁶⁷?

The hypothesis that our Christian authors were citing from non-Uthmanic codices is difficult to support. But, the Christian resort to reason and scripture point to the early days of Islamic theological discourse, when not only various groups of Muslims were debating with one another, but Muslims were also debating with members from other communities – the exact situation our texts draw upon as the setting for their compositions. Perhaps the most influential period for later theological discourse is the *miḥna* and its aftermath, in which the position of the 'people of *sunna* and *ḥadīth*' took precedence over that of those who asserted God's 'unity and justice', and who 'withdrew' from the debates on

⁶⁶ See Modaressi, "Early Debates."

⁶⁷ See, for example, Adang, *Muslim Writers*, for discussion of Ibn Hazm's use of biblical texts.

the fate of a Muslim who was also a grave sinner (the Mu‘tazila position, which al-Ma‘mūn attempted to enforce through the *miḥna*).

Al-Ma‘mūn’s caliphate marks a unique period in Islamic history: the translation of Greek (and other) texts into Arabic; a caliphal attempt to assert his right to direct theological discourse, through the imposition of the *miḥna* (“inquisition”, in which public officials and scholars, religious and other, had to assert the “createdness” of the Qur’ān, as opposed to its eternal, uncreated nature – which latter position was championed by Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, and eventually came to be the accepted understanding); continued debate over what was required for legitimate leadership of the Muslim community; and the transition from the Umayyad question of the place of non-Muslim Arabs, to the increasing Abbasid reality of non-Arab Muslims, and the resultant “shu‘ūbiyya” movement. Al-Ma‘mūn himself has been received with varying degrees of approval by later ages⁶⁸: his insistence on a theological doctrine that came to be undermined and overruled opened his faith to questions. Theodore’s text hints at a number of these issues: the extensive reliance on reason, and the easy conversance with debates familiar from theological discussions of the early Abbasid period; in the context of the faith/Islam debate (used as qur’ānic proof of the “faith” of Christians), the qur’ānic disparaging of “Arabs” is put forth, which touches on Hāshimī sensitivities, picked up elsewhere, as well (discussed above); and, as indicated above, al-Ma‘mūn himself was chastised for allowing the Christians too much freedom.

⁶⁸ Cooperson, *al-Ma‘mun*.

That Theodore's text comes closest to criticizing the Prophet himself (he died with 14 wives, but only allows you 4) may indicate an earlier provenance than either that of Paul's or Sinai Ar. 434: another Christian Arabic text (that of Abd al-Masih al-Kindi, in dialogue with a Hashimi friend) that also purports to take place in the caliphate of al-Ma'mūn contains even stronger anti-Islamic, as well as anti-Qur'ān and anti-Muhammad polemics. Was al-Ma'mūn's caliphate, in fact, one in which non-Muslims enjoyed considerable liberties⁶⁹ (more, in fact, than Muslims?: witness the *miḥna*)? Did his later reputation as "heterodox" due to the forcing of public officials to profess the "createdness" of the Qur'ān (which doctrine would, eventually, be repudiated by normative Islam⁷⁰) make him – in retrospect – a "champion" in the eyes of Christians⁷¹, and his caliphate, therefore, a "natural" setting for debates in which Christians would vanquish Muslims? Are Muslim-Christian tensions indicated by remarks about the established/ancient nature of Christianity, as compared to the relative youth of Islam, Theodore as a "sea of knowledge" against whom

⁶⁹ cf. Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 81, in which Theodore's ignorance, hypocrisy, disbelief and insolence are attributed, in part, to the "honor" and "admiration" he is shown by al-Ma'mūn.

⁷⁰ As with the caliph al-Qādir bi-llāh's edict, cited above.

⁷¹ cf. Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 86, in which al-Ma'mūn "smiles, greatly rejoicing" and is "delighted" when Abu Qurrah confounds his Muslim opponents; p. 70, in which he "laughs", p. 91, in which he praises Theodore's polite conduct and "laughs a long time" when a Muslim interlocutor from Damascus cedes a point to Theodore, saying "Abu Qurrah shoots at me with arrows from my own quiver; my weapon is spent, while his weapon carries on."; 73, in which he is "happy", and "shows his admiration"; 80, in which he marvels at Theodore's knowledge, and wishes to have him at his *majlis*; 98-99, in which al-Ma'mūn acknowledges Theodore's truthful utterances, and is also made "happy" by the "breadth of Abu Qurra's openness, of his luminous heart, of the abundance of his understanding and knowledge, of his apt expression and the swiftness of his response"; he acknowledges the validity of Theodore's arguments also on pp. 112 and 117, and is "delighted" and "astounded" with "the beauty of his diction, the swiftness of his response, the power of his argument" (p. 119).

nobody can withstand in *kalām* or the knowledge of religions,⁷² and his skill in overcoming his adversaries by showing them “what would never have occurred to the heart of any man”⁷³ – leading al-Maʿmūn to rue the day in which he saw the “rout of the Muslims” when “they had no argument for their religion”⁷⁴? Are intra-Arab Muslim tensions of the early Abbasid period reflected in both Christian Arabic texts that purport to take place in al-Maʿmūn’s reign (the Kinda vs. Hāshimīs in al-Kindī’s; Damascus, Kūfa, Hāshimī, e.g. – as each representing views of later, normative, Islam, but not of al-Maʿmūn himself)?

There is also a more lively engagement not only with the Qurʾān as Muslims read it, but also with arguments-in-process, in Theodore’s tract, than in those of the anonymous author of Sinai Ar. 434 or Paul. Might, therefore, Christian Arab allusions to the “books of God” prompt a re-examination of Christian concepts of “scripture”? Had Christians who came to write in Arabic also come to see the Qurʾān as a “book” of God? While frequently terming the Qurʾān “your Qurʾān” or “your book”, the author of Sinai Ar. 434, Paul and Theodore are not adverse to citing the Qurʾān as scriptural attestation to the truth of their (Christian) worldview. For, despite his seeming skepticism as to the integrity or veracity of the received qurʾānic text, Theodore is not above drawing on the Qurʾān to support his argument, either with explicit reference, or implicitly, from his qurʾānic-infused Arabic diction.

In addition to their potential importance for (contemporary) “qurʾānic studies”, Christian Arabic texts may also shed light on the traditional disciplines

⁷² Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 80.

⁷³ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 119.

⁷⁴ Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 125.

of qur'ānic study, such as *tafsīr* and *kalām*. For the issue of our Christian authors' use – and estimation – of the Qur'ān brings us to the question of the place, and significance, of “rational” argumentation in their texts. Is this merely the natural default position for two sides who can talk with one another in the same language, but who do not accept the “scriptural” or “divine” proofs of the other, thus leaving human intellect as the only means for engaging in conversation? Does it echo the Christian-Jewish arguments, in which Christians had tried to convince their Jewish opponents of the Trinity and Incarnation rationally, when their interpretations of the scriptures they shared were not convincing to the Jews? Is it simply an indication of the extent to which Hellenic culture had permeated the world to which Islam came (and naturally emerging from the earlier, intra-Christian debates that foreshadowed Islamic *kalām* discussions)? This line of inquiry leads us to ask whether the Christians mimicked, or were a central contributor to, the Islamic *kalām* discourse – either in their conversations with Muslims, or among themselves. While this is not the place to explore these questions in depth, Theodore's charge that the very text of the Qur'ān might not be that which had come to Muhammad (parallel to the qur'ānic – and Islamic – accusation that Jews and Christians had altered the texts that had been revealed to them) raises an important issue: was there a deep-seated skepticism or reservation about the nature of scripture itself in the early Islamic period, a skepticism that was reversed in the eventual promulgation of the doctrine of the Qur'ān as inimitable, but also as the eternal, uncreated word of God? If there was, in fact, such a deep-seated scriptural skepticism, as it were,

might not that contribute to the prevalence of reason over scripture in the rational discourse of the *mutakallimun* (the dialectical theologians) – Christian or Muslim?

When the caliphate moved from Mecca/Medina (the first four successors to Muhammad) and Damascus (Umayyads) to Baghdad (Abbasids), the paradigm shifted from a religion to unite the Arabs, with an Arab messenger and a recitation in clear/clarifying Arabic, to the adoption of Arabic and the religion of Islam by non-Arabs. Intra-Arab tensions are recorded for at least a century prior to the traditional dating of the prophet Muhammad's ministry in Mecca and Medina. Islamic tradition preserves the memory of their continuing at the death of the Prophet. While various tribes were persuaded of his merits, at his death, the *ridda* (apostasy) wars were a test of the strength of the new *umma*: could the message of the Prophet, and the new "kinship" (of faith – and polity?) overcome ancient prejudices of blood? The classic distinction between the caliphate of *nubuwwa* (prophetic spirit: in the eyes of the Sunnis, that of the first 4 successors to Muhammad: the "Rightly Guided" *rāshidūn*) and that of *mulk* (dynastic kingship, of all successive ones) indicate discontent with the leadership of the community, even among those (i.e. Sunnis) who saw the caliphate as legitimate (Shiites would acknowledge the reality of the caliphate, but would not view it as the legitimate heir to the Prophet; that role was reserved for the *imām*). Might Christian Arabic texts, particularly those that are situated in al-Ma'mūn's caliphate, shed further light on intra-Arab tensions (in addition to the more

commonly discussed Arab-non-Arab divide of the Abbasid period, evidenced in movements such as the Shu‘ūbiyya)?

Christian Arabic texts attest not only to the depth of Arabophone Christian understandings of the Qur’ān and Islam, but also to the richness of theological/philosophical discussions that transcended communal boundaries, and were a defining factor of the “civil society” of the early Islamic state. What do we hear when we open our ears to discussions re-emerging from centuries ago? What might Christians who were a majority, rather than a defensive minority, in a Muslim-ruled, Arabic speaking world say to us today? Might intellectual debates that elevate, rather than scorn, scripture, be a model for the present “secular” West? Will the memories of a bygone era, in which the “Commander of the Faithful” himself sponsored free and rich intellectual inquiry into matters of faith and doctrine, provide hope for the future of the Islamic world, one in which intellectuals will be able to discuss their faith in an open, academic forum without fear of threats, or being labeled “corrupters” or “innovators”? Might Christians be willing to take their cues from their predecessors, and bring scripture and theological traditions back into the discussions (with their co-religionists, and others)? And, will an invocation of Christians who lived in the Islamic world inform our understanding of the “dialogue of civilizations”? How accurate is it to speak of “Islamic” or “Christian” cultures, when Christians and Muslims lived in the same cities, studied together, and spoke the same language?

Having examined a number of qur'ānic passages found in a selection of early Christian Arabic texts, might we conclude that Christians and Muslims were both struggling to assert monotheistic faith in a living God, preserving that God's transcendence, maintaining his uncreated – and creative – and living – nature, affirming his ability and desire to communicate with his creatures, particularly man – while not anthropomorphizing Him? Recognizing that the Bible of the Christians would not persuade Muslims, Christians turned to the Qur'ān for support of Christian doctrinal articulations. But, far from accepting “Islam” as interpreted / practiced by contemporary Muslims, early Arabophone Christians attempted a reading of the Qur'ān that would not only accord with Christian beliefs, but would, in fact, affirm the virtues / validity of Christians and Christianity – over Islam and Muslims, without denigrating the *original* Qur'ān (or, for the anonymous monk and Paul, also the received text thereof) – or the Prophet Muhammad himself.

Furthermore, while Jews seem to have been considered part of the *umma* in the early Constitution of Medina, dating to the Prophet's time, there is evidence that Christian Arabs were not treated as “People of the Book” under the Umayyads: presumably due to the Arab-centric nature of the regime – if you were Arab, and spoke Arabic, why did you not therefore accept the Arab messenger and his message? Paul would pick up on this, pointing out how foreign – non-Arab Christians (possibly alluding to Crusaders) were not, in fact, expected to heed the Arabian prophet. All three of our Arabophone authors, however, focus on the virtues of Christianity – including qur'ānic support

therefore – as proof that Muhammad and the Qur’ān and Islam (if interpreted properly) did not, in fact, reject or condemn or even criticize Christianity. Might early Christian Arabic texts, therefore, shed light on the interpretive and textual history of the Qur’ān? Might they also shed light on laws found in later Islamic tradition, such as prohibitions on Christians teaching the Qur’ān to their Children (Covenant of Umar) and the development and enforcement of anti-blasphemy laws (such as those that led to the “martyrdom” of some Cordoban Christians in the 3rd/9th century, and which are, today, invoked by some Muslim-majority countries)?

At the outset of this investigation, that all three of the texts under examination here came from the Melkite community, led to the hypothesis that common “Melkite” trends in intra-Christian debates might emerge. At the conclusion (of this stage of research, at least), it is the Arabophone, Muslim-ruled setting of their composition, as well as a continued assertion of the virtues of Christianity over Judaism, rather than intra-Christian concerns, that are most evident. The vitriol of Christian Arabic anti-Judaism has received some scholarly attention. Might this be attributed to the “re-equation” of Christians with Jews, Christianity with Judaism, under Islamic rule – as equally “protected” Peoples of the Book (yet). While the Qur’ān indicates Jewish enemies of Muhammad, and a familiarity with Christian anti-Jewish polemics, the lived reality of the cohabitation of Jews, Christians and Muslims in the Arabophone, Muslim-ruled post-prophetic world would (at least, until the establishment of the State of Israel as a result of – Christian – Europe’s attempted extermination of the Jews, and as

a continuation of European colonial policies) not witness much occasion for overt anti-Jewish sentiment. A common – Semitic – culture with “Arabs”, and a relatively small and scattered demography would occasion little cause for tension. Christians in *dār al-islām*, however, were culturally mixed (some were Semitic), and were often a very significant demographic presence. And, both Muslims and Christians were attempting – in Arabic, with a Hellenic underpinning – to articulate a monotheistic faith in a living, uncreated, Creator God, without portraying Him as monolithic, while maintaining his utter transcendence and his ability and desire to communicate with his Creation, particularly humanity, without, however, descending into anthropomorphizing Him. That the Qur’ān provides some support for Christianity over Judaism – but that Islam would equate Christians with Jews in the socio-political realm – may have been a point of friction. The re-equation with “vanquished Judaism” may have caused a refining of Christian theology, without the affirmation of political dominance, and in the face of another – politically dominant – monotheistic faith: Islam.

How do political realities shape theological categories? How do theological discussions impact political rhetoric, laws, and cultural norms? That Christians were able to handle – and discuss – the Qur’ān, in Arabic, under Muslim rule, may be the most important lesson from this research. These texts emerge before the Mongol destruction of Baghdad and their subsequent conversion to Islam. They also emerge before the expulsion of Jews and, eventually, Muslims from the Iberian peninsula, and (Christian) European

colonization of Arabic-speaking realms. And, they predate the establishment of the Jewish state (populated predominantly by Jews of European extraction) in the Arabic-speaking Levant. The events of the past cannot be undone, but history can, and should, be revisited continually. While Christianity most certainly obtained a “historically definitive” form in Europe, combining therein biblical faith and Greek philosophical inquiry, what might Christians and Muslims, European, Arab and others, learn from the Arabic writings of Christians who lived under, and with, Muslims, in the lands of Christ’s birth and that Semitic Orient where Christians were first labeled as such? In the words of Paul, *“praise and gratitude to God, who bestows harmony and ends rancor between his servants, Christians and Muslims – may God protect both communities”*⁷⁵.

⁷⁵ Khoury, ed. and trans., Paul of Antioch, par. 64.

“The ink of the scholars will be weighed on the scale with the blood of the martyrs.”¹

POSTSCRIPT

Whether it is useful to say [that Christians are being discriminated against] publicly, whether it will hurt them more than help them, is a matter for prudential judgment. But in Islam there is no such thing as separation of church and state. And when you have a Muslim majority, you almost always have a state that is run in a way that favors Muslims. In Egypt there are very rarely Christian cabinet ministers, Christian senior officials, Christian generals, Christian village leaders.

(Msgr. Robert Stern, Secretary General of CNEWA: NCR interview February 10, 2011)²

Current speculations as to the directions that Egyptian society might take after President Mubarak’s departure focus on the role of “Islam” in the constitution and government. And, in contemporary political, theological and secular academic discourse, ‘Christianity’ “under” ‘Islam’ is often discussed in conjunction with the ‘sorrows of dhimmitude’, the plight of the ‘neomartyrs’, the shrinking numbers of Christians in the land of Christ, and, occasionally, with the difficulties of European incursions (Crusades, Colonialism, Capitulations). It should be noted, however, that in much ‘western’ academic discourse, the situation of ‘Islam’ (or Muslims) “under” ‘Christianity’ – or ‘in’ ‘secular’

¹ A (weak) *ḥadīth* found in al-Suyūṭī’s *al-Jāmi‘ al-Saghīr*; cf. John Renard, *Knowledge of God in Classical Sufism: Foundations of Islamic Mystical Theology*, vol. 9 *Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004).

² Steve Weatherbe, “Egypt’s Catholics in Crisis,” *National Catholic Register* (February 10, 2011), on <http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/egypts-catholics-in-crisis/>, accessed February 17, 2011.

'Westernized' societies is rarely discussed in terms of a 'plight'. Rather, echoing sentiments contained in Msgr. Stern's statement about Christians in Egypt, such discussions frequently turn to fears of the eventual? Inevitable? "Islamification" of any society that comes to have a significant Muslim presence.³ To what extent do such discussions have theological or cultural roots? Can the two be distinguished?

In 1965, the Vatican issued its first 'official' statement on Islam – in its 'Declaration on non-Christian Religions' (*Nostra Aetate*); what is less widely known is that this statement on Muslims was inserted into a document that was originally intended to be a statement on the Jews, at the insistence of bishops from the Arabic speaking world. (And, at this, bishops in India asked for a statement on Hinduism.) In the aftermath of the Second World War, the - primarily European - bishops at the Second Vatican Council had a desperate urge to provide a corrective for the evils of a certain interpretation of a theological anti-Jewish sentiment found in Christian doctrine (discussion of the 'perfidy' of the Jews, traditionally uttered during the Good Friday liturgy, the

³ Jonathan Sacks, "The Meaning Seeking Animal," *The Tablet* (14 November, 2009): 12-13; The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, *The Future of the Global Muslim Population*, January 27 2011 report, on The Pew Forum website, at <http://pewforum.org/The-Future-of-the-Global-Muslim-Population.aspx> (accessed February 18, 2011); the statistics of "threat" as relates to the percentage of Muslims in a given population circulating on the internet adapted from Peter Hammond, *Slavery, Terrorism and Islam: The Historical Roots and Contemporary Threat* (Arlington Heights, IL: Christian Liberty Books, 2005); As of 1 October 2008, question 86 of the citizenship test administered by the US Citizenship and Immigration Services reads "What major event happened on September 11, 2001 in the United States?" The answer, "*Terrorists attacked the United States*" (available on http://usgovinfo.about.com/library/blinstst_new.htm, accessed February 19, 2011).

most sacred day in the calendar of the Church, was replaced, in stages, by a prayer recognizing God's covenant with the Jews⁴).

Although Islam has no such theological tension with Judaism, some mosques in the contemporary (especially Arab) world preach hatred of Jews. This preaching cannot be understood apart from the formation, existence and policies of the state of Israel and the sometimes uncritical support given thereto by Western powers. Despite ideals that are often lauded across confessional lines, the perceived 'virtues' of 'western' society are diminished when western governments support regimes that may provide oil, or recognize the state of Israel, but do not grant their own citizens real civil liberties. In different times and places, non-Muslims have felt more or less comfortable 'under' the protection of an Islamic government. Historically, Christians who have lived under 'Islam' have equivocated in their encounters with their western counterparts: from the Crusades, to the era of Capitulations, through the colonial and post-colonial times, there are those who have asserted their common ('Arab' or other) identity with some of their Muslim neighbors, while others have expressed a desire to unite with their European counterparts, even in the face of doctrinal – and cultural - differences.

In the contemporary world, when preachers can command an audience of millions through the internet, TV or radio, and when the masses do not necessarily have the means (or the inclination) to discern whose interpretation of a given text or event is most authoritative, the voices of professing Christians

⁴ <http://www.jcrelations.net/en/?item=2927>; for further discussion of the recent reintroduction of the prayer for the Jews in the Tridentine liturgy, see <http://www.zenit.org/article-21705?l=english>.

living in a non-Christian-ruled world, prior to major external incursions therein, may speak to us from long ago with a gentle wisdom: when you are firm in what you believe, you need not be afraid to know what others are saying. And, once you know what others are saying, you may engage them in fruitful (or, as we have also seen, disingenuous) discourse. Just as the Muslim caliphs of yore were willing to allow believing Christians to debate the merits of their faith before them, so, too, it is hoped, the political and religious leaders of our day will provide fora in which learned persons of faith may discuss their respective traditions, with no goal other than that the 'other' become slightly more familiar and, as a result, a little less 'foreign' or 'threatening'. And, in such encounters, besides a necessary willingness to listen, once asked to articulate one's faith to someone of a different religion, one is forced to have (or to gain) a deeper understanding of the very faith that is being professed.

Discussions of the merits of 'secularization' often presuppose the urgent imperative for the 'Islamic' world to accord with the norms established by western European political philosophers, on the heels of the wars of religion of the early modern period.⁵ Indeed, much of the heartland of the traditional Islamicate world did come to be colonized by French or British forces. To varying degrees, this resulted in the establishment of the rule of law, sometimes at the expense of the classical model of the discernment of the *sharī'a*. As a consequence of the centralizing tendencies of the modern nation state, in those instances where *sharī'a* has been allowed to stand, at least in the realm of

⁵ See, for example, Bernard Lewis' pieces, such as his "What Went Wrong?" *The Atlantic Monthly* 289/1 (January 2002): 43-45 or his "The Roots of Muslim Rage," *The Atlantic Monthly* 266/3 (September 1990): 47-60.

personal law, there have been attempts to codify and/or 'unify' interpretations thereof; thus, in place of the classical model of the existence and permissibility of a variety of opinions (stemming, to some degree, from the multiplicity of methods and opinions found in the different 'schools' of legal interpretation), the methods or, in some cases, the rulings, of a single *madhhab* (school of legal interpretation) is now 'codified' In such 'secularizing' discourse, much which has transpired *since* what may be termed the classical, golden age of Islam - the early Abbasid centuries (2nd/8th - 5th/11th) - is far more present than the events of the formative period of Islamic thinking. Indeed, contemporary manifestations - particularly of 'political' Islam (Sunni or Shiite) - cannot be understood without knowledge of later events, such as the Mongol destruction of Baghdad in 1258 CE, and their subsequent conversion to Islam, with the concomitant reactions thereto by scholars such as Ibn Taymiyya; the Reconquest of al-Andalus by the most Catholic kings of Spain (and the eventual expulsion of Jews and Muslims); the few centuries of crusader kingdoms on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean; the establishment of a non-Arab, Muslim dynasty in Istanbul and the era of capitulations, in which the Ottoman sultan considered the most Christian French king, rather than the Pope of Rome (or Russian, Greek, or British officials), the protector of the Christian holy sites; and, of course, the era of colonial and post-colonial rule, with the establishment of the state of Israel. But, the formative centuries are also important for those who wish to understand the richness and diversity of the Islamic world, and for those who would like to be able to understand how - or where - contemporary activities done in the

name of Islam – fit into broader Islamic history or theology. The translation efforts of the early Abbasid caliphs, and their desire to acquire learning, as far as India and China, but also from the lands west of their realm, and the resultant preservation of much of Greek thought in Arabic the eventual translation of which into Latin made possible Aquinas' *Summa*, resonate all too faintly in the memories of most contemporary students of world and church and Islamic history – be they in DC or Cairo. Another under-reported vignette is that, for much of the early history of Islam, while most who came to live under Arab, Muslim rule came to speak, write and think in Arabic – many were not of, and did not adopt, the Islamic faith. The peculiarities of this situation have been recently explored by Richard Bulliet: *The case for Islamochristian civilization*.

Having had the privilege to teach for a semester at Georgetown's School of Foreign Service campus in Doha, Qatar, as an Egyptian Muslim journalist was baptized by the Pope at the Easter Vigil, a week after the first official church opened in Doha (built by the Qatari government, amidst much controversy), and a few weeks after the Chaldean Archbishop of Mosul was assassinated, I have had much occasion to reflect on the merits of the western Enlightenment, and its advocacy not only of tolerance, but also of freedom, of religion. But, reading the spirited defenses of Christianity that came from the pens of Christians living in the Arab, Islamic world at a time when they were a numerical majority, if not holding 'real' political power, the question frequently came to mind: is secularization (or laicization) the only model for a healthy civic society? If the vast majority of mankind did not suffer through Europe's wars of religion, and if

many do believe strongly in God (and not simply as a comforting ritual), is it right to advocate and impose a secular model of governance on other societies?

In his *Letter Concerning Toleration*, in the course of a discussion on the civil magistrate's responsibilities with regards the outward practices of minority or dissenting religious groups, Locke remarks

...it may be urged farther that, by the law of Moses, idolaters were to be rooted out. True, indeed, by the law of Moses; but that is not obligatory to us Christians... The case of idolaters, in respect of the Jewish commonwealth, falls under a double consideration, The first is of those who, being initiated in the Mosaical rites, and made citizens of that commonwealth, did afterwards apostatize from the worship of the God of Israel. These were proceeded against as traitors and rebels, guilty of no less than high treason. For the commonwealth of the Jews, different in that from all others, was an absolute theocracy; nor was there, or could there be, any difference between that commonwealth and the Church. The laws established there concerning the worship of One Invisible Deity were the civil laws of that people and a part of their political government, in which God Himself was the legislator. *Now, if any one can shew me where there is a commonwealth at this time, constituted upon that foundation, I will acknowledge that the ecclesiastical laws do there unavoidably become a part of the civil, and that the subjects of that government both may and ought to be kept in strict conformity with that Church by the civil power. But there is absolutely no such thing under the Gospel as a Christian commonwealth.* There are, indeed, many cities and kingdoms that have embraced the faith of Christ, but they have retained their ancient form of government, with which the law of Christ hath not at all meddled. (emphasis added)⁶

It was three centuries later, and in very different circumstances, that the Roman Catholic Church officially acknowledged the possibility that a 'secular' society, which allowed for separate realms of church and state, might not be the end of the world – in the face of (atheistic communist) societies outwardly hostile to any religiosity (the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World,

⁶ John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, translated William Popple (1689), available on <http://www.constitution.org/jl/tolerati.htm> (accessed February 20, 2011).

Gaudium et Spes, most closely touches on this theme, although Vatican Two did not have a formal statement on the relationship of Church and State⁷). For, only a century before, in 1864, Pope Pius IX, in his encyclical of the *Syllabus of Errors* had *denounced*, among the errors of modernity:

34. The teaching of those who compare the Sovereign Pontiff to a prince, free and acting in the universal Church, is a doctrine which prevailed in the Middle Ages. -- Apostolic Letter "Ad Apostolicae," Aug. 22, 1851. 54.
54. Kings and princes are not only exempt from the jurisdiction of the Church, but are superior to the Church in deciding questions of jurisdiction. -- Damnatio "Multiplices inter," June 10, 1851.⁸

Would an Islamic commonwealth, past or present, be closer to a Jewish or a 'Christian' (Catholic) model? In *sharī'a* (the 'law' of God, discerned through the process of *fiqh*, jurisprudence – lit. "understanding", which takes into account the Qur'ān, prophetic tradition and local custom, among other elements), all human actions are classified in two categories: *mu'āmalāt* (man's relations with his fellow man, such as marriage or trade) and *'ibādāt* (man-God relations, such as prayer). Akin to Judaism, in which a rabbi might be consulted for advice as to 'proper' action in one's life, Muslims may consult a trusted and learned Muslim for an opinion (*fatwā*) as to whether or not a given action is 'recommended', 'discouraged', 'prohibited', 'required' or 'neutral'. This is a dynamic process, in which a *fatwā* can only be issued in response to a question, and the questioner

⁷ John Courtney Murray, "The Issue of Church and State at Vatican II," *Theological Studies* 27 (December 1966): 580-606, available on <http://woodstock.georgetown.edu/library/Murray/1966h.htm>. I am indebted to Frs. Joseph Komonchak and Gres-Gayer of CUA for guiding my thinking on the Roman Catholic responses to Vatican II, the post-conciliar period and the early modern period. Neither, however, is to blame for any erroneous thinking contained herein.

⁸ Available on <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius09/p9syll.htm>.

has the right to seek the opinion of another trusted, learned Muslim if the initial opinion is not entirely to his or her satisfaction. Ideally, the *muftī* would be well-versed in the requirements of the law, as well as the exigencies in which the questioner found him or herself. And, classically, a distinction was made between a declaration of the facts of an event, and a juridical ruling thereon. For example, the five obligatory prayers are valid at certain points of the day, based on the position of the sun in the sky. It was the provenance of one trained in astronomy to determine *where* the sun was in the sky; the religious judgment about the *validity* of the prayers performed at a particular moment was for one trained in religious sciences to determine. Further, in the case of the meting out of punishments, the probity (*‘adāla*) of the judge and the disputants is of primary importance. For, as Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) - one of the Muslims who would eventually respond to Paul’s ‘letter’ (and whose writings have been influential in the thinking of some modern Muslim writers, such as Syed Qutb) - warns:

...some...think that Shari’a is the name given to the judge’s decisions; many of them even do not make a distinction between a learned judge, an ignorant judge and an unjust judge. Worse still, people tend to regard any decrees of a ruler as Shari’a, while sometimes undoubtedly the truth is actually contrary to the decree of the ruler... Shari’a in reality is just the opposite of the external law, although the decision of the judge has to be enforced. (emphasis added) In many cases the inner truth is contrary to what appears to some people ... In this case if it is said that the inner truth is the opposite of the externals, this will be true, but to call the inner ‘the Truth’ and the externals ‘the Shari’a’ is a semantic question.⁹

Similarly, Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274):

A tyrannical law, since it is not in accordance with reason, is not a law in the strict sense, but rather a perversion of law. However it has something of the character of law to the extent that it intends that the citizens should be good. It only has the character of a law because it is a dictate of a superior over his

⁹ Ibn Taymiyya, cited in Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (1966, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 112.

subjects and is aimed at their obeying laws – which is a good that is not absolute but only relative to a specific regime. (emphasis added)¹⁰

Ought ‘*sharī‘a*’ be judged by poor or unjust rulings of corrupt or incompetent judges? Ought the eternal, or the natural, or the divine, or human laws be judged by the legislation of tyrants or incompetent men? When European colonists first encountered the Islamic system of ‘law’ or ‘justice’ (in India or Egypt, for example), they were horrified by the seeming vagaries of the law and inconsistencies of recommendations (and, in the case of criminal complaints, the punishments decided upon by the judge, or *qāḍī*)¹¹ – and encouraged the ‘codification’ of the ‘law’, under which they hoped there would be equal protection for all. In some instances, though, the result of the attempted codification, even secularization, of the law was the privileging of a certain interpretation thereof – often to the advantage of those already in power.¹²

Alternatively, various contemporary movements within the Islamic world claim the Qur’ān as their ‘constitution’, and ‘God’ as the lawgiver. Is this understanding of the Qur’ān, *sharī‘a* and *fiqh* in keeping with classical understandings thereof? In a number of Muslim majority countries, particularly in the Arabic speaking world, there is a fear of the accusation of *takfīr* – of not being true to Islam – on the part of many leaders (one example is the assassination of Sadat for recognizing the state of Israel, and therefore not being

¹⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologicae*, Q 92, 1, in *St. Thomas Aquinas on Politics and Ethics*, trans. and ed. Paul Sigmund (New York: Norton, 1988), 48.

¹¹ Peters, *Islamic Criminal Law*.

¹² Amira El Azhary Sonbol, “Law and Gender Violence in Ottoman and Modern Egypt,” in *Women, the Family and Divorce Laws in Islamic History*, edited Amira El Azhary Sonbol (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press: 1996), 277-89.

a true Muslim). Syed Qutb was imprisoned, and eventually hanged (in 1966), as a threat to the Egyptian state and Nasser's presidency. But, with the expansion of Israel beyond her 1948 borders as a result of the 1967 war, the pan-Islamic rhetoric definitively took over the nationalist or socialist or pan-Arab voices – especially in the Arabic speaking world, and even among Christians who were frustrated with the failure of various 'secular' Palestinian groups. Are the aspirations and methods of such contemporary 'Islamic' movements or 'Islamist' groups, trans-state or non-state actors, properly termed 'Islamic', or 'nationalistic', or 'reactionary' (against perceived socio-economic, political and/or historical injustices)?

Finally, is it accurate to divide the world between "Islam" and "the West"? If Islam is viewed as, or understood to be, an outspoken critic of the colonial and post-colonial global dominance of "(western, post-Enlightenment) Europe and her daughters", perhaps. But, if one defines "western" as the inheritor of Greco-Roman civilization, does not Islam share as fully in that heritage as does her Christian counterpart – be she 'Latin', 'Greek' or 'Oriental'?

All three texts under discussion here, despite the discrepancy in their tones or estimations of Islam, have as a premise communication between Christians and Muslims, and an intimate knowledge of, and interest in, these religions on the part of the interlocutors. All three emerge before the Mongol destruction of Baghdad in the middle of the 7th/13th century, frequently understood, in retrospect, to have been one of the watermarks for Muslim-

Christian relations (the relations of post-Mongol times often seen as exemplified in the thinking of Ibn Taymiyya, one of the heirs to the dissemination of Paul's letter, and a thinker not infrequently evoked, if not invoked, by modern "Islamists", accurately or not¹³). But anyone who has had the privilege to visit, and be engaged in conversation by, contemporary citizens of the Islamic and Arabic-speaking realms, will readily attest to the survival of the *majlis* – in which people are asked to share, explain and defend their positions on a range of topics, be it international diplomacy or the Trinity. Agreement or persuasion is not the goal – rather, satisfaction is found with a good debate, conducted in a polite and respectful fashion.¹⁴ Thus, despite internal changes to the structure of Islamic polity or society from classical times (effected in part by the Mongol, Ottoman and European rule), the spirit of serious, but amicable, debate that the Qur'an itself exhorts (Q 16:125, "Debate with them in the better way"), and which later Islamic societies maintained, is still present. Regrettably, the intimate familiarity and easy conversance with other religions so prevalent in classical Arabic texts, Christian or Muslim, has not survived the centuries. Hopefully, this discussion has demonstrated the potential advantages of the reopening of such investigations, through a scholarly examination of manuscripts housed in Middle Eastern or European libraries, and a resultant re-engagement with a rich

¹³ See the insightful discussion of contemporary and classical interpretations of 'jihād' by Paul Heck, "Jihad Revisited".

¹⁴ Stroumsa, "Role of Bad Manners".

tradition that could greatly inform our contemporary dialogues of cultures, religions – and civilizations.¹⁵

In particular, might these early Christian Arabic uses and discussions of the Qur’ān inform contemporary approaches to the text (akin to those suggested by the late Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd), if they do not also shed light on contemporary scholarship regarding the possible nature and circulation of non-‘Uthmānic codices (as discussed in Chapter 6, above)? Might such academic discussions be brought into conversations regarding the use of the Qur’an in various legal and political contexts, particularly regarding the discernment of *sharī‘a*? Or, might the – sometimes sophisticated, sometimes (dis)ingenuous (see Chapters 3 and 4, above, in particular) - conversance of Christians and Muslims with the text of the Qur’an provide a model for contemporary “inter-religious dialogues”? Might examination of Christian Arabic allusions to Jews/Judaism shed light on what has been termed “Arab Muslim anti-Semitism” (as suggested in Chapter 5, above)? To what extent might the lamentations of early Arabophone Christians under Islamic rule inform contemporary discussions of the “plight of the *dhimmi*”?

Through this work, I hope the reader has been taken back to a ‘golden’ age of Christian-Muslim understanding – one in which Christians were a numerical majority in the Islamic world, and, having come under Islamic rule, were coming to read, write, speak and think in the Arabic language. As such, they had insights to the Qur’ān and Islamic tradition far richer than those of their Latin or

¹⁵ cf. Pope Benedict XVI’s Regensburg address, on <http://www.zenit.org/article-16955?l=english>.

Greek counterparts. The 'real' situation of these Christians, their responses and reactions to the Arab/Muslim conquests, have been examined as far as possible - while trying to avoid apologetics - and polemics. Finally, it should be remembered that, just as the Christians were not monolithic (while texts from the Chalcedonian - or Melkite - or Rūm Orthodox - community are the focus of this work, allusion has been made to 'Nestorian' and 'Jacobite' writers, as well), neither were the Muslims with whom they were in dialogue. The Christian texts examined here come from a time in which a fertile and lively conversation was going on among Muslims themselves concerning a variety of theological and socio-political issues, including matters touching on the nature and contents of the Qur'an itself.

We cannot transport ourselves back to Abbasid Baghdad or al-Andalus. But, we do a disservice to the historical milieu about which we write if we translate contemporary dynamics - selectively and uncritically - back in time. Do the nativity or annunciation scenes of Renaissance artists reflect life in first century Palestine, or of the Europe in which the artists lived? The irenic convivencia of al-Andalus posited by a socialist Spanish government cannot be understood outside of the wake of Franco's regime, and with the perception of recent abuses or privileges of the Catholic church borne in mind. The trials of dhimmitude, of which the contemporary Ba't Yeor speaks, cannot be understood without knowledge of the Crusades, Capitulations, Colonialism and the aftermath of the establishment of the contemporary state of Israel (or her own history). While the various *millets* (religious communities) of the Islamic world

did enjoy the protection (*dhimma*) of the Islamic state, and did live together with the Muslim populations (*convivencia*), the terms of this cohabitation, and the situation of the communities and individuals therein cannot be painted with a broad brush. The state of Qatar is building churches for her Christian workers; neighboring Saudi Arabia forbids her Christian guest workers to gather for public worship. Both consider themselves 'Islamic'; both have been criticized for their policies, by Muslims and non-Muslims.

It is my hope that these voices from the past will provide us with some guidance for the future: Christians of the Middle East are no longer a numerical majority; Christianity is too often defined by its European experience ... but this was not always the case. There are at least three levels at which the preceding might be read: 1) testimony towards the possibility for religious communities to live and communicate with one another (even if political circumstances are such that favor the dominance of one religion), a) without relegating religion and politics, church and state, to separate spheres – or b) with an acceptance that there can be space for both 'religious' and 'secular' authorities and institutions in the same space, without the need for one to dominate the other; 2) recognition of the multiplicity of learned voices present in Islamic history, and a call for their revival; and, 3) the lessons for interreligious dialogue and understanding that Christians who first came to write in Arabic can teach the contemporary world – be it through the lenses of 'orthodoxy', 'culture' or 'subjectivity'.¹⁶

¹⁶ For the distinction of these three categories, and for their encouragement with my thesis, I would like to thank Frs. Jack Haughey and Gap Lobiando, SJ and Mr. Vince Wolfington.

If Muslim students in Doha in 2008, versed in the ideas of Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhab, could read and react to the writings of al-Kindī with great equanimity, is it impossible for Muslims in other times and places to have engaged challenges to ‘Islam’ with similar eagerness and good will? If we can read back into other eras aspects of the contemporary world decried, for example, by the US Advisory Committee for Religious Freedom Abroad¹⁷, might we first attempt to understand the circumstances that might have contributed to a given situation, action or *fatwa*? Finally, might we not, with benefit, explore more deeply those elements of scholarly and pious tradition that – perhaps because of their relative inability to lend themselves to sensational soundbites - do not receive much publicity (positive or negative)?

O mankind! We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into peoples and tribes, so that you might know one another. Verily, the most noble among you according to God is the most pious of you. Verily, God is all-knowing, all-aware.
(Q 49:13)

¹⁷ In the words of the State Department page dedicated to Religious Freedom Abroad (<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/irf/>), “The Office of International Religious Freedom has the mission of promoting religious freedom as a core objective of U.S. foreign policy. Headed by Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, its Office Director and staff monitor religious persecution and discrimination worldwide, recommend and implement policies in respective regions or countries, and develop programs to promote religious freedom.”

GLOSSARY

ahl al-kitāb – ‘people of the book’: qur’ānic and Islamic designation for Jews and Christians, in particular

allāh – ‘the’ god: God

amīr al-mu’minīn – ‘commander of the faithful’; honorific for the caliph

anṣār allāh – ‘helpers of God’, like *ḥawariyyūn*, a qur’ānic designation for the disciples of Jesus

aqānīm – ‘hypostases’

ash‘arī – theological ‘school’ of ‘normative’ Islam, maintaining the uncreatedness of the Qur’ān and that God’s attributes should be believed without inquiring into the ‘how’ of their existence

al-asmā’ al-ḥusnā – the ‘most beautiful’ names of God

banī isrā’īl – ‘children of Israel’; in qur’ānic and Islamic tradition, a designation for both Jews and Christians

caliph – ‘successor’ to the messenger of God (abolished in 1924 by Atatürk)

dār al-islām – ‘region of Islam’; classically, ruled by the caliph

dhāt – ‘essence’ (of God)

dhimma – ‘protection’, in exchange for a tax, granted to non-Muslims in an ‘Islamic’ state (as non-Muslims would not have been allowed to serve in the military); people who receive *dhimma* are termed ‘*dhimmi*’, ‘protected’

Fatiḥa – ‘Opening’ chapter of the Qur’ān

fiqh – ‘understanding’ (jurisprudence)

ḥadīth – eyewitness account of an action or saying of the prophet Muhammad

ḥāfiẓ - one who has 'preserved' (memorized) Scripture; one who has memorized
the Qur'ān

ḥawariyyūn – qur'ānic term for the 'disciples' of Christ (see also *anṣār allāh*)

ijtihād – see below, *sharī'a*

īmān – 'faith'

injīl – "Gospel"; the 'book' that Jesus brought, according to the Qur'ān

'isā b. maryam – qur'ānic name for 'Jesus, Son of Mary'

islām – 'submission' (to the will of God)

jāhiliyya – pre-Islamic "Age of Ignorance" of the Arabs

jawhar – 'substance' (of God)

kalām – 'speech'; also, (Islamic) 'dialectical theology'

kitāb – 'book'

majlis – (caliphal) meeting: for our purposes, it designates a session in which
members of various religious affiliations would debate the merits of their
respective traditions, often relying more heavily on logic than on
quotations from Scripture

masīḥ/masīḥiyyūn – 'Messiah' (qur'ānic honorific for Jesus, Son of
Mary) / 'Christians' (see also *naṣārā*)

miḥna – 'inquisition': briefly attempted caliphal enforcement of the
pronouncement, on the part of public officials, of the doctrine of the
"createdness" of the Qur'ān

muṣḥaf – 'codex' (of the Qur'ān)

mu'tazila – those who ‘withdrew’ from the debates on the fate of the grave sinner in early Islamic history; they are also termed the people of ‘justice and unity (of God)’, maintaining that God’s justice must accord with human reason, and – preserving the oneness and uniqueness of God - that the Speech of God had to have a ‘beginning in time’

naṣārā – Qur’ānic designation for ‘Christians’

qur’ān – ‘reading’ or ‘recitation’

rasm – simplest consonantal Arabic script: without the distinguishing dots above and below the bare consonantal form (making, for example, ‘b’, ‘t’, ‘th’, ‘n’, ‘y’ indistinguishable)

sharī‘a – ‘well-worn path to a watering hole’; designation for the uncodified ‘Islamic law’, in the discernment of which great effort (*ijtihād*) has been expended by scholars (*‘ulamā’*), on a case-by-case basis, with the awareness that, ultimately, only “God knows”

shirk – ‘association’ (of something other than God with God); the one sin the Qur’ān says God will not forgive

ṣifāt – ‘attributes’ (of God)

sunna – (prophetic) ‘precedent’

sūra – ‘chapter’ (of the Qur’ān)

tafsīr – exegesis of the Qur’ān, classically on a verse-by-verse basis; classical works of *tafsīr* not infrequently extend to 20 or 30 volumes of hundreds of pages each, of small Arabic script

tahrīf – (scriptural) ‘corruption’

tawhīd – ‘oneness’ (of God)

‘*ulamā*’ - scholars (often of ‘religious’ sciences)

umma – community of ‘Muslims’

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