An Unknown Splinter Group
of Nestorians

Early in the history of Islam, through its contact with Christianity
and under its influence, there arose a controversy with regard to what
is known as divine attributes, analogous to the controversy in Chris-
tianity with regard to the second and third persons of the Trinity[1]. On
the one hand, corresponding to the orthodox Christian belief in the rea-
lity of the second and third persons of the Trinity, there was the orthodox
Muslim belief which, in its original form, affirmed the reality of two
attributes in God. On the other hand, corresponding to the various
Christian heresies, which denied the reality of the second and the third
persons of the Trinity and maintained that they were mere names,
there were the Mu'tazilites in Islam who maintained that the attributes
of God, which the orthodox affirmed to be real beings distinct from the
essence of God, were only names of God. These two opposite views on
the problem of divine attributes are known to have existed in Islam
in the early part of the eighth century. But then in the ninth century
there began to appear, with Abū al-Hudhayl (d. 841 or 850) a mediating
view, which in the tenth century, with Abū Hāshim (d. 933), assumed a
definite form and came to be known as the theory of « states » or
« modes » (aḥwāl).

This theory of modes, as a theory mediating between the realistic
and the nominalistic conceptions of divine attributes in Islam, is logi-
cally analogous to the various theories of conceptualism which appeared
later in Latin philosophy as mediating between the realistic and the no-
minalistic conceptions of universals. The formulae by which the theory
of modes in Islam expressed itself are that the attributes of God are
neither existent nor nonexistent[2]; they are neither identical with God
nor other than God[3]; they are « aspects » (wujūh), by which is meant
that they are not mere « names » nor are they something « superadded to
the essence of God[4] ».

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1. Cf. my paper « The Muslim Attributes and the Christian Trinity », *Harvard Theological
Review*, 49 (1956), 1-18.

2. BAGHDĀDĪ, *Al-Farḳ bayn al-Firaḳ* (Cairo, 1910), p. 182, l. 5.

3. *Ibid.*, l. 14.

4. SHAHRASTĀNĪ, *Kitāb Nihāyat al-Ikdām fī ʿIlm al-Kalām* (ed. A. Guillaume), pp. 180-181.

I am now going to show that among the Christians under Muslim rule, all of whom considered themselves as following the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, there appeared an interpretation of that orthodox conception of the Trinity in which the second and third persons were interpreted conceptualistically, after the analogy of the modalistic conception of divine attributes in Islam. And what is especially significant about it is that those who introduced that conceptualistic view of the two persons continued to remain in good standing as adherents of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. They were not regarded as heretics.

The text which furnishes us with information about this new interpretation of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity is Shahrastānī's account of the Christian sects as they were known to him to exist in the Muslim world during his lifetime (1086-1153), in the early part of the twelfth century.

In his account of these Christian sects, what is known as the orthodox Christian doctrine of the Trinity is to be found in his description of the doctrines of three main sects, the Malkites[5], that is, the Byzantine Church, the Nestorians[6], and the Jacobites[7], that is, the Monophysites. Heretical conceptions of the Trinity are attributed by him to the Macedonians, Sabellians, and Arians[8].

The conception of the Trinity held by all Christians who adhered to the orthodox doctrine, namely, the Malkites, the Nestorians, and the Jacobites, is described by Shahrastānī as follows : « They declare that God has three hypostases *(aķānīm).* They say that the Creator is a single substance *(jauhar)* ... one in substantiality and three in hypostaticality, and they mean by hypostases the attributes existence, life, and knowledge, or Father, Son, and Holy Spirit[9] ». As against this common Trinitarian view of the three orthodox sects, Shahrastānī mentions the views on the Trinity of the three heretical sects. The common element in their heretical views is their refusal to believe in the eternity and reality of all the three hypostases, the Macedonians contending that the Holy Spirit was created, the Sabellians contending that the so-called three hypostases, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, are only « properties » *(ḫawāṣṣ)* in one « substance » *(jauhar),* and the Arians contending that both the Son and the Holy Spirit were created[10].

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5. SHAHRASTĀNĪ, *Kitāb al-Mila. wa'l-Nihal* (ed. Wm. Cureton), p. 173, ll. 14 ff.

6. *Ibid.,* p. 175, ll. 9 ff.

7. *Ibid.,* p. 176, ll. 19 ff.

8. *Ibid.,* p. 178, l. 13 — p. 179, l. 1.

9. *Ibid.,* p. 172, ll. 8-11. On the origin of the identification of the three persons of the Trinity with the attributes of existence, life, and knowledge, see my paper referred to above (n. 1), pp. 8-11.

10. *Ibid.,* p. 178, ll. 13-18.

Then under those who believed in the eternity and reality of all the three hypostases, Shahrastānī says of the Malkites that « they clearly state that the substance is other than the hypostases, the relation between them being like that between the bearer of an attribute and the attribute[11] », that is to say, the relation of the hypostases to the substance is like the relation of attributes to God as conceived by the Muslim Attributists. Of the Jacobite conception of the Trinity he says that « they believe in three hypostases, as we have mentioned[12] », that is to say, their view of the Trinity is like that of the Malkites, though, as he goes on, he tries to show that their view on Christology differed from that of either Malkites or the Nestorians. But in his description of the Trinitarian view of the Nestorians he starts out with the general statement that the founder of that sect, Nestorius, « said that God is one, possessing three hypostases : existence, knowledge, and life ». This statement, so far, includes the Nestorians among the followers of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. Then, however, Shahrastānī goes on to report : « But these hypostases are not additional to the essence [of God] nor are they identical with Him[13] ». This conception of the relation of the hypostases to the essence of God is further characterized by Shahrastānī as differing from that of orthodox Christianity. He compares the attitude of this sect toward the gospels to that of the Mu'tazilites toward the orthodox Muslim law *(al-sharī'ah)*[14], adding that of the various views current among the Mu'tazilites on the question of divine attributes the one which is most like to this sect's view on the hypostases is Abū Hāshim's theory of modes[15]. In other words, the view of this group of Trinitarians stands midway between orthodox Trinitarianism and Sabellianism just as the Muslim Abū Hāshim's theory of modes stands midway between the realism of the Attributists and the nominalism of the Antiattributists. In Christianity, during the Patristic period there was no distinction made between Modalism and Nominalism with regard to the problem of the Trinity[16]. There was no midway between the orthodox assertion of the reality of the second and third persons and the Sabellian denial of their reality. This group of Nestorians, however, has found an intermediate between these two extreme positions by attenuating the reality of the hypostases.

An allusion to this Christian conception of the Trinity is to be found also in Shahrastānī's discussion of Abū al-Hudhayl's view on attributes.

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11. *Ibid.*, p. 173, ll. 18-19.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 176, l. 19.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 185, ll. 11-12.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 75, l. 1.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 185, ll. 14-15.
16. Cf. my *Philosophy of the Church Fathers*, I, p. 580.

Trying to show that Abū al-Hudhayl's formula does not mean an absolute denial of attributes, but rather an affirmation of attributes as « aspects » *(wujūh)* of the essence of the subject, he adds, by way of explanation, that « they are the same as the hypostases *(akānīm)* of the Christians and the modes of Abū Hāshim[17] ». In the passage quoted from him above, as we have seen, it is only the conception of the Trinity which he ascribes to Nestorians, in contradistinction to the established orthodox conception which he ascribes to the Malkites and Jacobites, that is compared by him to the modes of Abū Hāshim.

But who were those Christians who held this new conception of the Trinity ? Shahrastānī calls them « Nestorians ». But he cannot mean by it the Nestorians as known to us from the history of Christianity and as also known to the Muslims. To begin with, we know that Nestorius was orthodox in his view on the Trinity. Then, we have the testimony of Mas'ūdī that the Nicene Creed constituted the Creed of « the Malkites, the Jacobites, and the Ibādites or Nestorians, and it was recited by them daily in their liturgy[18] ». Then, also, in Ibn Ḥazm's account of Christianity, the Nestorians are said to hold the same view as the orthodox Malkites on the doctrine of the Trinity[19]. Then, again, Yaḥyā Ibn 'Adī says that all the three Christian sects, that is, the Malkites, the Nestorians, and the Jacobites, are fully in agreement on the doctrine of the Trinity[20]. Finally, Shahrastānī describes the founder of these « Nestorians » of his as « *Nastūr al-ḥakīm* », that is, Nestorius the Wise or the Philosopher or the Physician, « who appeared in the time of Ma'mūn[21] », that is, during his reign (813-833) or perhaps during his lifetime (786-833). Ibn Athīr cannot be right in his statement[22], approved of by Sweetman[23], that Shahrastānī has made a mistake about the historical Nestorius, who died in 451 and who for all we know was never known by the title of « the Wise » or « the Philosopher » or « the Physician ». Shahrastānī's detailed description of the author of this new view of the Trinity shows that such a person actually existed and that he was is called *Nastūr*, « Nestorius », who lived during the reign or the lifetime of Ma'mūn and who was himself a Nestorian and whose followers continued to belong to the Nestorians, forming an indistinguishable group within the Nestorians. Now it happens that a Nestorian Bishop, by the name of Nestorius, which in Arabic is Nastūr, flourished in Adiabene,

17. SHAHRASTĀNĪ, *Milal*, p. 34, ll. 19-20.

18. MAS'ŪDĪ, *Kitāb al-Tanbih wa'l-Ishrāf* (ed. M. I. de Goeje), p. 142, ll. 11-12.

19. IBN ḤAZM, *Kitāb al-Fiṣal fī'l-Milal* (Cairo 1317-27), I, p. 49, l. 5.

20. *Petits Traités Apologétiques de Yahya ben 'Adī*, by Augustin PÉRIER, p. 55, ll. 1 ff.

21. SHAHRASTĀNĪ, *Milal*, p. 175, l. 9.

22. *Kitāb al-Kāmil fī al-Tārīḥ* (ed. C. J. Tonrberg), I, p. 237, ll. 12-15.

23. *Islam and Christian Theology*, II, 1, p. 28.

on the Tigris, at about 800[24], which corresponds exactly to Shahrastānī's « in the time of Ma'mūn ».   Nothing much is known about this Nestorian Bishop Nestorius, but he is as suitable a candidate as one could wish for that « Nestorius the Sage », who has given a new turn to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, the followers of which are described by Shahrastānī as « Nestorians », and whose doctrine of Christology, as described by Shahrastānī, is Nestorian.

But whoever was the founder of this new conception of the Trinity, it is quite certain that he appeared as Shahrastānī says, « in the time of Ma'mūn », which means during the early part of the ninth century.   This brings him near to the time when the first traces of a theory of modes with regards to attributes appears in Islam.   As we have seen, about the same time, during the first half of the ninth century, a formula suggestive of a theory of modes like that which was later developed by Abū Hāshim made its appearance in Islam. Whether the conceptualistic Christian interpretation of the Trinity and the Muslim theory of modes appeared independently of each other or whether either one of them was dependent upon the other cannot be ascertained.   But one may be justified in assuming that this new interpretation of the Trinity, even if it had an independent origin in Christianity, arose under the impact of the constantly growing Muslim polemics against Christianity, its purpose being to ward off the Muslim argument that the Christian Trinity meant Tritheism.

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24. Cf. *Dictionary of Christian Biography*, s.v. « Nestorius (6) ».