

Early Christian-Muslim Theological Conversation among Arabic-Speaking Intellectuals

In my previous essay I sketched the manner in which the Christian communities of the Middle East gradually came to adopt Arabic as a language of everyday life, and *also* to discover in it the resources with which they, *as Christians*, could praise God and reflect upon their faith. In the following pages I will expand on this introduction by speaking about the role of the first generations of Christian intellectuals who wrote in Arabic: how they participated in the projects associated with the formation of what we may call "Arabic civilization," and how this participation provided them with the means for speaking about matters of theology or *tawhīd* with their contemporaries among *Muslim* intellectuals.

The common ground of the Scriptures

We should not imagine that Christian thinkers gained competence in the Arabic language overnight! The ancient manuscript that I mentioned in my previous essay, *Sinai Arabic 154* (ca. A.D. 800), contains, in addition to the work of Christian theology mentioned there, an Arabic translation of parts of the New Testament. While this Arabic translation can be understood, it is obvious that the translator is *thinking* in Syriac, and then, rather laboriously, doing his best to put Syriac sentences into Arabic. Indeed, it was some centuries before Christians produced translations of the Bible that would satisfy an Arabic grammarian.¹

¹ See, for example, Sidney H. Griffith, "The Gospel in Arabic: An Inquiry into its Appearance in the First Abbasid Century," *Oriens Christianus* 69 (1985): 126-67.

However, we have already seen in *Sinai Arabic 154* that an anonymous eighth-century Christian teacher *was* able to master Arabic sufficiently so as to understand and appreciate the vocabulary and cadences of the Qur'ān. In his work, "On the Triune Nature of God," we have a good example of the earliest stage of Christian-Muslim theological conversation in the Arabic language, a stage not marked on the Christian side by great dialectical or demonstrative sophistication, but rather by the use of the scriptures, both the Bible and the Qur'ān, in an attempt to find "common ground" for discussion in the shared or similar concepts, stories, and teachings found in the holy Books.

Let me give an example of the way in which this eighth-century Christian theologian used Biblical and Qur'anic materials. In the second chapter of his treatise, in the course of a survey of "prophetic history" from Adam to Christ, he summarizes the story of Moses. Most of the narrative comes from the Bible, from *Exodus* 1-14. Into this, however, the Christian author weaves in several details and turns of Arabic phrase that clearly come from the Qur'ān! (In what follows, I have put clear Qur'anic allusions into italics, and added their Qur'anic sources in square brackets.)

Then Israel and his children entered Egypt: seventy-five souls, men, women, and children. And God caused them to multiply and grow until they reached six hundred thousand and more.

There arose over Egypt another pharaoh, who had not known Joseph. He scattered them and put them to harsh toil. He wished to destroy the children of Israel, *and made himself a god* [26:29, 28:38, 79:24]. And he set them to work in difficult building projects, oppressed them with the harshest oppression, and murdered their sons. But God saved Moses, and the daughter of Pharaoh raised him.

The Children of Israel besought God to save them from the oppression they were experiencing from the hand of Pharaoh. And God responded to them and acquainted them with His mercy.

And Moses departed Egypt in flight, and God drove him until he reached Mount Sinai. *And God spoke to him directly* [4:164] *from the right side of the mount* [19:52], and said to him: "The lamentations of the Children of Israel have arisen to me, and the oppression with which Pharaoh and his folk have oppressed them."

And God sent him to Pharaoh, and supported him with signs and great wonders and mighty power. Then God split the sea for the Children of Israel, and caused them to pass through the midst of it; but he drowned Pharaoh and his host. *And God was Mighty, Lord of Vengeance* [3:4, 5:95, 14:47, 39:37].²

It should be stressed that it is *not* the author's intention to devise some new, syncretistic scripture by combining the Old Testament and the Qur'an. Rather, in his treatise he demonstrates the extent to which the Books of the Christians and the Muslims share teachings about the prophets and messengers of God, who were sent as a mercy to humankind, but who consistently encountered rejection and unbelief. The Christian apologist's point in presenting this shared history is to prepare for an argument that, given humanity's obstinate refusal to heed the messengers and prophets and its evident enslavement to Satan, God undertook a *new* initiative for its salvation: the Incarnation of the Word. This is not the place to go into the details of his argument.³ The point to be stressed here is that the scriptures themselves -- the Arabic Qur'ān and the Bible in Arabic translation or paraphrase -- provided a certain amount of "common ground" on which a Christian theologian could attempt to explain his faith to Muslim thinkers in a comprehensible way.

² *Sinai Arabic* 154, f. 104^v. For some comments on this text see Mark N. Swanson, "Beyond Prooftexting: Approaches to the Qur'an in Some Early Arabic Christian Apologies," *The Muslim World* 88 (1998): 308-11.

³ A good presentation of the author's argument is found in Samir Khalil Samir, "The Earliest Arabic Apology for Christianity (c. 750)," in Samir Khalil Samir and Jørgen S. Nielsen (eds.), *Christian Arabic Apologetics during the Abbasid Period (750-1258)* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), pp. 57-114.

I will allow this one example from "On the Triune Nature of God" to represent the many examples of early arabophone Christian thinkers who used the Qur'ān -- with varying degrees of sensitivity -- in an attempt to explain their beliefs. It is important to mention that we find similar attempts in the writings of Muslim thinkers. In a recent article, Dr. David Thomas has shown how ninth-century Muslim writers such as the Zaydi *imām* al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm al-Rassī (d. 860), or the physician and convert 'Alī ibn Rabbān al-Ṭabarī (d. ca. 860), made extensive use of the Bible in their discussions (and criticisms) of Christianity.⁴ Christians *and* Muslims found the scriptures -- their own and that of the others -- to provide a basis for conversation and for easily-grasped commendation of what they held to be the truth.

The common ground of the kalām

If Christians and Muslims first sought common ground in *al-naql* ("what has been transmitted" = the scriptures), they increasingly sought it in *al-'aql* ("intellect" = rational arguments). In the earliest Arabic Christian texts that we have available to us, these rational arguments are of an elementary kind. For example, the author of "On the Triune Nature of God" uses simple analogies from nature in his explanation of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, explaining that there are many realities which are *one*, although they are identified in *three* different ways: the one sun is a disk generating light and heat; the one tree has a trunk issuing in branches which bear fruit; the one body of water begins at a spring, becomes a stream, and flows into a lake; and so on.⁵

⁴ David Thomas, "The Bible in Early Muslim Anti-Christian Polemic," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 7 (1996): 29-38.

⁵ A complete list of the analogies presented in *Sinai Arabic 154* is found in Samir, "The Earliest Arab Apology," pp. 70-72.

With the passage of time, however, arguments from *al-'aql* became more sophisticated. Increasingly they are characterized by the kinds of argument that we associate with the branch of Islamic learning called *'ilm al-kalām*: the "science of speech" or dialectic, often translated into English simply as "theology." The earliest history of the *kalām* is still rather obscure. At one time it was popular for Christian Islamicists to claim that Christian theology played a decisive role in its development. For example, in 1911 Carl Heinrich Becker could state:

That the entire methodology of the *kalām* stems from Christianity is well known. Whoever reads Islamic dogmatic and Christian patristic texts in succession will be so convinced of their relationship that he will no longer need individual proofs.⁶

Few today would defend such a claim. Indeed, the current tendency among scholars is to see the Islamic *kalām* as entirely "home-grown," as it were, from Qur'anic roots fertilized by disciplines such as Arabic grammar.⁷ However, from its very earliest stages the Islamic *kalām* was in conversation with Christian theology, as may quickly be seen from the number of times that the title *al-Radd 'alā l-Naṣārā*, "The Refutation of the Christians," occurs in lists of early *kalām* works.⁸ Indeed, this title occurs so frequently that one gets the impression that the defense of the Islamic concept of *al-tawḥīd* over against Christian trinitarianism became something of a school exercise. In any event, one of the most telling criticisms one Muslim *mutakallim* could make of another was to charge that his doctrines had strayed "over the line" into those of the Christians. For

⁶ Carl Heinrich Becker, "Christliche Polemik und islamische Dogmenbildung," *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 26 (1911): 190.

⁷ Richard M. Frank eloquently defends this position, for example, in his *Beings and Their Attributes: The Teaching of the Basrian School of the Mu'tazila in the Classical Period* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1978), p. 5.

⁸ See Abdelmajid Charfi, *Islamic Thought concerning 'the Refutation of the Christians': Through the End of the Fourth/Tenth Century* [in Arabic] (Tunis and Algiers: 1986). In his chapter on "The Sources" (pp. 113-

example, opponents of the compromise-seeking *mutakallim* ‘Abd Allāh ibn Kullāb (d. 955?) reported that he had fallen into Christian teaching:

He used to say that "the Speech of God is God." ‘Abbād used to say that, with respect to this doctrine, he was a Christian.

Abū l-‘Abbās al-Baghawī said: "One day we went in to see Pethion the Christian, who was in the west side of the Byzantine Quarter. The conversation led up to my asking him about Ibn Kullāb. He said, 'May God have mercy on ‘Abd Allāh! He used to come to me, and sit in this corner' -- he pointed to one side of the church -- 'and he adopted this doctrine from me. If he had lived, we surely would have vanquished⁹ the Muslims!'"¹⁰

While this report is probably slanderous, it does point to a truth: that in the late eighth and early ninth centuries A.D., at a time when the Islamic *kalām* was enjoying its first flourishing, Muslim *mutakallimūn* were aware of Christian doctrines, at least as a set of unacceptable positions to be avoided in their own efforts to speak about God, His attributes, and His dealings with creatures.

As for Christian thinkers who wrote in Arabic, it is clear that some of them were quite aware of developments in the Islamic *kalām*, and were capable of using the Arabic idiom and dialectical methods characteristic of it. Indeed, in some cases it is not far-fetched to speak of Christian *mutakallimūn*. The earliest figure to come to mind is Theodore Abū Qurrah, a Melkite (i.e. Chalcedonian) Christian who lived in the late eighth and early ninth centuries A.D. -- the dates ca. 755 - ca. 830 are sometimes given -- and who spent years as a monk of the monastery of Mar Sabas in Palestine, and some

70), I count sixteen works with this or a similar title, not including refutations of particular Christian theologians.

⁹ Or: "Christianized." The Arabic word is *naṣṣarnā*, and may derive either from *naṣr* ("victory") or *Naṣārā* ("Christians").

¹⁰ Found in the famous catalogue of the tenth-century Baghdad bookseller Abū l-Faraj Muḥammad ibn Abī Ya‘qūb Ishāq, known as Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist* V:3. (I used the edition of R. Tajadod, Teheran: 1971, p. 230.)

time as bishop of Ḥarrān in Mesopotamia.¹¹ Theodore was remembered in the East for his skill in controversy, especially with non-Chalcedonian Christians, but also with the Muslims. The anonymous thirteenth-century Syriac chronicle *ad annum* 1234 reports that he excited the admiration of many Christians because he "entered into disputes by his arguments against the Muslims,¹² as he knew the Saracen language."¹³ Later, the same chronicle reports that in A.D. 829 Theodore "got into a conversation with [the Abbasid caliph] Ma'mūn. There was a great debate between them about the faith of the Christians."¹⁴ Other evidence indicates that Theodore's arguments did not go unnoticed by Muslim intellectuals. The Mu'tazilite *mutakallim* Abū 'Īsā ibn Ṣubayḥ al-Murdār (d. ca. 840) wrote a work (now lost) "Against Abū Qurrah, the Christian." Furthermore, the great Mu'tazilite Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār mentions "Qurrah" in his *Mughnī* (written ca. 970).

Fortunately, our knowledge of Theodore's controversial work is not limited to scattered notices such as these mentioned above. Indeed, a fairly extensive body of his writing has been preserved, allowing us to observe this Christian *mutakallim* at work. I will give one example, again having to do with the doctrine of God.

One of Theodore's early works is his *Treatise on the Existence of the Creator and on the True Religion*.¹⁵ In the ninth chapter of the book, entitled "What the Intellect Says with Regard to the Attributes of God," Theodore explains the logic of analogical speech about God: since Adam was created "in the image of God," one is permitted to attribute

¹¹ Biographical information about Theodore is available in a variety of places. The best summary is Sidney H. Griffith, *Theodore Abū Qurrah: The Intellectual Profile of an Arab Christian Writer of the First Abbasid Century* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1992) [hereafter referred to as Griffith, *Theodore*].

¹² The Syriac text uses the word *ḥanpê*, normally meaning "pagans," but often used as an indirect way of referring to the Muslims.

¹³ Griffith, *Theodore*, p. 15.

¹⁴ Griffith, *Theodore*, p. 17.

Adam's "excellences" (*fawāḍil*) to God, keeping in mind of course that when predicated of God these attributes carry none of the limitations that they do when predicated of human beings. In such a way, beginning from Adam's "excellences," Theodore proceeds to confirm God's existence (*wujūd*), life (*ḥayāt*), knowledge (*ʿilm*) -- and other attributes, of which Theodore gives a good selection, many of which were under discussion by Muslim *mutakallimūn*: wisdom (*ḥikmah*), sight (*baṣar*), hearing (*samʿ*), power (*qudrah*), generosity (*fayḍ khayr* or *jūd*), kindness (*faḍl*), righteousness (*birr*), patience (*ṣabr*), mercy (*raḥmah*), readiness to forgive (*tajāwuz* or *ʿafw*), and justice (*ʿadl*). Up to this point in the argument, Theodore may well have won the endorsement of many Muslim thinkers. His daring *Christian* move comes in the next section, however, in which he argues that Adam's very greatest "excellences" are those that denote *his capacity for relationship with others like himself*, since it is only through these relationships that Adam, or any human being, develops capacities of speech and thought and enjoys a life more meaningful than that of the beasts. According to Theodore, these "excellences" are three: "begetting" (*wilādah*, referring to Adam's relationship to a son), "procession" (*inbithāq*, referring to Adam's relationship to his wife, who "proceeded" from his side), and "headship" (*ri'āsah*, referring to Adam's position in the community of human beings just described). We can all see, of course, where Theodore is headed: using the same kind of logic that he used to establish God's existence, life, knowledge, etc., he intends to establish the trinitarian relations (the begetting of the Son, the procession of the Spirit, and the headship of the Father) as eternal attributes in God.

¹⁵ Ignace Dick, *Théodore Abuqurra: Traité de l'existence du Créateur et de la vraie religion*, Patrimoine Arabe Chrétien 3 (Jounieh, Lebanon: Librairie Saint-Paul, 1982). The chapter under discussion here is found at pp. 219-28.

One can make of this what one will. I, for one, find Theodore's *fundamental* point to be quite profound: that the human being's greatest "excellences" are those in which his capacity for relationship with others subsist, and that if one is to speak of God by analogy with human "excellences," these need to be taken into consideration. On the other hand, I find Theodore's focus on precisely three attributes -- Adam's "begetting" a son, the "procession" of his wife from his side, and his "headship" over his family -- more clever than convincing. However, my task here is not to assess the strengths and weaknesses of Theodore's argument. It is simply to point out that Theodore argues as a *mutakallim*; he brings a *mutakallim*'s sense of how to construct a telling argument to a topic that was already occasioning much debate among Muslim intellectuals themselves:¹⁶ the question of the precise sense of the attributes predicated of God.

The common ground of falsafah

Before we leave Theodore Abū Qurrah, it is worth mentioning one aspect of his intellectual activity other than his involvement in controversial theology: his contributions to the great "translation movement" by means of which Greek scientific and philosophical knowledge was transmitted to Arabic speakers, from whom this knowledge would later be transmitted to the Latin West. Among a number of hints about Theodore's activity in this regard, there is plausible testimony that Theodore made an Arabic translation of a treatise then believed to be a work of Aristotle, *De virtutibus animae*, probably between 816 and 820.¹⁷

¹⁶ An excellent introduction to these debates is Michel Allard, *Le problème des attributs divins dans la doctrine d'al-Aš'arī et de ses premiers grands disciples* (Beirut: Éditions de l'Imprimerie Catholique, 1965).

¹⁷ Griffith, *Theodore*, pp. 25-26.

Such a notice comes as little surprise. The early "translation movement" was dominated by Christian scholars, as may be grasped in a rough way by reading the article on Arabic philosophy (*falsafah*) in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*.¹⁸ Its author, Prof. Michael Marmura, offers a list of fourteen early translators of whom "mention must be made": of them, twelve were Christians, including "the best-known and most influential" of them, the Nestorian scholar Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq (d. 873). One translator in Marmura's list is a pagan, Thābit ibn Qurrah of the Harranian "Sabaeans." This leaves a single Muslim, the physician Abū 'Uthmān Sa'īd ibn Ya'qūb al-Dimishqī. Several of the Christian translators mentioned by Marmura also wrote theological works; it does not strain the imagination to think that a theologian such as Theodore Abū Qurrah, skilled as he was in Arabic, might also have been involved to some degree in the translation of scientific and philosophical treatises.

Such observations are important to Arabic-speaking Christians today because they highlight the historical fact that Christians played a great role in the development of Arabic civilization -- a civilization in which, therefore, Christians may take pride and feel at home. For the purposes of this paper, however, the role played by Christians in the translation of Greek learning into Arabic, and then in the development of Arabic science and philosophy, points to another area of *al-'aql* that could serve as common ground between Christians and Muslims in their quest for mutual intelligibility. Those Christians and Muslims (and Jews) who met and worked together in the grand projects of translation and Arabic philosophical inquiry came to share an intellectual world: they had a

¹⁸ Michael Marmura, "Falsafah," *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (ed. Eliade). The paragraph in question is on p. 268, col. 2.

common formation, common modes of discourse and argument, and a common library of the authoritative works of past sages.

Let me offer an example of specifically theological Christian-Muslim conversation enabled by this shared intellectual world. The honor of being the "father" of Arabic philosophy is usually granted to Abū Yūsuf Ya'qūb ibn Ishāq al-Kindī (d. ca. 870). Among al-Kindī's works is a book entitled *The Refutation of the Christians*, in the course of which he attempts to show the incoherence of Christian trinitarian discourse.¹⁹ He does this, however, on the basis of a discussion of Aristotle in the *Topics* on the meanings of "the one":²⁰ that something is "one" either "in number" (as an individual object is "one") or "in species" (as human beings are all "one") or "in genus" (as animals are all "one"). In which of these three ways, asks al-Kindī, do the Christians say that God is one? If they say that God is one "in number," this makes nonsense of their claim that God is also three. And if they say that God is one "in species" or "in genus," they admit composition and plurality into the Godhead.

Possibly independently of al-Kindī's treatise, however, a Christian *mutakallim*, the Syrian Orthodox theologian Ḥabīb Abū Rā'īṭah (known to be active between 815 and 828) was asking precisely the same question: In which of Aristotle's three ways do the *Muslims* say that God is one?²¹ Ḥabīb rejects the suggestion that God is one "in number," because *all individual creatures* are one "in number," and therefore this description of God does nothing to *distinguish* God from His creatures -- and thus fails to heed the

¹⁹ Al-Kindī's refutation is preserved in *its* refutation by the Christian philosopher Yaḥyā ibn 'Adī: Augustin Périer, "Un traité de Yaḥyā ben 'Adī: Défense du dogme de la Trinité contre les objections d'al-Kindī," *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien* 22 (1920-21): 3-21. The passage under discussion is on p. 11.

²⁰ Aristotle, *Topics* I.7. In the Greek original the discussion is about the meanings of *to tauton*, "the same."

²¹ In his "Treatise on the Holy Trinity," published in Georg Graf (ed.), *Die Schriften des Jacobiten Ḥabīb ibn Ḥidma Abū Rā'īṭa*, CSCO 130/ar. 14 (Louvain: Impr. Orientaliste L. Durbecq, 1951), pp. 6-7.

Qur'anic word, "There is no thing like Him" (*al-Shūrā* (42):11). For Ḥabīb, the Christian description of God as one "in essence" and *three* "in number" respects God's transcendence by describing God in such a way as to distinguish Him from any created being.

But, to ask a question that Muslim controversialists constantly asked of Christians, *why three?* Ḥabīb does not lack for an answer. He argues that God should be described with attributes of perfection or completeness (*kamāl*). However, "three" represents the summation of *all* the numbers because, as the sum of the first odd and the first even numbers, it in principal contains all numbers within itself!

Now, this is an argument that may strike many of us today as simply silly. It certainly did not impress the great Andalusian jurist and heresiographer, Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064), who devoted a page to refuting it in his *Fiṣal*.²² However, it is possible that just as Ḥabīb had already based his case on Greek authority (namely, the Aristotle of the *Topics*), here too he expected that his argument would be rendered cogent by the memory of some recently translated text -- perhaps a Pythagorean discussion about the properties of numbers. I do not know what texts Ḥabīb might have read; but Pythagorean arithmetical texts provide a glimpse of the kind of intellectual world in which his argument about "three" as the number of *al-kamāl* might have made sense.²³ In any case, as far as we can tell Ḥabīb's argument seemed sound to other Christian intellectuals, who "recycled" it a number of times: we find his argument for the triunity of God in the

²² Abū Muḥammad 'Alī ibn Aḥmad known as Ibn Ḥazm al-Andalusī al-Zāhirī, *al-Fiṣal fī l-mīlāl wa l-ahwā' wa l-niḥāl*. I consulted the edition of Aḥmad Shams al-Dīn (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1996), I:68-69.

²³ See, for example Walter Burkert, *Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism*, translated by Edwin L. Minar, Jr. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), esp. p. 432 where Burkert mentions Pythagorean texts in which 1 and 2 are not regarded as numbers at all, but the first principle of number.

Epistle of the anonymous ninth-century Nestorian controversialist who used the name 'Abd al-Masīḥ al-Kindī, as well as in a treatise on the Trinity by the thirteenth-century Coptic theologian and bishop Būlus al-Būshī.

This is but one simple example of the way in which the Greek philosophical heritage, as well as the early development of Arabic philosophy, provided the idiom with which Christian and Muslim intellectuals could converse with one another -- also concerning matters of faith. If space permitted, we could discuss the way in which later philosophers, such as the great Muslim philosopher al-Fārābī's Christian successor Yaḥyā ibn 'Adī (893-974), developed the Arabic Aristotelian discussion of the meaning of "the one." In Yaḥyā's *Treatise on Unicity*,²⁴ a work preserved in both Christian and Islamic manuscript collections, he offers *twelve* meanings of "the one" in the course of a philosophical prolegomenon to the discussion of God's *tawḥīd*. Here and elsewhere in Yaḥyā's writings we are provided many fascinating glimpses into how a Christian *faylasūf* who followed in the footsteps of al-Fārābī, "the second teacher" [after Aristotle], could use the intellectual tools available to him in order to make the case to his Muslim colleagues that fundamental Christian doctrines could be defended in an intellectually respectable fashion.

Conclusion

This essay has provided some very brief glimpses into the early history of religious conversation between Christian and Muslim intellectuals in the Arabic

²⁴ The edition of this treatise, with a splendid introduction [in Arabic] to Yaḥyā's life and work, is: Khalil Samir, *Le traité de l'unité de Yaḥyā ibn 'Adī (893-974)*, Patrimoine Arabe Chrétien 2 (Jounieh, Lebanon: Librairie Saint-Paul, 1980).

language. These conversations were enabled, in the first place, by Christians' adoption of and eventual mastery of Arabic, and furthered as Christians and Muslims got to know one another's scriptures. In this essay, however, we have focussed more on the conversations that proceeded on the basis of *al-'aql* rather than *al-naql*, that is, conversations that took place between Christian and Muslim *mutakallimūn* and *falāsifah*. While it is dangerous to generalize and attempt to extract "lessons" from history, perhaps it is worth observing that some of the most interesting apologetic work that we find in the first two centuries of Arabic Christian-Muslim conversation was produced by intellectuals who were deeply involved in the great civilization-building projects of their time. It was precisely their participation in *common* intellectual currents that provided Muslim and Christian thinkers with the tools with which they could defend and commend their *particular* beliefs. Perhaps here there is a lesson for us today: Christian-Muslim dialogue will surely profit as Christians and Muslims together address the great issues and challenges and projects of our time and place.

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