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David Thomas

The First Arabic-Speaking Christian Theologians

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Sandra Toenies Keating
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Although it is known that Arabic-speaking tribes who identified themselves as Christian inhabited the Arabian Peninsula as early as 340 (Hoyland 2001: 30), the first texts on theological topics composed in Arabic do not appear until around the middle of the eighth century. Previous to this, Syriac and Greek traditions dominated as the liturgical and theological idioms, giving way to Arabic only as the ʿAbbāsid dynasty gained power and influence over non-Muslim society. At this point, Christians of all denominations, Melkite, Jacobite and Nestorian (as they are usually designated in the texts), exhibit a sense of urgency to communicate their teachings and faith in the new lingua franca of the empire.

While the first Arabic-speaking Christian writers were solidly grounded in Syriac and Greek theology and the rhetorical styles of Late Antiquity, the new situation presented by Islam necessitated a creative presentation of the doctrines of Christian faith. Muslims saw themselves as the inheritors of the faith of Adam, Abraham and Jesus, and found justification for this in what they believed had been ‘sent down’ (tanzīl) to their Prophet Muḥammad in the form of a recitation (qurʾān) of the eternal umm al-kitāb (Mother of the Book, Q 3:7; 13:39; 43:4) or al-lawḥ al-maḥfūz (the Preserved Tablet, Q 85:22). This qurʾān is intended both to confirm what was received by prophets before and to correct the errors that have crept into the true religion given by God to Adam at the creation of humanity and to subsequent prophets. Thus, the Qurʾān is characterised by both an emphasis on continuity with Christianity (belief in One God, revelation, prophets, the Last Judgment, etc.) and on teachings that must be corrected (Trinity, Incarnation, original sin). The earliest Christian writers in response to Islam took advantage of the claim to continuity to defend the veracity of Christian teachings, while simultaneously arguing that Islam was a heresy and Muḥammad a false prophet. Initially, the audience of these writers was Christian, as in the well-known example of John of Damascus, and the texts were likely intended to help other Christians understand the implications of the religion of their new rulers as well as to defend themselves against it. These earliest texts were written in ecclesiastical languages such as Greek, Syriac and Coptic. Later, however, Christians were prompted to write in a manner accessible to Muslims and to articulate these doctrines and arguments in the language of Arabic, which had become heavily influenced by the Qurʾān and Islamic concepts.

The sporadic appearance of anonymous treatises and texts written in Arabic by Christians before the end of the eighth century provides a window into the efforts to respond to the
growing presence of Islam in everyday life. Especially significant here is the untitled and anonymous treatise written in 755 or 788 that goes by the modern title Fī tathlīth Allāh al-wāhid (‘On the Trinity of the one God’). This treatise typifies a general format that becomes a common feature of later Christian Arabic texts, defending first the unity and Trinity of God, followed by an explanation of the person of Christ and concluding with Old Testament testimonia supporting, among other themes, baptism and the crucifixion (Thomas and Roggema 2009: 331). One notices that this systematically treats the major points of theological contention between Muslims and Christians, providing a sort of handbook for its reader.

The format of Fī tathlīth Allāh draws attention to the challenge of the Qurʾān to Christians to give a demonstration, a burhān, of their beliefs (Q 2:111; 21:24). While Christians were able to use apologetic methodology developed especially for engagement with Jews and pagans in the early centuries of Christianity, Islam presented a unique challenge that was only gradually identified. As noted already, common beliefs led many to characterise the movement as a heresy, appearing as it did in the wake of the Christological controversies addressed at the various Ecumenical Councils and incorporating the veneration of Jesus and his mother, Mary. By the late eighth century, however, deeper differences had become apparent that necessitated creative responses to the emerging religion. The situation became even more urgent with the accession of the ‘Abbāsids to the caliphate and their intentional programme of Arabisation and Islamisation. Now the threat of large-scale conversion to Islam was more immediate as the ‘Abbāsids consolidated power and expanded their influence. Consequently, the early ninth century saw an intensified effort on the part of all Christian communities to identify strategies of Muslim daʿwa (call to Islam) and to provide theological responses to the questions asked by Muslims that were convincing both to the educated elite and the common person.

Not surprisingly, three named theologians representing the three largest Christian denominations emerge at this time whose writings in Arabic become the basis for later argumentation: the Melkite Theodore Abū Qurra, the Jacobite (Miaphysite) Abū Rāʾiṭa l-Takrīṭī and ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī of the ‘Nestorian’ Church of the East. These writers are apologists who become known for engagement with Muslims, giving accounts of their experience of questions posed by their interlocutors and possible answers. They are not just translating earlier apologetic texts; they are engaged in expressing Christian teachings in a new context, adapting their methods to fit particular problems presented by the Qurʾān. Their responses set both the tone and theological topics for subsequent generations of Christians living under Muslim rule as their writings came to be viewed as ‘classics’.

The first of these theologians is Theodore Abū Qurra, an extremely prolific writer whose works in Greek, Syriac and Arabic have only been partially preserved. Little is known for certain about him personally, except that he is associated with the Melkite Church and the city of Harrān and that he travelled to Armenia sometime between 813 and 817 to participate in a debate with Nonnus of Nisibis (d. after 862) at the court of the Bagratid Prince Ashot Msakr (van Roey 1948). For numerous reasons, most especially because of his adherence to the Melkite Church and the relative accessibility of his writings in Greek (many of which were translated into Georgian), Abū Qurra has long been recognised in the Western traditions, unlike most of his Christian contemporaries (Thomas and Roggema 2009: 438–41).

Abū Qurra’s writings often take the form of a maymar, or treatise, addressing a single topic. The most extensive and systematic of his extant Arabic works, and one of the only texts in which he is explicitly concerned with Islam, is the Maymar fī wujūd al-Khāliq wa-l-dīn al-qawāmīn (‘Treatise on the existence of the Creator and the true religion’), which is likely three shorter treatises combined into a longer text (Dick 1982: 173–270; Lamoreaux 2005: 1–25, 41–7, 165–74). In it,
Abū Qurra lays out arguments concerning three of the most common topics in Christian Arabic texts – the human need of divine revelation for knowledge of the unity and Trinity of God, how one can discern the ‘true religion’, and the various reasons for adherence to a religion. He concludes that a religion is true if it has spread because it is convincing and its teaching has been substantiated by miracles. Thus, Christianity alone is the true religion.

The theme of the relationship between reason and revelation is a common one among the early Arabic-speaking Christian theologians as they sought to achieve a balance between the tradition of the Fathers who relied heavily on the Greek philosophical tradition and the centrality of the Bible for Christian life. The challenge posed by Islam with its confidence in the veracity of the Qur’ān and its ‘correction’ of Christianity forced theologians such as Abū Qurra to reformulate Christian thought on the limits of reason as well as to substantiate the reliability of scripture. Abū Qurra lays out arguments on the usefulness of human reason in many of his Arabic texts, notably in the first part of Maymar fi uujiyd al-Khāliq (Dick 173–98, Lamoreaux 2005: 165–74) and in a shorter text, Maymar ‘alā sabīl ma’rifat Allāh wa-tahqīq al-Ibn al-azāli (‘Treatise on the way of knowing God and the confirmation of the eternal Son’) (Lamoreaux 2005: 157–64). Each of these emphasises that much can be known by natural reason about God’s attributes, especially through his effects, including that God has a Son, who is equal in essence, because creation resembles him, even if some mysteries are only known through revelation.

While Abū Qurra does describe the doctrine of the Trinity in some detail in Maymar fi uujiyd al-Khāliq, as well as Maymar yuhaqiqu annahu lā yulzamu l-Naṣārā an yaqūlla thalātha ʾāliha idiḥ yaqūlla l-Ab ilāh wa-l-Ibn ilāh wa-Rūḥ al-Qudus (ilāh) (‘Treatise confirming that Christians do not necessarily speak of three gods when they say that the Father is God and the Son is God and the Holy Spirit is God’) (Thomas and Roggema 2009: 453–4; Lamoreaux 2005: 175–93), a defence of Christian teachings specifically on the person of Christ pervades his extant works. His most copied work, Maymar fi maوت al-Masīḥ wa-annā idhā quhā inna l-Masīḥ māta ‘annā innamā naqīlu inna l-Ibn al-azāli l-maṭālūd min al-Ab qalba l-dhuhr huwa ilāhī māta ‘annā lā fi ṣabī’ atihi l-ilāhyya bal fi ṣabī’ atihi l-insānīyya wa-kayfa yu’qalu ‘haftā l-maut (‘Treatise on the death of Christ, and that when we say that Christ died for us we say that the eternal Son begotten of the Father before the ages died for us, not in his divine nature, but in his human nature, and how this death is to be understood’), provides an explication of Melkite Christological formulae, as well as the significance of Christ’s death. The clarification is made within the context of debates with Nestorians and Miaphysites, with a particular eye to the usefulness of the treatise for those in conversation with Muslims (Thomas and Roggema 2009: 454–6; Lamoreaux 2005: 109–28). Since the Qur’ān denies both the divine nature of Christ as well as the crucifixion, it was necessary for Christians to construct a burhān in the most accessible manner possible and to clarify for ‘outsiders’ the source of a seemingly obscure and illogical argument taking place among the Christian communities in the aftermath of the Ecumenical Councils. Thus, although Maymar fi maوت al-Masīḥ focuses on inter-Christian disagreements, the fact that it is an explanation in Arabic, translating and defining key terms in the language of the Qurʾān, indicates it was intended to support Christians in defence of their religion.

A related subject is that of the Crucifixion more specifically. Among the extant treatises of Abū Qurra, two record his responses to questions about Christ’s suffering and death. The first is a fragment entitled Su‘īla Abū Qurra Anbā Thādhums usqaf Harrān ‘an al-Masīḥ bi-hauhā ʾuluha am bi-ghāyru hauhāi (‘Abba Theodore Abū Qurra, the Bishop of Harrān, was asked about Christ, whether he was crucified willingly or not’). In it he answers a Muslim’s question of why the Jews are not to be praised for crucifying Christ if he had willed his death with an analogy of a person killed in jihād against the Byzantine armies. Just as the Byzantines do not intend the
person to enter into heaven as a martyr, and so can be held accountable for the death of that person, the Jews intended to destroy Christ, not do his will. Thus, they are not to be praised for killing him on the cross (Lamoreaux 2005: 207–8; Thomas and Roggema 2009: 468–9). A second text, *Al-radd ‘alā l-ladhīna yaqūlūna inna l-Nāṣārā ya’innu bi-‘ilāh dī ‘if* (‘Refutation of those who say that Christians believe in a weak God’), systematically outlines the necessity of the Crucifixion and death of Christ for salvation. It is only because of God’s attributes of justice, goodness, might and wisdom that God’s Son could suffer on the Cross and save humanity from the slavery of sin (Thomas and Roggema 2009: 471–2).

Of great interest to Abū Quorra is the question of how one determines the true religion and why one might choose to be an adherent of a religion not demonstrated to be true. This theme is found in many of his treatises and reflects growing concerns of Christians as ‘Abbāsid policies encouraged conversion to Islam in a host of areas in society. In *Maymar fi wujūd al-Khāliq*, Abū Quorra lays out a scenario in which one might examine and evaluate various religions ‘objectively’ (he envisions a person who has lived apart from civilization meeting adherents of various contemporary religions, including Muslims), asking which has the greatest claim to the truth. This is followed by a summary of those reasons why a person might become an adherent of a religion and whether, in his opinion, these are legitimate. He concludes that only Christianity has been properly demonstrated to be true because of the miracles associated with it, and that its followers accepted it without coercion or expectation of gain to themselves (Lamoreaux 2005: 1–25, 41–7, 165–74). Similar arguments are made in *Maymar yuḥaqqiqū annahu lā yuẓammū l-Nāṣārā an yaqūlū thālātha alīha, as well as Maymar fi taḥqīq al-Injīl wa-anna kullāna lā yuḥaqqiqūhu l-Injīl fa-huwa bātīl* (“Treatise on the confirmation of the Gospel and that everything that the Gospel does not confirm is false”) (Thomas and Roggema 2009: 456–7; Lamoreaux 2005: 49–53) and *Maymar fi taḥqīq nāmūs Mūsā l-muqaddas wa-l-anbiyā‘ alladhīna tanabba ‘ū ‘alā l-Masīh wa-l-Injīl al-tāhir . . . wa-taḥqīq al-urthūdhuksiyya llatī yansuhū l-nūs ilā l-Khalkīdīnīyya . . .* (“Treatise on the confirmation of the holy law of Moses and the prophets who prophesied about Christ and the holy Gospel . . . , and on the confirmation of the orthodoxy that people attribute to Chalcedonianism . . .”) (Thomas and Roggema 2009: 460–1; Lamoreaux 2005: 61–81), all of which emphasise the importance of miracles to confirm the truth of a religion. Although Abū Quorra often directs his arguments against the Jews, he is insistent that the same temptations of divorce and polygamy, as well as that of earthly power, which appeal to the ignorant, are again present in the new religion (Islam).

The problem of determining the true religion and legitimate motivations for conversion to it is of great importance to Christian theologians writing in Arabic in the first century of the ‘Abbāsid caliphate. As noted already, the ‘Abbāsids began a process of normalization of Islam as the religion and Arabic as the language of the lands under the new rulers which developed and expanded what was already initiated by the Umayyad caliphate (Bulliet 1979; Robinson 2000). Although there is little evidence of coercion to adopt the new religion through violence, pressure was exerted by Muslims on many fronts to encourage conversion. These included the *jizya* (taxation on non-Muslims) and restriction of certain types of government work to Muslims (Duri 2011; Levy-Rubin 2011), as well as concerted efforts of *da’wa* evidenced by the reports of Christians such as Abū Quorra and Abū Rāʾīṭa, who sought to provide responses to Muslim attempts to undermine the legitimacy of Christian faith and practice. It seems likely that the increased presence of Christian apologetic materials in Arabic was due to heightened *da’wa* as churches felt the need to furnish more systematic explanations for their congregations and inspire them to remain firm in their faith and stave off conversions. Previous defences of Christianity were useful in some situations, but Abū Quorra and others recognised that Islam posed a new threat with its allowance of some practices prohibited in Christianity (divorce, polygamy),
as well as access to power through its association with the new rulers. In proposing a method accessible to people of all walks of life, Abū Qurra emphasises the importance of miracles (of which none were claimed for Muḥammad at this time) and the meekness of those who spread the Christian message (Lamoreaux 2005: 18–23). Abū Qurra, like his Christian contemporaries, fully expected these texts to be read by non-Christian Arabic speakers; it is not known if they were convincing to Muslims, but they became the core of Christian Arabic apologetic in response to Islam.

Several themes not discussed in Maymar fi ʿuwjād al-Khāliq are found in Abū Qurra’s other treatises. The most significant of these are the importance of free will and a defence of the veneration of icons. Although a Melkite understanding of free will is evident in many of Abū Qurra’s writings, he lays out a defence of this position in Maymar yuḥaqqiqu li-l-insān hurrīyya thābita min Allāh fi khaltiqatihi wa-anna hurrīyyat al-insān lā yadkhulu ʿalayhā l-qahr min wujh min al-uwjūh battatān (‘Treatise confirming that human beings have an innate freedom from God in his creation (of them) and that absolutely no compulsion in any manner constrains the freedom of human beings’). The text is in part directed at Mani and his followers but is clearly shaped by the Qur’ān’s emphasis on God’s will. Abū Qurra argues that what God commands and prohibits does not limit human free will but that all human beings are born with free will and retain it throughout life. Further, God’s foreknowledge does not extinguish the exercise of free will, since God’s justice requires that humans choose to do good or evil (Thomas and Roggema 2009: 451–2; Lamoreaux 2005: 195–206).

A close contemporary of Abū Qurra, Ḥabbū ibn Khidma Abū Rāʾīta l-Takrīṭī, represents the Syrian Orthodox, Jacobite, church in the transition from Syriac to Arabic at the beginning of the ninth century. Like Abū Qurra, little about him personally has been established for certain. Although some traditions name him as a bishop, the earliest evidence indicates that he was a layman and a well-known teacher and apologist, as indicated by his title of vandapeti in Armenian texts. Abū Rāʾīta is associated with Abū Qurra’s visit to Armenia, noted earlier, to which he sent his relative, Nonnus of Nisibis, armed with arguments in defence of the Syrian Orthodox tradition. The dating of internal references in his writings, as well as mention of his participation in a local synod at Reshʿayna in 827/8, put his active phase between 814 and 830 in and around the city of Takrīt. Nine extant texts are attributed to him, along with at least one that is now lost. Of these, five are concerned directly with Islam, with references to perhaps two others that are not extant; four others defend miaphysite teachings against the Nestorian and Melkite positions (Thomas and Roggema 2009: 567–9; Keating 2006: 1–72).

Abū Rāʾīta’s writings follow a question and answer format that was common in the period, usually describing the questioners as ‘our opponents’ or ‘those who differ’; like Abū Qurra he does not mention Muslims or Islam explicitly, although there is no doubt these are his interlocutors. Many of the same themes noted in the writings of Abū Qurra are also addressed in Abū Rāʾīta’s extant texts. His longest and most comprehensive extant work is the risāla, Fī ithbāt dīn al-Naṣrānīyya wa-ithbāt al-Thālīth al-muqaddas (‘On the proof of the Christian religion and the proof of the Holy Trinity’), which outlines legitimate and illegitimate reasons to change one’s religion, various defences of the Trinity and the Incarnation and an explanation of several Christian practices. The text breaks off abruptly in a discussion of fasting (Keating 2006: 73–144). Abū Rāʾīta also composed more extensive explanations of the Trinity and Incarnation, as well as a separate list of Old Testament testimonia supporting these, probably for use by church leaders needing to defend their flocks from ongoing daʾwa.

The most important of Abū Rāʾīta’s writings is his first risāla, Fī l-Thālīth al-muqaddas (‘On the Holy Trinity’). He begins it with a short exhortation to those who might be drawn into
conversing with ‘those who differ’ and a recommendation of how to proceed. This is followed by a list of *siḥāt Allāh* (divine attributes) on which Christians agree with the ‘people of the south’. The list is one of the earliest references to the formulation of a Muslim creed known to us and has great value as a witness to what was believed to be held in common by scholars (Keating 2009). The majority of the text is a complex philosophical demonstration of the rationality of the doctrine of the Trinity in answer to the challenge of the Qur’ān to provide a *burhān* of Christian beliefs. At the conclusion of the *risāla*, he takes up the charge of *taḥrīf*, that the Christian scriptures have been tampered with, to demonstrate that the Bible is authentic and reliable. Although it is not explicitly stated, Abū Rā‘īṭa’s extensive use of philosophical methodology, along with reliance on carefully chosen biblical and patristic references, is intended to refute the accusation of scriptural corruption and the irrationality of Christian doctrine (Keating 2006: 147–215).

Scholars have long questioned the manner in which Christians in this early period engaged with Muslims – is the question and answer format of the theological texts merely a literary form, or do actual formal debates or informal conversations lie behind them? Although most of the writings never mention Muslims or Islam explicitly, a few extant texts are addressed to specific persons. One example of this is Abū Rā‘īṭa’s *Mustadillan bihi ‘alā šīhāt al-Naṣrāniyya l-maqbūla min al-dā‘īn al-mubashshirīn bihā bi-l-Injīl al-muqaddāsas* (‘In which he demonstrates the authenticity of the Christianity received from the Evangelists who called to it by the holy Gospel’). This very short text is addressed to his contemporary, the well-known Mu’tazilī *mutakallim*, Thumāma ibn Ashras al-Baṣrī (d. c. 828). Like Abū Qurra in his works, Abū Rā‘īṭa here lays out a proof of the truth of Christianity using a logical formula, concluding that miracles and signs are necessary to confirm the authenticity of a religion (Thomas and Roggema 2009: 578–80; Keating 2006: 335–45).

A further example of this type of exchange is found in the group of texts preserved as the *Apology of al-Kindī*’. Very little is known about the author(s), and scholars are not agreed on whether it represents an actual letter exchange between ‘Abd Allāh ibn Ismā‘īl al-Hāshimī, who invites the Christian ‘Abd al-Masīḥ ibn Iṣḥāq al-Kindī, and the latter’s response it purports to be, or whether it is an apologetic work by a single, Christian author. Nonetheless, this text has been extremely influential because it was translated into Latin in the twelfth century and was for centuries the primary apologetic source concerning Islam in the West. It contains perhaps the earliest account of the collection of the Qur’ān from a non-Muslim source (including variant readings), as well as an extensive defence of Christianity that draws on Abū Rā‘īṭa’s treatise on the Trinity (Thomas and Roggema 2009: 587–94; van Koningsveld 2004: 69–92).

The third of the three earliest theologians to write in Arabic whose name we know is ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī. Like Abū Qurra and Abū Rā‘īṭa, little is known about him except that he was a younger contemporary of the latter and is associated with the Syrian Church of the East (Nestorian) in Baṣra. In his two lengthy extant works, he addresses many of the same topics as the texts discussed earlier, and in many cases presents a more developed defence of Christianity. More than Abū Rā‘īṭa, ‘Ammār emphasizes the Incarnation as a real and necessary event in a manner that appeals to Muslims and answers common questions about Christian teachings. In both the *Kitāb al-maṣā‘īl wa-l-ajwība* (‘The book of questions and answers’) and the *Kitāb al-burhān ‘alā siyāqat al-tadhīr al-ilāhī* (‘The proof concerning the course of the divine economy’), ‘Ammār very explicitly lays out a defence against the charge of *taḥrīf* as a component of his argument for Christianity as the true religion (Thomas and Roggema 2009: 604–10; Hayek 1986: 21–265).

Finally, although he belongs to the next generation, Ḥunayn ibn Iṣḥāq (809–73) may also be counted among the earliest Christian Arabic theologians whose name we know. He is best
known as a translator, but he also composed original works, of which the Kayfiyyat ḥaqqat al-diyyāna (‘How to discern the truth of a religion’) is most relevant here. Like the theologians discussed earlier, Ḥunayn lays out the various ways a person can identify the true religion and reasons why one might convert. This text was widely copied, and its contents are found in the works of several later apologists (Thomas and Roggema 2009: 768–79).

In their own, unique way, each of these early Christian writers in Arabic takes up the challenges posed to their communities in the late eighth century by the establishment of Islam as the religion of the rulers. Although they consider themselves opponents of each other because of divisions among the churches, certain topics of common concern emerge: how does one discern the true religion, and what reasons are sufficient to adhere to it; how does one demonstrate the reasonableness of Christianity, and especially that the doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation do not contradict logic; and how does one prove the authenticity of the scriptures possessed by the Christians and Jews. These are the questions that will dominate Christian Arabic apologetic in the coming centuries, and the answers will provide the foundation for the theology of these communities until the modern period.

Note

1 The date has been variously computed, depending on whether the phrase ‘since the establishment of Christianity’ refers to the birth of Christ or his Crucifixion. (Thomas and Roggema 331)

References


Further reading


