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MUTUAL INFLUENCES AND BORROWINGS

Alexander Treiger

In the early period of Islamic rule, the borderlines between Middle Eastern Christian and Muslim communities remained porous, and ideas were ‘smuggled’ quite freely across them. Influences and borrowings were happening both spontaneously – as Christians converting to Islam were inadvertently importing aspects of their heritage – and deliberately, through collaboration and discussion between Muslim and Christian scholars. Institutionalised public debates (majālis) between Christians and Muslims (and others) as well as informal discussions between adherents of the two faiths were an important avenue through which Muslim theology was gradually shaped. The first part of this chapter will review the evidence for such influences and borrowings. The second will discuss Islamic influences on Christianity both inside and outside the Middle East.

Christian influences on Islam

The Qurʾān is very conscious of Christians, Christianity and biblical lore. While key Christian teachings are rejected (e.g. the Trinity and Jesus’ divine sonship, crucifixion, and – implicitly – resurrection), several others are adopted (e.g. Jesus’ virgin birth). The Qurʾān recognises numerous biblical personalities as ‘prophets’ and ‘messengers’; it accords Jesus the same status, while affirming Muhammad as the last prophet and messenger (Griffith 2013: 54–96). In one notable instance Christians are praised as the ‘nearest in affection’ to the Muslims ‘because they have priests and monks among them and are not arrogant’ (Q 5:82; but cf. Q 9:34). Not accidentally, Qurʾānic vocabulary is replete with terms borrowed from or influenced by Christian terminology in Aramaic/Syriac, Greek and Ethiopian; even the term ‘Qurʾān’ may be derived from Syriac qeryānā, ‘scriptural reading’ or ‘lectionary’ (Jeffery 1938).

While it seems wrongheaded to suggest that the Qurʾān as a whole draws on some prior Christian lectionary, an ‘Ur-Qurʾān’ which has been tampered with and misunderstood by later Islamic tradition, exploring the Qurʾān’s intertextual engagement with late antique, particularly Syriac, Christianity is certainly a fruitful avenue of inquiry (Reynolds 2008, 2010; Neuwirth et al. 2010; Witztum 2011; Horn 2013; El-Badawi 2014).

Notable cases where the Qurʾān demonstrably draws on Christian sources are the story of the ‘companions of the cave’ (Q 18:9–26), based on a Christian legend about the seven sleepers
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of Ephesus (Griffith 2008), and the section devoted to Dhū l-Qarnayn, i.e. Alexander the Great (Q 18:83–102), based on the Syriac Alexander Romance (van Bladel 2008). Qur’ānic presentation of Jesus and Mary displays familiarity with Christian apocrypha, particularly the Protoevangelium of James (Horn 2008; Reck 2014), while the story of the prostration of the angels before Adam is likely indebted to the Life of Adam and Eve cycle of texts or to the Syriac Cave of treasures (cf. Minov 2015). It has been plausibly suggested that Sūrat al-ikhlāṣ (Q 112) polemises against the Nicene Creed (El-Badawi 2014: 6), while the famous ‘light verse’ (Q 24:35) draws inspiration from a Christian monastery, probably Mount Sinai (Böwering 2001: 116–25; Fowden 2007: 5–6).

An intriguing Qur’ānic verse – ‘They say, “It is only a human being who teaches the Prophet”; the tongue of the one to whom they refer is foreign, while this is a clear Arabic language’ (Q 16:103) – has long raised suspicions that Muḥammad was relying on Christian (or Jewish) informants. Thus, John of Damascus (d. c. 749) argues that Muḥammad drew inspiration from an Arian monk, while a ninth-century Christian legend claims that a heretical monk Sergius or Bahīrā ‘taught’ Muḥammad the Qurʾān (Roggema 2009). Muslim commentaries on this verse acknowledge that Muḥammad befriended a certain Christian, possibly a blacksmith or a slave, while denying that he learned from him. Similarly, a monk named Bahīrā appears in the earliest Muslim biography of Muḥammad, the Siwa of Ibn Ishāq (d. 767), yet his function in the narrative is merely to predict Muḥammad’s prophetic mission, not to teach him anything. Whatever the case may be, it is obvious that Muḥammad and his early followers were familiar with Christianity and biblical lore and had personal contacts with Arabic, Aramaic/Syriac and Ethiopic-speaking Christians; without such familiarity the Qurʾān’s message could not have been fully appreciated by its original audience.

Biography of Muḥammad

The Qurʾān indicates that the coming of a new prophet was foretold in earlier scriptures – the Torah and the Gospel – and proclaimed by Jesus (Q 7:157; 61:6). Ibn Ishāq may have been the first to add specifics and argue that Muḥammad was the Paraclete (Comforter) predicted by Jesus in the Gospel of John. His citation of the relevant Gospel passage (John 15:26–16:1) – the first such extended quotation in a Muslim work – marks a symbolic beginning of Muslim polemists’ engagement with Christian scriptures (Griffith 2013: 175–203; cf. CMR 1:57–71).

Ibn Ishāq’s citation indicates that either he or his informant – possibly a convert from Christianity – had access to a Christian Palestinian Aramaic translation of the Gospel of John; he was also probably familiar with the analogous Manichaean belief that Mani was the Paraclete predicted by Jesus. Subsequently, the notion that Muḥammad was the Paraclete was tested in Christian–Muslim debates, most famously in the disputation between the East-Syriac Catholicoi Timothy (r. 780–823) and the caliph al-Mahdī (r. 775–85); not surprisingly, it found little traction with the Christian leader, who argued for the traditional Christian identification of the Paraclete with the Holy Spirit (CMR 1:522–6).

Ḥadīth and ascetic literature

Some New Testament phrases were reascribed to Muḥammad and circulated among Muslims in the form of Ḥadīths (Cook 2006). One particularly interesting example is the following ḥadīth qudsi ('sacred' Ḥadīth, i.e. a saying attributed to God): ‘God said: I have prepared for My pious servants what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor has it occurred to the heart of man’. Evidently a paraphrase of 1 Corinthians 2:9 (itself a quotation from an earlier apocryphal work, The Apocalypse of Elijah), this Ḥadīth is cited already by Hammām ibn Munabbih (d. c. 720) and in Qurʾān
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commentaries on Q 32:17 as early as Muqātil ibn Sulaymān (d. 767) and Ma’mar ibn Rāshid (d. 770; preserved by ‘ Abd al-Razzāq, d. 827); it is also transmitted in al-Bukhārī’s Ṣaḥīḥ (nos. 3244, 4779–80, 7498) (de Prémare 1989; Lange 2016: 2–3).

Later on, this Ḥadīth features in Islamic philosophical and theological works, most prominently in al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), who used it to articulate his incorporeal understanding of the afterlife (contrary to the communis opinio, al-Ghazālī is rather in agreement with the philosophers on the matter – Treiger 2012: 42, 46, 84–93, 137, n. 81). It is no accident that the underlying New Testament verse is habitually employed by Syriac Christian authors of the seventh–ninth centuries (Isaac of Nineveh, Joseph Ḥazzāyā, ḽob of Edessa) with the same purpose, and in the case of Job of Edessa, as part of his covert polemic against the Qurʾān’s sensual afterlife (Roggema 2009: 123–6). We can reasonably infer that early Muslims’ familiarity with Syriac Christianity facilitated the acceptance of this New Testament verse into Ḥadīth – perhaps as a counterbalance to the Qurʾān’s sensualism – and influenced its later trajectory within the Islamic tradition.

Even more widespread than attribution of New Testament phrases to Muḥammad is attribution of a wide range of sayings – some derived from canonical or apocryphal Gospels (typically Islamicised), others of uncertain origin – to Jesus. The resulting ‘Muslim Jesus’ traditions enjoyed considerable popularity in later Islamic ethical literature, works of adab (belles-lettres) and Sufism (Khalidi 2001).

Islamic mysticism (Sufism)

Numerous anecdotes about Christian monks (muḥābān) feature prominently in early Islamic literature. In these anecdotes, monks impart ascetic wisdom to their Muslim interlocutors, often notable ascetics (zuhhād) themselves; thus, for instance, the early Sufi Ibrāhīm ibn Adham (d. c. 782) claimed that a Christian hermit Simʾān had taught him ‘gnosis’ (Livne-Kafri 1996; Mourad 2004; Ṣādir 2005; similarly, the alchemist Jābir ibn Ḥayyān saw fit to acknowledge his debt to a Christian monk – Rosenthal 1975: 248–51). These anecdotes must have had verisimilitude for their intended audience, and so contacts between early Muslim ascetics and Christian monks must have been common enough.

This finds confirmation in Christian sources. Thus, in his Superiority of celibacy, the East-Syriac theologian Elias of Nisibis (d. 1046) cites an unspecified book composed by a Christian monk about a disputation he had with three Muslim Sufis. The Sufis attempted to challenge the monk’s celibate way of life but were persuaded by his arguments (Kessel 2010: 113). Another pertinent Christian source is the Disputation of Ṣāliḥ ibn ‘Abd al-Qudās with a monk of China (Armala 1926; other versions of this story, ascribed to various personalities, are extant in both Christian and Muslim sources – see Graf 1944–1953: II 475). Ṣāliḥ was a poet executed for ‘heresy’ (zandaqa, possibly Manichaean leanings) in about 783. In the Disputation he questions a monk about God’s proximity to the ‘hearts of the pious’, renunciation and human sinfulness – common themes in both Christian and Sufi reflection.

Moreover, there is one significant case where a Christian ascetic treatise seems to have been commissioned by and addressed to an (unnamed) Muslim ascetic. This is Ibn al-Ṣalt’s early tenth-century précis of the teachings of the East-Syriac mystic Isaac of Nineveh. Ibn al-Ṣalt described his addressee as a ‘foreigner’ who did not know Syriac and ‘dedicated himself to his Lord’ (Sbath 1934: 10, 53). This could of course mean that the addressee was a Christian monk who was not an Aramean. However, the fact that Ibn al-Ṣalt’s rhetoric is replete with distinctly Islamic expressions makes it more likely that the addressee was a Muslim. Unless that is the case, it is hard to explain why Ibn al-Ṣalt refers to God with such Islamic epithets as lā ilāha illā huwa (‘there is no god but He’), jalla jalālahu (‘exalted be His majesty’), taqaddasat asmāʾahu (‘hallowed
be His names’), *dhū l-jalāl wa-l-ikrām* (‘Master of majesty and bounty’, Q 55:27, 55:78) and *layṣa ka-mištihli shay* (‘there is nothing like unto Him’, Q 42:11) (Sbath 1934: 9, 51, 53) as well as employing phrases from the Ḥadīth such as ‘An hour of reflection is better than a night-long vigil’ and even ‘Every innovation is an error’ (Sbath 1934: 48, 64). It is significant that Ibn al-Ṣalt may have also authored a treatise on medical astrology, likewise intended for a Muslim audience (Klein-Franke 1984).

If we also consider early Muslims’ fascination with Christian monasteries (Kilpatrick 2003; Fowden 2007; Campbell 2009), the facility with which they attended Christian festivals and frequented Christian holy men (Penn 2010), and the fact that several Sufis were converts from Christianity (e.g. Farqad al-Sabakkāhī, d. 749, and Maʿrūf al-Karkhī, d. 816), it will become clear that Sufism could not have developed in isolation from contemporary Middle Eastern monasticism. The scholarly paradigm that seeks the origins of Sufism solely in the Qur’ān and Ḥadīth, in isolation from non-Muslim sources, seems inadequate in that it fails to do justice to the historical reality of contacts between Muslims and Christians in a period when Christians were still in the majority in the Middle East.

Indeed, as is frequently pointed out, the very term Sufism was coined with reference to the ascetic practice of wearing a woollen cloak (*ṣūf*), in imitation of Christian monks’ hair-shirt (Knysh 2000: 7, 15–16). It also seems likely that the cult of Sufi saints (*awliyāʾ*) as well as that of Shi’ī Imāms developed under the influence of Christian veneration of saints, their shrines and their relics. Sufism and Shi’ism – and more generally, popular Islam – have absorbed such practices as visitation of shrines and tombs of holy men (*ziyārat al-qubūr*), the belief in saints’ mediation (*tauwaṣṣul*), intercession (*shaṭḥa*) and miracles (*kaṟāmāt*), possibly influenced by the Greek term *charismata*), and the notion of a spiritual energy (*‘blessing’, *baraka*) inhering in their tombs and material remains (Taylor 1999). It is significant that the term *baraka* in this specific sense is found in Christian Arabic well before it is attested in Islamic sources (e.g. in Theodore Abū Qurra (d. c. 830) and in the *Life of Timothy of Kākhushīt* (ninth or early tenth century) – Griffith 1997: 74; Wood 2011: 266; cf. CMR 5: 648; the earliest Islamic example may be al-Sarrāj, d. 988 – Sells 1996: 226–8). The Muslim theologian Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), a staunch opponent of such practices, may well be correct in identifying their origin as Christian (Michot 2002).

Literature on Syriac mysticism has experienced an exponential growth, with many new sources becoming available in recent years (Kessel and Pinggéra 2011). Several studies address the relationship between Syriac mysticism and Sufism (Seppälä 2003; Beulay 2005; Blum 2009; Tamcke 2010; Gobillot 2011). A host of parallels between Sufism and Syriac mysticism have been pointed out: for instance, between the Sufi *đikr* (invocation of God) and the Syriac notion of ‘remembrance of God’ (*‘udhānā d-alahā*) as well as the ‘Jesus prayer’ (Knysh 2000: 317–18; Teule 2010); or between spiritual ‘intoxication’ (*sukt*) in Sufism and ‘inebriation’ (*nawwāyūṭa*) with the love of God in Syriac mysticism. Key theological terms used by and about the Sufi poet al-Ḥallāj (executed in 922) are of East-Syriac provenance (Treiger 2011: 703–5), while his celebrated ecstatic utterance ‘I am the Truth’ deliberately harkens back to Jesus (John 14:6). The significance of ‘weeping’, solitude and obedience to the ‘elder’ (*shaykh*) in both traditions has also been pointed out (Knysh 2000: 17, 314–15). Arabic translations of monastic literature (Evagrius, John Climacus, *Apopthegmata patrum*, etc.) and of East-Syriac mystics (particularly Isaac of Nineveh), produced from the mid-eighth century onwards in Palestinian monasteries, may have also contributed to the development of Sufism (Treiger 2014).

Christian influence is discernible also in later Sufism. The case of al-Ghazālī is particularly instructive. He presents Islamic spiritual life as an interplay of two sciences: the ‘science of practice’ (*‘ilm al-muʿāmala*) and the ‘science of knowledge’ (*‘ilm al-maʿrifā*), also called the ‘science of unveiling’ (*‘ilm al-mukāshafa*). The former instructs how to ‘polish the mirror of the heart’ (i.e.
purify it from reprehensible qualities), while the latter consists of spiritual knowledge revealed to the heart thus polished. In his Persian work *Alchemy of felicity*, al-Ghazālī subdivides this knowledge into ‘meditation on the wonders of creation’ (tafakkor dar 'ajāyeb-e šan) and ‘meditation on the beauty and sublimity of the [divine] essence’ (tafakkor dar jalāl-o-jamāl-e dhāt) (Treiger 2012: 35–47).

All this bears a striking resemblance to the teachings of Evagrius (d. 399), who famously divided Christian life into praktikē (the ‘practical’ stage, i.e. combatting the passions, leading to ‘dispassion’, apatheia) and gnōstikē (the stage of knowledge), also called ‘contemplation’ (theōría). The latter is subdivided into contemplation of the created world, called ‘physical’ contemplation (physikē), and contemplation of the Trinity, called ‘theological’ contemplation (theologikē). Evidently, al-Ghazālī’s muʿāmala corresponds – both structurally and linguistically – to Evagrius’ praktikē (both terms are derived from verbs which mean ‘to act’); maʿīfa to gnōstikē; mukāshāfa to theōria; and finally, the two subdivisions of mukāshāfa to physikē and theologikē respectively.

It is, moreover, highly significant that al-Ghazālī used the image of a polished mirror to describe the median state between muʿāmala and mukāshāfa, just as Evagrius and his followers deployed the mirror image to describe the median state of apatheia. The mirror image is particularly prominent in Syriac (Brock 2005). Al-Ghazālī further deployed it to articulate his unique Christology in ways traceable to the eighth-century East-Syriac mystic John of Dalyatha, a follower of Evagrius (Treiger 2011). All this leaves little doubt that al-Ghazālī was (indirectly) drawing on East-Syriac Evagrianism, though the exact route by which its teachings reached him remains to be explored. Muslim heresiographers such as Abū ʻĪsā al-Warrāq (d. 861), who discussed Christian doctrines, as well as Christian theologians who wrote in Arabic such as Elias of Nisibis may have played a role in this transmission process.

**Dialectical theology (kalām)**

The trademark kalām technique of disjunctive questions (e.g. ‘Ask: Do you believe X, yes or no? If the opponent says “yes”, respond: . . .; if “no”, respond: . . .’) seems to be influenced by Christological discussions in Syriac, while the term kalām (literally: ‘speech’) in the sense of ‘dialectical theology’ most likely resulted from a conflation of the terms designating dialexis and theologikē in Syriac and/or Arab Christian discourse (Cook 1980; Tannous 2008; Treiger 2016).

Possible Christian influences on kalām have been pointed out (Wolfson 1976: 58–64). Scholars have long argued that Christian thinkers – particularly John of Damascus – influenced the Qadarī (‘free will’) position and triggered the free will versus predestination debate within Islam. The Qadarī-Christian connection remains a distinct possibility – indeed, Muslim sources allege that Qadarī leaders (Maʿbad al-Juhanī, executed in 699, and Ghaylān al-Dimashqī, executed c. 735) had ties with Christians (Rubin 1999: 177–80). However, it no longer seems likely that John of Damascus had a significant role in this encounter, as a key document formerly ascribed to him – the *Disputation between a Saracen and a Christian* – has been shown to be the work of a later author (Treiger 2016: 34–8).

The Muslim theory of divine attributes (ṣifāt) inhering in, yet distinct from, the divine essence has also been put down to Christian influence (Wolfson 1976: 112–32). This intuition may be correct, though the arguments deployed to prove it are problematic, not in the least because they disregard Syriac articulations of Trinitarian theology. It may be significant, for instance, that the East-Syriac mystic John of Dalyatha rejected hypostatic Trinitarianism and controversially redefined the Son and the Holy Spirit as God’s ‘powers’ (ḥaylā): knowledge and life. (This equation became standard also in Arab Christianity from the ninth century on.) As John of Dalyatha was not writing with reference to Islam, he seems to represent a pre-existing
trend in East-Syriac theology that could well be at the origin of the Muslim theory of divine attributes.

Finally, the traditional Sunnī view that the Qurʾān is God’s uncreated ‘speech’ (kalām) which became a book closely mirrors, and was possibly influenced by, the Christian view that Jesus is God’s uncreated ‘Word’ (Logos) which became a man; the place of Jesus as the incarnate Logos in Christianity parallels that of the Qurʾān as the ‘inlibrate’ Logos in traditionalist Islam. Muʿtazī opponents of this view – including the caliph al-Maʾmūn – were quick to deride the tradition- alists for holding quasi-Christian beliefs (Wolfson 1976: 235–63).

**Philosophy**

Collaboration between Christians and Muslims in philosophy and the sciences – culminating in the Graeco–Arabic translation movement – is well known. The Christian translators’ background is, however, worth exploring further because it sheds light on unacknowledged sources of Arabic/Islamic philosophy. Thus, it has been suggested that Ibn Nāʾima (fl. 830s), the Arab Christian translator of Plotinus and de facto author of the Neoplatonic treatise *Theology of Aristotle* (edited by the Muslim philosopher Abū Yūsuf al-Kindī), was likely a Maronite or Melkite scholar who was influenced by Origenism and may have been trained in one of the monasteries of Palestine (Treiger 2015). If true, this observation helps unravel al-Kindī’s intellectual pedigree and the sources of the ‘Kindian’ tradition in Arabic/Islamic philosophy.

Among the Christian authors of Late Antiquity, John Philoponus (d. 570) was the only one to influence Arabic/Islamic philosophy significantly. Several of his works, including *Against Proclus*, *Against Aristotle* and *On the contingence of the world*, were translated or adapted into Arabic, though they also met with criticism: thus the Muslim Aristotelian philosopher al-Fārābī (d. 950/1) authored a refutation of Philoponus’ critique of Aristotle (Chase 2012).

Among the Arabic-writing Christian philosophers, the Jacobite Aristotelian scholar Yaḥyā ibn ʿAdī (d. 974), a pupil of al-Fārābī, was particularly influential in Muslim circles. This is evidenced by a recently discovered Islamic manuscript that contains 53 treatises by Yaḥyā ibn ʿAdī, many of which were previously considered lost (Wisnovsky 2012).

Christian polemic against Islam may have played a role in the Muslim philosophers’ articulation of their beliefs. Thus Avicenna’s (d. 1037) emphasis on an incorporeal afterlife may have followed the lead of Christian theologians (e.g. Job of Edessa) who polemicated against the Qurʾān’s sensualism. A reverse example may be Avicenna’s insistence that God is not a ‘substance’ (jawhar); this tenet – adopted also by the mutakallimūn, e.g. al-Juwaynī (d. 1085) – clearly has in view, and seeks to undermine, the Christian application of the term *jawhar* (Greek *ousia*) to God, which is fundamental to Trinitarian theology.

**Ismāʿīlī Shiʿism**

Due to their universalist outlook, Ismāʿīlīs paid special attention to Christianity. Thus, Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī (d. 1021) was able to cite the Gospels in Syriac (as well as the Old Testament in Hebrew); he was also familiar with the Arab Christian work *Book of the Rolls*, in which he identified an apocalyptic prediction of the coming of Muḥammad (de Smet and van Reeth 1998).

The so-called ‘Long recension’ of the *Theology of Aristotle*, probably produced in Ismāʿīlī circles, interposed the Christian ‘Word’ between the Plotinian ‘One’ and the rest of the Neoplatonic hierarchy. As a result, many Ismāʿīlī theologians considered the ‘Word’ (kalīma – the term used by Arab Christians to translate ‘Logos’), also called ‘Command’ (amr), as an uncreated and eternal
median entity between the transcendent God and the created world; al-Shahrastānī identified this entity with the uncreated Qurʾān (Mayer 2014: 9–17).

**Historiography**

Muslim historians were naturally drawn to the historical record of non-Muslim communities, particularly the Christians, and relied extensively on Christian written sources and informants (Hoyland 1991). Thus al-Yaʿqūbī (d. c. 900) drew on the Cave of treasures (Griffith 2013: 182–97) and al-Masʿūdī (d. 956) perused the Arab Christian histories of Eutychius and Agapius (Šiboul 1979: 229–39, 292–5; El Cheikh 1999), while al-Bīrūnī (d. 1048) had a profound knowledge of Christian liturgical calendars; for instance, he preserved a unique calendar of the Melkite Christian community in Central Asia (Galadza 2010). An important Latin historical work, Orosius’ *Adversus paganos*, circulated in a tenth-century Arabic translation and was used by Ibn al-Juljul (d. c. 994), Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406) and al-Maqrīzī (d. 1442). It is also from Christian historiography that Muslim historians most likely adopted the annalistic form of exposition (Rosenthal 1968: 71–81).

**Poetry**

Classical poetry, both Arabic and Persian, revels in Christian imagery, especially when infatuation with a handsome Christian youth or a beautiful girl is at play. Thus the Arab (nominally Muslim) libertine poet Abū Nuwās (d. 814) expressed his passion for a youth, who

> Wearing the *zunnār* [belt], . . . walks to his church; his god is the Son, so he said, and the Cross.
> O I wish I were the priest or the metropolitan of his Church! No, I wish that I were the Gospel and the Scriptures for him!
> No, I wish that I were a Eucharist which he is given or the chalice from which he drinks the wine! No, I wish I were the very bubbles <of the wine>!
> So that I might obtain the benefit of being close to him and my sickness, grief and cares be dispelled!


Similarly, the Persian poet Khāqānī (d. c. 1195) – perhaps the most knowledgeable of all Persian authors in the Christian tradition (his mother was a Nestorian Christian, later converting to Islam) – apparently learned some Georgian and deployed a clever bilingual pun to catch his beloved’s attention:

> Out of passion for the cross-shaped hair of a Byzantine-looking [beauty]
> I became a resident of Abkhazia and a Georgian-speaker;
> So often have I said to her: *moi, moi* [‘come’ in colloquial Georgian]
> That my tongue has become effaced [literally: has become ‘hair’, *mūʾ*], and each hair [*mūʾī*] a tongue.

*(Minorsky 1945: 566; cf. Gould 2016)*

In his famous ‘prison poem’, Khāqānī – no doubt tongue in cheek – entertains the possibility of converting to Christianity and becoming a cassock-donning monk with a cross on his neck, a learned exegete, who will compile ‘a Syriac commentary on the Gospel’ and ‘an epistle on
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the ‘Trinity’, and a wonderworker, who will reshape Moses’ staff into a cross and heal the ailing
catholicos with . . . the droppings of Jesus’ donkey (Minorsky 1945: 568–9).

Abū Nuwās’ and Khāqānī’s creative (albeit, as here, occasionally irreverent) engagement with
Christian motifs exemplifies Christianity’s role as a prominent theme in Arabic and Persian
poetry, which never ceased to fascinate the poets and their audience.

To sum up: as the foregoing exposition has demonstrated, contacts between Muslims and
Christians, conversions of Christians to Islam and Muslim scholars’ engagement with Christian
written sources facilitated retention, assimilation and creative transformation of a wide range
of Middle Eastern Christian beliefs and practices within Islam. The ‘presumption of continu-
ity’ along the Christian–Muslim divide has more to recommend itself than the now prevalent
‘presumption of independence’, since the former conforms to, while the latter contradicts, the
historical reality of Christian–Muslim interactions. It is to be hoped that subsequent research will
shed further light on such continuities, highlighting their modalities and the individuals and/or
social circles involved therein, and will accord Christian–Muslim interactions their due place as
a formative factor in the development of Islamic culture.

Islamic influences upon Christianity

Middle Eastern Christianity

It is now time to reflect on the reverse influences: those of Islam upon Christianity. In the
Middle East itself, Islam, as an increasingly dominant social, cultural and religious factor, was
never absent from Christians’ consciousness. It is not surprising that so much Christian writ-
ing in Arabic, and to a lesser degree Syriac, is apologetic and polemical in nature, seeking
to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity, rebut Muslim polemicists’ objections to its
doctrines and practices, and forestall Christian conversions to Islam (Noble and Treiger 2014:

Arabic and Syriac-writing Christian theologians were deeply engaged with the Arabic/
Islamic culture of their day – to which they were also, of course, active contributors. Thus, for
instance, the Melkite Christian deacon from Antioch and prominent translator of the Greek
Church Fathers into Arabic ʿAbd Allāh ibn al-Faḍl (fl. 1050) studied Arabic grammar with the
famous Muslim poet and freethinker al-Maʿarrī (d. 1057). In his Discourse on the Holy Trinity,
Ibn al-Faḍl skillfully synthesised Greek and Arabic etymologies of the terms ‘Theos’ and ‘Allāh’
respectively – the former derived from Gregory of Nazianzus’ Fourth Theological Oration, the latter
from al-Maʿarrī’s Epistle on the Angels (CMR 3:98–100). In his other works, Ibn al-Faḍl cites the
Muslim philosophers Abū Bakr al-Rāzī (d. 925) and, extensively, al-Fārābī, alongside an array
of Patristic, Byzantine and Arab Christian authors. It is for this reason that Ibn al-Faḍl has been
aptly characterised as a meeting point of two ‘Hellenisms’: the Hellenism of Byzantium and the
Hellenism of the Caliphate (Noble and Treiger 2014: 172).

Similarly, the Syriac scholar and maphrian (head of the eastern branch of the Jacobite Church)
Bar-Hebraeus (d. 1286) heavily relied on Muslim philosophers and theologians, particularly Avi-
cenna, whose Pointers and reminders he even translated into Syriac, al-Ghazālī, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī
(d. 1210) and al-Ṭūsī (d. 1276). Al-Ghazālī’s influence was particularly profound: Bar-Hebraeus’
Ethicon is largely based on al-Ghazālī’s Revival of the religious sciences, while his Book of the dove is
modelled on the Deliverer from error (CMR 4:591–3, 604–7). Since, as argued earlier, al-Ghazālī
himself was likely drawing on East-Syriac Evagrianism, it is only natural that Bar-Hebraeus saw
him as a ‘kindred spirit’ whose spirituality could be synthesised with, and could thus enrich,
Bar-Hebraeus’ own Syriac Christian tradition.
Bar-Hebraeus’ contemporaries in Egypt, the Copto-Arabic Christian theologians of the thirteenth century, particularly the brothers Awlād al-ʿAssāl, also made creative use of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, whose writings, according to Gregor Schwarb’s recent study, provided ‘structural and conceptual models on which they would form their own philosophico-theological compositions’. Thus, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī was ‘by far the most cited non-Christian author’ in al-Muʿtaman ibn al-ʿAssāl’s famous Arab Christian encyclopaedia Summa of the principles of religion, providing inspiration for al-Muʿtaman’s treatment of such diverse subjects as logic, God’s essence and attributes, angelology, and eschatology (Schwarb 2016: 550 and 556).

**Byzantine and European Christianity**

Medieval Byzantine and European authors were keenly aware of the philosophical and scientific achievements of the Islamic world. While translations from Arabic into Byzantine Greek were largely limited to the ‘occult sciences’ (astrology, alchemy, dream interpretation, divination etc.) and astronomy (Gutas 2012), translations from Arabic into Latin, carried out in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, were more diverse. Crucially, they included Avicenna’s philosophical and medical writings, Averroes’ (d. 1198) commentaries on Aristotle, the Arabic Neoplatonic compendium Liber de causis (based on Proclus, but misascribed to Aristotle) and Maimonides’ (d. 1204) Judeo-Arabic philosophical-exegetical treatise Guide of the perplexed, all of which had a decisive influence on Latin scholasticism.

As summarised by Dag Hasse, among the influential theories adopted from Arabic/Islamic philosophy were the following:

- the logical distinction between first and second intentions; the intension and remission of elementary forms; the soul’s faculty of estimation and its object, the intentions; the conjunction between human intellect and separate active intellect; the unicity of the material intellect (Averroism); naturalistic theories of miracles and prophecy; the eternity of the world and the concept of eternal creation; the active intellect as giver of forms; the [F]irst [C]ause as necessary existent; the emanation of intelligences from the [F]irst [C]ause; the distinction between essence and existence; the theory of primary concepts; [and] the concept of human happiness as resulting from perfect conjunction of the human intellect with the active intellect.

(Hasse 2014)

Due to limitations of space, only one example can be considered here – that of Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274). On the much-debated subject of eternity versus temporal origination of the world, Aquinas adopted Maimonides’ view that neither alternative could be demonstrated by reason alone without recourse to Revelation. While accepting the Catholic doctrine of temporal origination, Aquinas nonetheless made the point of proving that Avicenna’s contrary view, that of ‘eternal creation’, involved no internal contradiction and was, on rational grounds, fully acceptable.

In the controversy between Avicenna and Averroes over whether the subject-matter of metaphysics was ‘being qua being’ (Avicenna) or immaterial entities, including God (Averroes), Aquinas, like most scholastic theologians, sided with Avicenna. (On ‘Averroist’ countercurrents, see Niewöhner and Sturlese 1994; Akasoy and Giglioni 2013.) Aquinas also accepted Avicenna’s distinction between essence and existence, Avicenna’s description of God as the ‘necessary being’ wherein essence and existence were identical, Avicenna’s ‘ontological proof’ for the existence of God and Avicenna’s theory of ‘modulation of existence’, which inspired Aquinas’ own theory of

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‘analogy of being’ (*analogia entis*) (de Libera 1989; Treiger 2010). Despite his far-reaching debt to Avicenna, Aquinas rejected certain Avicennian doctrines, such as deterministic emanation from the First Cause and the celestial Agent Intellect as the ‘giver of forms’ for the sublunar world.

As in philosophy, so also in the sciences, influences from the Islamic world were paramount. It is well known that the term ‘algebra’ originates from the expression *al-jabr wa-l-muqābala* (‘reconstitution and balancing’), used in the title of al-Khwārizmi’s treatise on the subject, written in Arabic in the 820s and translated into Latin twice in the twelfth century. It is also from the Islamic world that Europe received the decimal positional notation system and the Indian numbers (in their North African and Andalusian variety, the so-called ‘ghubār numbers’), which we consequently call ‘Arabic’. Recent research has also shown that Copernicus (d. 1543) benefited from the mathematical apparatus developed by the Muslim astronomers al-‘Urdī (d. 1266), al-Ṭūṣī and Ibn al-Shāṭir (d. 1375); their work facilitated Copernicus’ adoption of heliocentrism (Saliba 2007: 193–232).

Of European Christian polemicists against Islam, mention should be made of Ramon Llull (d. 1315), who knew Arabic and used a wide range of Arabic-Islamic sources (e.g. *Kalila wa-Dimna*, the *Epistles of the Brethren of purity*, al-Ghazālī and Ibn Sab‘īn), including those unavailable in Latin. His *One hundred names of God*, written in Catalan verse, is influenced by the Islamic tradition of the 99 ‘most beautiful’ divine names, while aiming to imitate and surpass the Qur’ān (Bellver 2014). Llull’s younger contemporary, Dante Alighieri (d. 1321), who did not know Arabic, had had a profound impact on the mad’s journey through heaven and hell in the *Divine comedy* (CMR 4: 789). Finally, Nicholas of Cusa (d. 1464) pioneered what might be called the ‘ecumenical approach’ to Islam. In his *De pace fidei*, written in 1453, shortly after the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans, he envisioned the different religions as earthly manifestations of one and the same teaching (identified, to be sure, with ideal Christianity). It has been demonstrated that the key formula underlying his approach, ‘one religion in a variety of rites’, originates in an Islamic source, extant in a twelfth-century Latin version: the so-called *Liber de doctrina Mahumet* (CMR 3: 503–7; Valkenberg 2014).

Islamic influences are discernible also in the various forms of anti-Trinitarianism that developed in Europe from the sixteenth century on (Socinianism, Deism, Unitarianism, etc.) and in the European Enlightenment’s critique of revealed religion generally and the Christian tradition in particular (Garcia 2012). Medieval Islamic polemical works against Christianity – made available to European readers by nascent scholarship of the ‘Orient’ – provided ready ammunition to these movements in their fight against traditional Christianity while further stimulating historical study of the origins of Christianity, the origins of Islam and the complex interrelationship between the two religions (Mulsow 2010).

**References**


Alexander Treiger


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**Further reading**


