

A Lesson in Painting Your Opponents with the Same Brush of “Heresy”: The Trinity, the Tawhid, and Centuries of Missed Opportunity

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Introduction: Christians Today Critique the Tawhid

Dr. Nabeel Qureshi is a convert from Islam to Christianity, who is an evangelistic speaker. After a lecture at Georgia Tech University about his conversion and now Christian faith, he fielded questions.¹ A Pakistani Muslim man stepped up to the microphone. He presented questions which he believed showed that Christian faith is full of logical impossibilities. He asked, among other questions, “Is Jesus finite or infinite? How can he be human and also God?” Dr. Qureshi replied, “It’s a lot like asking, Can Allah come onto this world if He wants?” The Muslim questioner replied, “No, Allah cannot do logically fallacious things, just as you cannot have a square circle; it is logically impossible.” Dr. Qureshi replied, “But how do you know that’s what this is? The Quran says [in Surah 28:30] that when Allah spoke to Moses, that Allah was in the bush. So if you want to say that that meant something else, you’re going to have to argue with the Quran on that one. It seems to be pretty clear that Allah can emanate His voice from a physical place. He can be in a physical place in a sense. In the same way, I don’t believe that God coming to this earth limits His omnipotence. God the Son has taken on flesh. God the Father is still everywhere. Jesus is here on this earth, and that’s a limitation in that sense, but it’s not a limitation of his nature. He has both a divine and a human nature.”

Dr. Qureshi was quite skillfully working within the Quran itself, which he knew quite well from his youth and young adulthood. He did not simply defend the Christian dogma of the Trinity, but critiqued the Islamic dogmatic principle of the tawhid. Tawhid is the central plank in the Islamic doctrine of God. Essentially, it refers to the absolute oneness of God, understood also as the absolute transcendence of God. The Muslim questioner, by claiming that Allah coming to this earth was logically fallacious, reflected this understanding of tawhid. But the Quran itself repeats the story of the burning bush (Ex.3), in which God was transcendent but also immanent in the creation, localized, and locatable. So does the Quran support the definition of tawhid? Or is there some internal complexity within God which allows Him to be both transcendent and immanent and also united?

One might also raise the question of how God, in Islamic tradition, could have communicated the contents of the Quran to the angel Gabriel, who then delivered it to Muhammad. If God is absolutely transcendent, how could he localize Himself to Gabriel? Whether a being is an angel like Gabriel or a human like Moses makes no difference for the question of transcendence. Gabriel is not an omnipresent being, and he presumably does not share immediately in the mind of God. So how could a radically transcendent God communicate with even the mightiest of angels? The ontological presupposition is that no created being can breach the ontological chasm between God and all created beings. But the chasm works both ways: Neither can God, in Islam, cross over the chasm either.

In fact, perhaps Dr. Qureshi could have taken his critique of tawhid one step further. If God is absolutely and only transcendent (and Surah 28:30 did not exist in the Quran), would any humans or angels be able to know – or say – anything whatsoever about God? Would revelation be communicable? Even the ninety-nine attributes of God would come under serious epistemological question, and perhaps lose any meaningful content as a result.

Anecdotally, I know of an Egyptian Coptic Christian priest who also used this approach to challenging the tawhid. He was so effective at persuading Muslims to Christ that he had to flee Egypt because of death threats from other Muslims. My own limited experience pursuing this line of debate with Muslims has been fruitful.

I find it curious that many Arabic Orthodox writers did not use this line of argumentation with Islam. I will survey the first Christian writer to engage Islam, John of Damascus (c.675 – 759 AD), the document from Saint Catherine’s Monastery called *An Apology for the Christian Faith* (ca 800 AD), the Melkite bishop of Harran, Theodore Abu Qurra (late 8th – early 9th century), and the document called *The Disputation of the Monk Abraham of Tiberias* (815 – 840 AD). Not until Paul of Antioch’s *Letter to a Muslim Friend* (1200’s) do we find an argument about the Trinity which could “work in reverse” as a critique of the tawhid, like Dr. Nabeel Qureshi’s.

¹ W. Masih, “Main Problem of a Muslim solved by Ex Muslim (Nabeel Qureshi)”, November 6, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5M7ePlmgVxA>

Not for lack of courage did these Christian writers avoid critique of the tawhid in this manner. They were otherwise quite challenging intellectually, pulling no punches with regards to the character of Muhammad and his claim to prophetic office. They were not afraid of martyrdom, either; in fact, some of these documents encourage Christians to be faithful in the face of great adversity and even death.

Instead, I suggest that these Orthodox writers under Islam did not coordinate the transcendence and immanence dynamic with the Father-Son relationship because of an apparent forgetfulness about the Judaic aspect of Logos (Word) Christology, wherein the Logos was the localized, immanent appearance of the transcendent God. They deploy Trinitarian discourse and Logos Christology in their connection to Hellenistic forms of thought referring to ontology as opposed to functionality. That is, they consider the Logos to be the “reason” or “rationality” of the Father. This tradition goes back to Justin Martyr’s *First Apology* and perhaps the Gospel of John itself.²

The Orthodox writers under Islam, however, stress the unity of the Word-Son with the Father, to ward off the Muslim accusation that Christians worship three separate gods. The impression one gets is that these Orthodox writers under Islam, when discussing the Trinity, wish to speak to their fellow Christians by *means* of speaking to an Islamic opponent. They seem interested in defending the content of the ecumenical creeds, which were philological and linguistic accomplishments stabilizing the meaning of the originally Judaic revelation into Hellenistic terms. Their interest in the creeds can be commended, of course. But it was, at the same time, a truncated approach that did not extend downward as deeply as it could into its original biblical source material, nor rise to the level of maximal engagement with a new dialogue partner, Islam. As such, this particular pattern of Trinitarian discourse reflects a missed opportunity for centuries as Orthodox writers in Greek and Arabic tried to engage with the Islamic world.

Father-Son as Transcendent-Immanent God: The Pre-Nicene Witness

I will first show that coordinating Father-Son language with the transcendence-immanence has very firm footing in the Greek Hellenistic Christian tradition. It appears in Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*. While some elements of Justin’s exegetical moves are questionable,³ I find most notable his use of the distinction between God and His Word. Justin discusses the relation in the context of Israel’s historical interactions with God. Justin was comfortable discussing a simultaneous duality of divine transcendence and immanence.

In *Dialogue with Trypho* 55 – 67 and 126 – 128, Justin lists theophanies and offers his explanation for them. I will focus my comments on 126 – 128. In *Dialogue* 126, God spoke to Moses from the burning bush (Ex.3), wrestled with Jacob (Gen.32), appeared to Abraham (Gen.18), and assured Moses (Num.11). In 127, Justin acknowledges that the biblical language used for God needs qualification because it expresses immanent appearances of God. God shut Noah into the ark (Gen.7:16), and came down to behold the tower (Gen.11:5). He says,

“You must not imagine that the unbegotten God Himself came down or went up from any place. For the ineffable Father and Lord of all neither has come to any place, nor walks, nor sleeps, nor rises up, but remains in His own place, wherever that is, quick to behold and quick to hear, having neither eyes nor ears, but being of indescribable might; and He sees all things, and knows all things, and none of us escapes His observation; and He is not moved or confined to a spot in the whole world, for He existed before the world was made.”⁴

² Depending on what we think John was doing philologically with the Greek phrase “logos theou” in relation to the Hebrew phrase “dabar YHWH.”

³ Hirshman, Marc. Translated from Hebrew to English by Batya Stein. *A Rivalry of Genius: Jewish and Christian Biblical Interpretation in Late Antiquity*. Chapter 4. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press. 1996. Hirshman notes that Justin appears to take physical circumcision as disgraceful, a warning not to sin, and a sign of God’s future judgment. Justin also argues, curiously, that God did not rest on the Sabbath. Also, Soulen, R. Kendall. *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press. 2007. Soulen is not as specific as I am being here. He constrains his comments to the question of supercessionism. Nevertheless, his observations are stimulating.

⁴ Justin Martyr. *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*. 127.

Justin attributes transcendence to the Father, a distance from the creation, but instantaneously knowing all things. What about those instances, Justin asks, when the people at Sinai “were not able to look even on the glory of Him who was sent from Him,” or Moses was not able to enter into the tabernacle, or when Solomon’s priest could not stand before the temple when God’s glory descended upon it? This question creates something of a logical puzzle. It is one thing to say that God “descended” to earth to accomplish this or that. It is another step altogether to say that God was observed or heard by people in a specific location. Justin explains that, on those occasions, the Israelites did not see the Father, but the Son:

“Therefore neither Abraham, nor Isaac, nor Jacob, nor any other man, saw the Father and ineffable Lord of all, and also of Christ, but [saw] Him who was according to His will His Son, being God, and the Angel because He ministered to His will; whom also it pleased Him to be born man by the Virgin; who also was fire when He conversed with Moses from the bush.”⁵

This is a rather remarkable and bold assertion. Perhaps mindful of the apostle John’s dictum that “no one has seen the Father” (Jn.1:17), Justin argues that all divine theophanic appearances must therefore be the Son. The Father’s Son, “being God, and the Angel,” localized his presence within the creation. He was at one time the fire in the burning bush and at another time the incarnate man in the womb of the Virgin Mary.

Justin then cites Genesis 19:24 to show that God could be simultaneously on earth and in heaven:

“Since, unless we thus comprehend the Scriptures, it must follow that the Father and Lord of all had not been in heaven when what Moses wrote took place: ‘And the Lord rained upon Sodom fire and brimstone from the Lord out of heaven.’”⁶

Justin perceives in this statement that God was in two different locations at once. On the one hand, the Lord was within the creation; this is the one who had just finished talking with Abraham, who now called down from heaven the rain of fire and brimstone. On the other hand, the Lord was in heaven, from which the fire and brimstone came. To explain this bi-locationality of God, Justin says the Son is the one sent by the Father to the world, whereas the Father is the one in the transcendent heaven, though apparently within the flow of time.

A nuance to the term “transcendent” with respect to Justin is important. It is clear that Justin believed that the Father was *spatially* transcendent from creation. It does not seem to follow, in Justin’s extant writings, that the Father was *temporally* transcendent as well, at least without further explanation, which he does not offer. If, after all, the Father can rain down fire and brimstone from heaven at a certain time, then the Father is engaged with time in such a way that he respects it.

In 128, Justin says that the various titles given to “God the Son of God,” are explicable largely by their function in any given biblical encounter. He is called “Angel” because of his role as the messenger from the Father to human beings. He is called “Glory,” because he “appears in a vision sometimes that cannot be borne.” He is called “a Man, and a human being” because he sometimes appears like a man. He is called “the Word” because He is a verbally articulated message from God the Father to human beings, who is a power “indivisible and inseparable from the Father,” just like the light of the sun is “indivisible and inseparable” from the sun. Justin insists that the son is “numerically distinct” from the Father, and begotten from the Father by his will, “but not by abscission, as if the essence of the Father were divided.” Justin holds together the pre-Nicene biblical identification of the preliminary Trinity as the transcendent Father, immanent Son with what would become the Nicene and post-Nicene position on the Father-Son being united (“not by abscission”) on the level of *ousia* (“essence” undivided).

⁵ Ibid 127.

⁶ Justin Martyr. *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*. 128. In 56, Justin says that the God who rained fire “and is named by Moses in the Scripture Lord, is different from Him who also is God and appeared to Abraham.” (emphasis mine) In 58, Justin discusses theophanic appearances and encounters with God “face to face” with Jacob, including the temple motif found in Jacob’s dream of the ladder stretching from heaven to earth. In 59 – 60, Justin discusses the burning bush appearance to Moses, saying that God showed Himself “visible on a little portion of the earth.”

Tertullian of Carthage, *Against Praxeas* 14 – 16, weaves the motif of visibility and invisibility into his Father-Son discourse. He considers why human beings saw God and lived, despite God’s warning that those who see Him would not live (Ex.33:13). Tertullian answers that these people saw the Son, and not the Father:

“Now, then, He must be a different Being who was seen, because of one who was seen it could not be predicated that He is invisible. It will therefore follow, that by Him who is invisible we must understand the Father in the fullness of His majesty, while we recognise the Son as visible by reason of the dispensation of His derived existence; even as it is not permitted us to contemplate the sun, in the full amount of his substance which is in the heavens, but we can only endure with our eyes a ray, by reason of the tempered condition of this portion which is projected from him to the earth.”⁷

Tertullian deploys the frequent patristic analogy of the sun and its rays. He uses it, moreover, in a less common mode: The sun cannot be seen and contemplated directly lest we in fact damage our eyes and lose our sight. But we can consider a ray of the sun, the visible manifestation of the sun’s brilliance. In the same way, Tertullian says, that the Father is invisible to the human eye, but the Son is visible, and the Father, Son, and Spirit are united. Tertullian then returns to biblical texts where Moses and Jacob saw God “face to face” (Ex.33:13; Gen.32:30) and says that the Son was the God who they saw. Tertullian therefore attests to the use of the Trinity as a revelational Trinity, along the same lines as Justin Martyr.

Clement of Alexandria, *Against the Judaizers (Fragment 3)*, draws upon the biblical text involving King Solomon welcoming God’s glory-cloud into the temple in Jerusalem. Clement writes:

“Solomon the son of David, in the books styled *The Reigns of the Kings*, comprehending not only that the structure of the true temple was celestial and spiritual, but had also a reference to the flesh, which He who was both the son and Lord of David was to build up, both for His own presence, where, as a living image, He resolved to make His shrine, and for the church that was to rise up through the union of faith, says expressly, “Will God in very deed dwell with men on the earth?” He dwells on the earth clothed in flesh, and His abode with men is effected by the conjunction and harmony which obtains among the righteous, and which build and rear a new temple...”⁸

Clement’s use of 1 Kings 8:27 (“Will God in very deed dwell with men on the earth?”) is quite impressive for its compactness and precision. In its original context, the verse expresses King Solomon’s wonder and astonishment that God, who cannot be contained by heaven, would be locatable on earth, and therefore ‘finite’ in that sense. The very next sentence is: “Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain You, how much less this house which I have built!” This is a transcendence-immanence paradigm. God is transcendent, as “highest heaven cannot contain” Him. Yet God also localizes His presence and becomes visible and audible, as He did in “this house which I have built.” The temple theophany encompasses its precursors: God’s cloud of glory dwelling in the tabernacle, God’s fire dwelling atop Mount Sinai, God’s fire dwelling in the burning bush, and God’s theophanic appearances stretching all the way back to God in the garden of Eden. Careful attention to Clement’s dense statement reveals that the “temple” theophany paradigm also reaches ahead, to Jesus of Nazareth and the church gathered in his name.

Indeed, Clement sees in this declaration of Solomon that the Son is “the true temple.” That is, the visible Son shows forth the glory of the Father in the “celestial and spiritual” dimension, as well as with “reference to the flesh” here on earth. Clement then carries the temple “structure” as a pattern of God’s revelation. In the days of King Solomon, God revealed Himself in a temple pattern, for the immanent Son revealed the transcendent Father. This meant that Jesus of Nazareth was the temple of God’s presence, and the church which exists in him: “both for His own presence, where, as a living image, He resolved to make His shrine, and for the church...” Indeed, in the surviving fragment, Clement quotes John 2:19 – 21 where Jesus spoke of the temple of his body, and 1 Peter 2:5, where Peter spoke of the temple of the church.

⁷ Tertullian of Carthage. *Against Praxeas*. 14.

⁸ Clement of Alexandria. *Fragments. Against Judaizers*. From the *Unpublished Disputation Against Iconoclasts*, of Nicephorus of Constantinople; edited in Greek and Latin by Le Nourry in *His Apparatus to the Library of the Fathers*, Vol. I. p. 1334 a.b.

Other pre-Nicene writers also deployed the identification of the Old Testament theophanies with the pre-incarnate Son-Word: Athenagoras of Athens;⁹ Irenaeus of Lyons;¹⁰ Melito of Sardis;¹¹ Hippolytus of Rome;¹² and Origen of Alexandria.¹³ Nicene theologians also deploy this identification: Athanasius of Alexandria;¹⁴ Hilary of Poitiers;¹⁵ and Ambrose of Milan.¹⁶

John of Damascus (c.675 – 749/758 AD)

In the three and a half centuries between the First to the Sixth Ecumenical Councils (325 – 681 AD), the Greek and Latin speaking churches standardized their terminology for expressing the relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and also the divine and human natures in Christ. The Nicene – Constantinopolitan expression that the Father and Son were united in essence (*homoousion*), and that the Son was from the essence (*ek tis ousia*) of the Father, became bulwarks against the various Arian theologians who denigrated the Son as less divine than the Father, as created by the Father at a certain point in time.

Meanwhile, Islam spread quickly after the death of Muhammad in 632. For centuries, Orthodox Christians in Arabic-speaking, Muslim lands treated Islam as a kind of Christian heresy. This includes John of Damascus. In this framework, the Christians seemed to think it sufficient to prove the ontological unity between the Son and the Father. They did not seem to think it valuable to recover the pre-Nicene discourse of the Father-Son as the transcendent-immanent God. That is, they did not re-engage the earlier biblical-Judaic background behind the later ontological-Hellenistic creedal terminology, and leverage that discourse against the new Islamic challenge.

⁹ Athenagoras of Athens, *Plea for the Christians* 10

¹⁰ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.16.6 (“and the Word being made man”); 4.14.2 (“to hold communion with God: He Himself, indeed, having need of nothing, but granting communion with Himself to those who stood in need of it, and sketching out, like an architect, the plan of salvation to those that pleased Him”); 4.20.1 (“It is not possible to know God, as far as his grandeur is concerned. For it is impossible to measure the Father. But as to His love (for it is this which leads us to God by his Word), those who obey God always learn that there does exist so great a God, and that it is He who by Himself has established and made and adorned and contains all things, including ourselves and our world”); 4.20.9 (“And the Word spake to Moses, appearing before him”); *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 45 – 46 (“And all such visions point to the Son of God, speaking with men and being in their midst. For it was not the Father of all, who is not seen by the world”).

¹¹ Melito of Sardis, *On the Passover* 60, 69, 96

¹² Hippolytus of Rome, *Third Fragment, Scholia on Daniel*, 92 (“For as the children of Israel were destined to see God in the world, and yet not to believe in Him, the Scripture showed beforehand that the Gentiles would recognise Him incarnate, whom, while not incarnate, Nebuchadnezzar saw and recognised of old in the furnace, and acknowledged to be the Son of God.”)

¹³ Origen of Alexandria, *On First Principles* 1.2 (“And as no one ought to be offended, seeing God is the Father, that the Saviour is also God; so also, since the Father is called omnipotent, no one ought to be offended that the Son of God is also called omnipotent.”)

¹⁴ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourse Against the Arians* 3.12 (“And if the Patriarch Jacob, blessing his grandchildren Ephraim and Manasses, said, ‘God which fed me all my life long unto this day, the Angel which delivered me from all evil, bless the lads,’ [...] in saying, ‘Who delivered me from all evil,’ he showed that it was no created Angel, but the Word of God, whom he joined to the Father in his prayer, through whom, whomsoever He will, God does deliver.”); 3.16 (“Suitably has He joined the ‘Word’ to the ‘Form,’ to show that the Word of God is Himself Image and Expression and Form of His Father; and that the Jews who did not receive Him who spoke to them, thereby did not receive the Word, which is the Form of God. This too it was that the Patriarch Jacob having seen, received a blessing from Him and the name of Israel instead of Jacob, as divine Scripture witnesses, saying, ‘And as he passed by the Form of God, the Sun rose upon him.’”); *Letters to Serapion on the Holy Spirit* 1.12 (“For it was God Himself who, through the Word, in the Spirit, led the people... For when the Spirit was with the people, God, through the Son in the Spirit, was with them.”); *First Letter to Virgins* 26 (“And he who earlier gave the law through Moses, the Lord, it is he who commends marriage by his presence in Cana of Galilee”); 38 (“It is he who appeared to Moses and gave him the Law from the Father”)

¹⁵ Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity (De Trinitate)* 4 – 5 sees the Old Testament theophanies as the Word

¹⁶ Ambrose of Milan, *Exposition of the Christian Faith* 1.3.23 – 29; 1.13

John of Damascus is noteworthy because he was the first Orthodox writer, and one of the first Christian writer of any persuasion, to live and write under Islamic rule. According to both Greek and Arabic sources, his father was a financial administrator for the caliph Abd al-Malik (685 – 705). John grew up well-educated, surrounded by a deeply rooted Romano-Hellenic culture, along with the Arabic-speaking elite of the conquering Muslims. This included Christian spiritual formation in the Greek patristic writers before him. At some point in the early 8th century, John moved from Damascus to Jerusalem or a monastery near Jerusalem which might have been St. Sabas. There, he acted as an advisor to the patriarch of Jerusalem. Peter Schadler notes that John, in his writings, shows his support for the Sixth Ecumenical Council (680–81) and the Council of Trullo (692).¹⁷

John of Damascus defends the Trinity when he rebuts the accusation made by Muslims about Christians, that Christians are “Associators, because, they say, we introduce beside God an associate to Him by saying that Christ is the Son of God and God.”¹⁸ John appeals to the Hebrew prophets, which gives him the opportunity to appeal to such biblical material on God’s transcendence-immanence as 1 Kings 8:27. But John does not do this. He acknowledges that the Muslims entertain various accusations that the Christians or the Jews have corrupted the original manuscripts. So appealing to such sources as authorities is complicated at best.

John therefore reaches into a Quranic mention of Christ being named as “Word” and “Spirit of God.” This comes from Surah 4.171.

“O followers of the Book! do not exceed the limits in your religion, and do not speak (lies) against Allah, but (speak) the truth; the Messiah, Isa son of Marium is only an apostle of Allah and His Word which He communicated to Marium and a spirit from Him; believe therefore in Allah and His apostles, and say not, Three. Desist, it is better for you; Allah is only one God; far be It from His glory that He should have a son, whatever is in the heavens and whatever is in the earth is His, and Allah is sufficient for a Protector.”

In this translation, it seems reasonably clear that the Quran refers to Jesus [Isa son of Marium] as a messenger of God. When this Surah calls Jesus “His Word,” the designation is unusual. In every other one of the fifty-nine cases in the Quran where “word” is used as a singular noun, it refers to a promise, or the content of someone’s teaching. That the Quran calls Jesus “His Word” is admittedly noteworthy, but it is more likely that the text intends to honor Jesus as a prophet from God. It seems rather unlikely that the Quran is doing what John of Damascus says it is doing. Moreover, the Quran calls Jesus “a spirit from Him.” The eleven other instances of “spirit” refer to “the Holy Spirit” (2.87, 253; 5.110; 15.29; 16.102; 19.17; 26.193; 32.9; 38.72; 70.4; 78.38) as an empowering and life-giving agent of God. The Quran is clearly aware of the Old and New Testament usage, for example, when God breathed the Spirit upon the clay and created it as human life. However, the Quran also groups “the Holy Spirit” with “angels” (70.4; 78.38), so it also seems plausible to think that the Quran understands the Spirit as a created being and type of angel. Regardless, the Quran maintains its stance against the Trinity: “say not, Three... Allah is only one God; far be it from His glory that He should have a son...” So whatever the grammatical construction of “word” and “spirit” here, it would seem the immediate context militates against attributing to this instance the meaning of the Christian Trinity.

John of Damascus, however, takes this mention of “word” and “spirit” to mean precisely that. Given John’s acknowledgement that he cannot share the biblical text as an authority with Muslims, due to their stance on its corruption, which allows them to dodge any charge which arises from the biblical text, he mines this Quranic verse for meanings that no Muslim could possibly give it. John interprets “word” and “spirit” as inherent properties of God, like rationality and life.

“For the Word and Spirit is inseparable each from the one in whom this has the origin; if, therefore, the Word is in God it is obvious that he is God as well. If, on the other hand, this is outside of God, then God, according to you, is without word and without spirit. Thus, trying to avoid making associates to God you have mutilated Him. For it would be better if you were saying that he has an associate than to mutilate Him

¹⁷ Schadler, Peter. *John of Damascus and Islam: Christian Heresiology and the Intellectual Background to Earliest Christian-Muslim Relations*. Leiden: Brill, 2018. 101

¹⁸ John of Damascus. *Refutation of Heresies*. Ch.100.768.B

and introduce Him as if He were a stone, or wood, or any of the inanimate objects. Therefore, by accusing us falsely, you call us Associators; we, however, call you Mutilators of God.”¹⁹

John is content to argue that God has “associates,” by which he seems to have in mind the meaning of the Greek hypostasis or Latin persona as these terms were used and defined from Nicaea onwards. He rather quickly retorts by calling the Muslims “mutilators,” since they would seem to cut off from God properties and attributes that are intrinsic to Him. But this would only score points with fellow Christians. A human being with full faculties has “rationality” and “life” as well. Yet I do not speak of myself as having “associates” for that reason. Why, then, should we speak of God that way? It is far from clear that the Quranic verse intends to hypostasize “word” and “spirit” into what Christians dogmatically call “the Trinity.”

Moreover, John foregoes the opportunity to both defend God’s transcendence-immanence, and to critique the tawhid. He could have considered the self-defeating logic of how God could communicate by word with Gabriel, Muhammad, or anyone at all, if the tawhid is true, and God is imprisoned by His own transcendence, inaccessible. He might have traced the Old Testament speeches and appearances of the Word of God, the dabar YHWH, to demonstrate that weight of the biblical data and the consistency of its pattern.

John demonstrates clues that he recognized the pre-Nicene terms of transcendence and immanence, as shown by his other writings. In his *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, John follows an outline of topics from God’s nature and attributes, to humanity and our knowledge of God, to Christ, and the faith of the church. In his preface, he mentions the burning bush, and says it was “the benevolent condescension of God the Word.”²⁰ Later in the work, he explains how God used various images to communicate Himself, saying, “He was seen by Abraham in the semblance of a man...”²¹ Nevertheless, John does not critique the tawhid directly, nor enlist the transcendence-immanence discussion from the pre-Nicene writers in his response to Islam, nor countercharge Islam with making knowledge of God functionally impossible if His Word is not one with him. Why not?

The likely reason is that John regarded Islam as a Christian heresy. This is shown in his rather casual accusation that Islam is “worthy of laughter.”²² It is more substantially shown in his placement of the “superstition of the Ishmaelites” or “the Hagarenes” or “the Saracenes” as the last chapter of his *On Heresies*.²³ Tellingly, he categorizes the teaching of Muhammad as influenced by “an Arian monk.”²⁴ His response to the Muslim accusation that Christians are “Associators” then becomes explicable. Behind Muhammad, John of Damascus sees Arianism. He therefore responds by arguing that the word/Word of God is inherent to God and inseparable from Him. John evidently thinks that by doing this, he has dispatched his opponent swiftly and decisively.

In my view, this was a serious mistake. Arius was constrained by the biblical texts and therefore had to explain passages relating the Son and the Father. Muhammad operated under no such constraint, and the Muslims who followed in his wake could casually dismiss the New Testament as corrupted. Arius was also beholden to a view of Christian salvation that found its anchor in “union with God.” Muhammad was beholden to no such thing. And Arius was trying to show that the Son still gave us real communication from the Father, and therefore the Son acted in such a way that he could be personally identified with (and in Arius’ view, mistaken for) the Father. In effect, Arius wanted to preserve the functionality of the Father-Son unity for the purpose of revelation and redemption, while severing the ontological connection between the Father and the Son. Muhammad found it expedient to dispatch with both the ontological connection between God the Father and Jesus the Son because he wanted to dismiss the Christian claims about revelation and redemption. This move left Muhammad wide open to epistemological and ontological problems explored and overcome by the pre-Nicene Christians, and arguably also the Jewish sages. But John, instead of calling attention to that breach, and that fatal inconsistency in Islam, answers a question that he was not being asked. He responds to a different theological opponent than the one actually before him.

¹⁹ John of Damascus. *Refutation of Heresies*. Ch.100.768.C

²⁰ John of Damascus. *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*. Preface

²¹ Ibid 4.16.

²² John of Damascus. *On Heresies*. 100/101. XCIV: 765. A.

²³ Ibid XCIV: 764. A.

²⁴ Ibid XCIV: 765. A.

An Apology for the Christian Faith (late 8th century)

The document from Saint Catherine's Monastery called *An Apology for the Christian Faith*, dating to the late 700's, follows the pattern of trinitarian discourse developed by John of Damascus.²⁵ The document starts with praise to God the Creator, who created the heavens and the earth "by Your Word and Your Spirit." The author(s) (henceforth, "author") of this document seem to accept the Quranic terms used of Jesus in Quran 4:171, and discussed by John of Damascus. The author goes so far as to use the Quranic phrase "the angels and the spirit" (Quran 78:38; 97:4), which is curious and potentially confusing, given what the document is attempting to do. The author quotes various Scriptures from the Genesis creation involving the Spirit and the Word, linking them to the "Us" of Genesis 1:26. God, the author argues, can therefore be one Creator, but a plurality of entities "which are not separated one from another."

The author then proceeds to list objects which have a plurality of components but can be semantically identified by one name. An eye has a pupil, and a light, but is one eye. The human being has soul, body, and spirit, but is one human being. The tree has trunk, branch, and fruit, but is one tree. And so on. These are limited analogies – and admittedly, mostly semantic ones – which suggest that "it is appropriate that human beings believe in Him in this way."

The author then acknowledges that these analogies are limited, because "faith, piety, the fear of God, and the purity of the Spirit" are required to truly understand God. Christians do not say that God "begat" His Son-Word in a carnal way, but "as the sun begets rays of light, as the intellect begets the word, or as a fire begets heat." There is an intrinsic relationship between the source and its effect which cannot bear any temporal separation. The same is true of God, His Word, and His Spirit. To bolster his point, the author cites verses in the Quran when God speaks in the first person plural (Quran 90:4; 54:11; 6:94) and where God and His Word are mentioned (Quran 4:171), or where God and His Spirit are mentioned (Quran 16:102).

Finally, the author demonstrates a curious interest to defend God from "moving" "from place to place." This discussion is sandwiched in between mention of the baptism of Christ in the Jordan on either side. The apparent concern is to show that God is not "separated" one part from another, nor does God "move from place to place but is where He wills and as He wills." Once again, the opportunity presents itself to this Christian writer to explain how God can be transcendent and immanent at the same time, most notably in the baptism of Christ. But instead of developing that aspect of the self-revelation of God, the author confines himself to insisting that the three persons were and are unified despite the spatial separation: "The Father bore witness from heaven, the Son was upon the water, and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him. All that is one god and one [supreme] authority."

In the next section, the one on the Incarnation, the author mentions theophany appearances of God from the Old Testament. "God expelled them from the Garden." "God made the wall of the Garden to be of fire." "God commanded [Noah] to build [the ark]." "God brought Noah and his household out of the ship." "God rescued Lot and his two daughters." "He spoke to [Moses] directly." "God sent Moses to Pharaoh." "Moses was in the presence of God on Mount Sinai." "God said to Moses and to the children of Israel." Nevertheless, the author does not defend these instances, which would have been troubling to Muslims, nor does he connect all this to the transcendence-immanence dynamic implicit in all theophanies.

Theodore Abu Qurra (late 8th – early 9th century)

Theodore Abu Qurra was the bishop of Harran in the late 8th century and early 9th century. Although John C. Lamoreaux considers it unlikely that Abu Qurra was a monk at the Mar Saba monastery where John of Damascus lived for quite some time,²⁶ it is likely he knew the writings of John of Damascus, as both of them were staunch

²⁵ Swanson, Mark N. "An Apology for the Christian Faith." Edited by Samuel Noble and Alexander Trieger, *The Orthodox Church in the Arab World 700 – 1700: An Anthology of Sources*. Dekalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2014. Chapter 1.

²⁶ Lamoreaux, John C. "Theodore Abu Qurra." Edited by Samuel Noble and Alexander Trieger, *The Orthodox Church in the Arab World 700 – 1700: An Anthology of Sources*. Dekalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2014. Chapter 2.

defenders of icons.²⁷ In the view of Peter Schadler, Abu Qurra makes more of an effort than John of Damascus to refute Islam.²⁸

Abu Qurra develops an argument for the Trinity based on an analogy to Adam according to the biblical creation account. Adam begot a son through Eve, and Eve proceeded from Adam's side. Since Adam has the relational characteristics of begetting and headship, and if Adam is made in God's image, God must also have these characteristics. But the analogy is qualified. God's manner of begetting and proceeding "transcend and are contrary to this."²⁹ Qualification accepted, if God did not have these relational characteristics, Abu Qurra argues, Adam could not have them either. Moreover, again based on reasoning from the analogy of Adam, God must be head over one like Himself, and be the source of another who proceeds from Him eternally. Therefore, Abu Qurra reasons, "God is three persons: One who begets, Another who is begotten, and Another who proceeds." This completes the logical requirements for Adam to be made in the image of God. Therefore, the Son is co-eternal with the Father; and Christians do not worship three gods.

In the assessment of Sara Leila Hussein, Abu Qurra "does not fully explain any of his Trinitarian terms such as 'nature,' 'person' or 'hypostasis'; he relies heavily on biblical proofs which would most likely be dismissed by his Muslim counterparts with the accusation of *tahrif* (corruption or falsification of scripture)... His aim, it would seem, is not to prove the truth of the doctrine, which is already proven by Christian scripture, but to express it clearly in Arabic for what appears to be both a Christian and Muslim audience... Abu Qurra's explanation of the Trinity itself is a traditional one... with a relatively limited engagement with Muslim thinking..."³⁰ In other words, in Hussein's view, Abu Qurra was writing, on balance, more for Christians about Muslims, than for Muslims about Christian faith. And he was writing to help Christians defend their beliefs from Muslim criticisms. But he was not as adept at helping Christians critique Muslim beliefs about God, or helping Muslims see the problematics in their own theological system.

Significantly, Theodore Abu Qurra, in other writings on Islam, reports that Muhammad had an earlier encounter with an Arian monk, from whom Muhammad derived some of his defective ideas. Theodore is even more explicit: He says that Muhammad was "the disciple of an Arian."³¹ Schadler points out that other theologians, even those contemporary with Theodore Abu Qurra, claimed that Muhammad was influenced by a monk "either from the Jacobite, Nestorian, or other tradition."³² Theodore's alignment with John of Damascus suggests borrowing. Strangely, however, Schadler believes that "Theodore does not appear to regard Islam and Muslims in heretical terms."³³ I am not as persuaded, however.

²⁷ Hussein, Sara Leila. *Early Christian-Muslim Debate on the Unity of God: Three Christian Scholars and Their Engagement with Islamic Thought (9th Century C.E.)*. Leiden: Brill, 2014. 51.

"Whether or not Abu Qurra was a monk at Mar Saba, it is known that he travelled to Jerusalem and that he was familiar with the works of John of Damascus."

Schadler, Peter. *John of Damascus and Islam: Christian Heresiology and the Intellectual Background to Earliest Christian-Muslim Relations*. Leiden: Brill, 2018. 182 – 184 discusses the influence of John of Damascus on Theodore Abu Qurra.

"Both theologians were clearly well educated representatives of Chalcedonian orthodoxy and both appear to have had strong ties to Jerusalem and the patriarch there. Several of Theodore's works have him visiting Jerusalem, and at least one of his Arabic works appears to have been translated into Greek at the order of Patriarch Thomas of Jerusalem (807–820) during Theodore's lifetime. Further, the earliest reference to John of Damascus' *Fount of Knowledge* is found in a letter probably dating from the eighth century, written to one Leo, none other than the Syncellus of the Melkite bishop of Harran, the position Theodore came to hold."

²⁸ Schadler, Peter. 192.

²⁹ Lamoreaux, John C. 76

³⁰ Hussein, Sara Leila. 76

³¹ Greek: Ἀρειανοῦ ἄκροατῆς. Gleis and Houry (eds.), *Schriften Zum Islam*, 118;

Lamoreaux (trans.), Theodore Abu Qurrah, p. 225. Cited in footnote 65 by Peter Schadler, 198

³² Schadler, Peter. 198.

³³ *Ibid.* 204.

Consider, for instance, Theodore's unique, and otherwise admirable, translation of the Arabic word *samad* in Quran 112 and the statement about God not begetting. The Quran reads:

“God the Eternal, Who has not begotten nor has been begotten. There is no equal to Him.”

Byzantine theologians translated the Arabic word *samad*, which is a *hapax legomenon* (found only here), into a variety of Greek terms: Σφυρόπηκτος, ὀλόσφαιρος, σφυρελακτος, σφυρελατος, ὀλόσφυρος, among others. This led to a misunderstanding, where Byzantine Christians accused Muslims of attributing a substance to God akin to beaten metal (“holosphoros”). Theodore Abu Qurra, however, aptly renders *samad* with the Greek στειρόπηκτος, meaning “barren-constructed.” Theodore translates Quran 112 into Greek thus:

“ὁ θεὸς μουνάξ, ὁ θεὸς στειρόπηκτος, ὃς οὐκ ἐγέννησεν οὐδὲ ἐγεννήθη οὐδὲ γέγονεν αὐτῷ ἀντιμεριοτήτις”

Schadler points out that most scholars have failed to notice Theodore's careful translation.³⁴ The translation “barren-constructed” is very helpful in the history of translation, indicative of Abu Qurra's diligence to understand his dialogue partner, and also suggestive of the bishop of Harran's view that Muhammad preached a variety of Arianism. “Barren” refers to God not, in fact, being a Father in the sense that Christians believe Him to be. God may be a *Creator* of beings ontologically separate and vastly inferior to Himself, but He is not a *begetter* of a Son ontologically equal to and united with Him. Theodore Abu Qurra, like John of Damascus, continued to place Islam into the category of Christian heresy generally, and Arian heresy specifically. Thus, he was content to cite the Quran for proof of the Christian Trinity, but he did not go on the offensive towards the tawhid itself. He sought to establish the unity of the Father-Son relationship, but not the functionality of the transcendent-immanent relationship, which would have enabled him to critique the tawhid and the centerpiece of the Islamic doctrine of God.

The Disputation of the Monk Abraham of Tiberias (815 – 840 AD)

The author of this work tells a story about a Muslim emir named ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Hashimi summoning a Christian monk named Abraham from Tiberias into a debate when they encounter each other in Jerusalem. Krisztina Szilagyi detects strong elements of a Chalcedonian Christology, and reasons that the author must have been an Arab Orthodox Christian.³⁵ Szilagyi also reasons that the events described in the work come from a period between 815 – 840 AD, although the work itself may have been composed after that.³⁶

The character Abraham of Tiberias delivers a very punchy and rather fearless criticism of Islam. On the second day of their dispute, while repudiating the claim of Muhammad to be a hanif, Abraham defends himself by saying that Christ dwells in him, and Christ and the Father indwell each other reciprocally. The implication straightaway is that Abraham speaks with spiritual authority, even that of Christ, in principle. Abraham defends Christian worship as not merely directed at Christ, but directed at God the Father who mutually indwells Christ. The Father and the Son are one. Then, Abraham cites the now familiar Quran 4:171, saying, “Your own words confirm this: God aided Him with His Word and His Spirit.” How must One such as this have to be a prophet or a slave? He is God to be worshipped and Judge of the Last Judgment.³⁷ Interestingly, Abraham is said to have been reading from “a booklet.” This would appear to be a Christian booklet to be read on precisely these occasions when Christians debated Muslims. When “the monk finished reading the booklet, the emir looked at him, red-eyed with anger.”³⁸

³⁴ Ibid. 205. “However, scholars have failed to notice Theodore's unique usage, with the exception of Gleis and Reinhold, who edited the Greek work choosing an alternative manuscript reading, and Lamoreaux, who translated the text reading “στειρόπηκτος”, but still assuming it to be a mistranslation.”

³⁵ Szilagyi, Krisztina. “The Disputation of the Monk Abraham of Tiberias.” Edited by Samuel Noble and Alexander Trierger, *The Orthodox Church in the Arab World 700 – 1700: An Anthology of Sources*. Dekalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2014. Chapter 3. Page 91.

³⁶ Ibid. 91.

³⁷ Ibid. 99.

³⁸ Ibid. 101.

Furious, the emir summoned a Muslim man named al-Manzur ibn Ghatafan al-Absi to continue the debate. Al-Mansur challenges Abraham about where he received the version of the truth he upholds. Abraham replies, “The books of the prophets and the apostles.” A Jewish bystander chimes in, saying that the literature of the apostles is untrustworthy. Al-Mansur extends the accusation of untrustworthiness to the Old Testament as well. The monk Abraham therefore shifts to Quran 4:171 along with a few other Quranic details about Christ. He then expounds on the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. Then he quotes from Old Testament passages where the unity of God, His Word, and His Spirit can be reasoned out. While impressive, and persuasive as long as one also receives the authority of the Old Testament, Abraham does not explain the *functionality* of the Father-Son relationship, or the dynamic of simultaneous transcendence and immanence for God.

Paul of Antioch’s *Letter to a Muslim Friend* (1200’s)

Paul was a Christian monk in Antioch, and later, the scholarly Arab Orthodox bishop of Sidon during the thirteenth century. Sidney H. Griffith points out that Paul’s *Letter to a Muslim Friend* was “well known among both Christian and Muslim scholars of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.”³⁹ This letter did in fact elicit Muslim responses.⁴⁰ In this letter, we find hints of a return to the articulation of the Trinity which recovers some of the pre-Nicene logic.

After using a Trinitarian greeting, Paul recounts a story of himself taking a journey to Constantinople and discussing Islam with the “most eminent and learned men” there. Paul portrays himself as asking these theologians, receiving answers, and relaying them. Whether Paul actually did undertake this journey or whether this journey is simply a literary device is an interesting question, but immaterial to my observations here.

Paul claims that the Byzantines acquired a copy of the Quran for themselves, and had very developed reasons for rejecting Islam as a belief system. As related to the Incarnation and the Trinity, they note in passing, of course, the verse describing Jesus as “God’s Spirit and His Word.”⁴¹ Just prior to a full-blown defense of the Trinity, Paul says that “testimony” is given about “God’s Spirit and His Word” “by means of miracles.”⁴²

Paul deploys the common ontological argument for the relation of the Word and Spirit to the Father. “For us the essence is the Father, the Son is the rationality, and the life is the Holy Spirit.”⁴³ He says that Christians have been commanded to use these names, and provides a short catalog of biblical quotations where Word and Spirit are named and used of God; the most persuasive text is Matthew 28:20. Paul parallels this with verses from the Quran. In this context, significantly, Paul mentions that “God spoke with Moses in a conversation.” This is a quotation of Quran 4:164, and implicitly raises a challenge to the tawhid and God’s supposedly absolute transcendence. Paul then argues that the Quran itself holds “three attributes to the exclusion of others”⁴⁴ in highest esteem for God. By this, Paul means that God is living and rational. He coordinates the attributes of life with Spirit and rationality with Word. Paul seems to be preparing his audience for his treatment of the Incarnation.

When Paul turns to discuss the Incarnation, he compares the Virgin Mary to the “burning bush which the Prophet Moses saw was afire without burning up.”⁴⁵ This comparison was by this time a common parallel for Christians to make. Paul deploys it to parallel a Quranic statement about how God can only communicate with select human beings – the prophets – “from behind a veil.”⁴⁶ Functionally, God’s communication to any human or angel requires God to be both transcendent and immanent at the same time. Paul then focuses on humanity as “the most exalted of what God created”⁴⁷ and declares that humanity of the incarnate Word of God can be compared to the thorn bush: “Just as He addressed Moses the prophet through the box-thorn bush.”⁴⁸

³⁹ Griffith, Sidney H. “Paul of Antioch.” Edited by Samuel Noble and Alexander Trierger, *The Orthodox Church in the Arab World 700 – 1700: An Anthology of Sources*. Dekalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2014.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 217

⁴¹ Ibid. 221

⁴² Ibid. 225.

⁴³ Ibid. 226.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 227.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 227 – 228.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 227. See Quran 42:51.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 227.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 227.

Paul then deploys the common patristic analogy of fire in iron to explain the death of Jesus. Just as splitting an iron heated with fire impinges on the iron but not the fire within, so the death of the humanity of the incarnate Word does not impinge on his divinity. Paul returns to the Quran to remind his readers that we find there reinforcement that Christ being human on the one hand, and Spirit and Word of God on the other. He argues that the Quran itself acknowledges that Christ was “two natures... united in His one person.”⁴⁹ He provides a semantic argument about the carpenter and the hand of the carpenter, or the tailor and the hand of the tailor signifying one and the same being in action. “This is what we mean by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”⁵⁰ Paul resolutely maintains that Christians do not worship three gods.

After treating such subjects as why, and in what sense, might Christians quote the Quran, and how to understand the use of anthropomorphisms for God, Paul returns to why the names of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not anthropomorphism. He uses the Aristotelian distinction between substance and accident, saying that these are not accidental to God, and that God belongs in the category of “subtle substances” which do not truly occupy – or are reducible to – a space.⁵¹

Paul then returns to the Incarnation from the logic of God’s “bountyfulness.” The best of God is His rationality, or Word. The best creation of God is humanity. Thus, for God to offer Himself most bountifully, and communicate Himself in a bountiful way to human beings, the Incarnation “was necessary.”⁵² “For this it was necessary that He should take on a sensory essence through which His power and His bountyfulness would become manifest. And since there does not exist among beings created by Him anyone nobler than man, He took on the human nature of the Lady Mary, the one purified and ‘chosen over all the women of the worlds.’”⁵³

Paul resumes the pre-Nicene concern to frame God’s revelation to humanity in the logic of a transcendence-immanence paradigm. His two mentions of the burning bush and his singular Quranic quotation about God’s conversation with Moses evokes source material from the Bible, Christian exegetical tradition, and Quran 4:164 and 28:30. His deliberate parallels of the burning bush to the womb of Mary and the humanity of Jesus, along with his use of the iron-fire image, present a rhetorically powerful combination. While not all of Paul’s arguments would score the points he might hope they would with a Muslim audience, he has detected a weakness in the Muslim concept of God. A God who is absolutely and wholly transcendent cannot communicate – whether content or supremely, Himself – to human beings. For God to do so requires God to bridge His own transcendence and locate Himself within creation. Paul says, “All the Muslims say that the Qur’an is God’s speech; only someone who is alive and rational has speech.”⁵⁴ But to pull the cords more tightly around his Muslim interlocutor, he might also have said, for good measure, “And only a God who can be both above the highest heaven and on earth at the same time can speak to us.”

Further research must be done on the responses to Paul. The Muslim jurist Shihab al-Din Ahmad ibn Idris al-Qarafi (1238 – 85) in Cairo responded to Paul of Antioch directly. Ibn Taymiyya (1263 – 1328) in 1316 and Ibn Abi Talib al-Dimashqi (died 1327) in 1321 replied to a revision and republication of Paul’s letter by an anonymous Christian writer in Cyprus.

Gregory Palamas (1296 – 1359 AD)

Considered the greatest of the Greek medieval theologians,⁵⁵ Gregory Palamas, archbishop of Thessaloniki, took a sea voyage to Constantinople in 1354 at the age of 58. A storm forced the ship’s captain to seek harbor in the port city of Gallipoli, which had recently been captured by the Ottoman Turks. The Turks took the ship and its crew hostage and negotiated with the Byzantines for their release. When they realized the significance of Palamas, they increased the ransom and began moving the group to various cities in Asia Minor. All told, Gregory Palamas was a

⁴⁹ Ibid. 229.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 229.

⁵¹ Ibid. 232.

⁵² Ibid. 233.

⁵³ Ibid. 233. Paul was quoting Quran 3:42 with regards to Mary.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 227.

⁵⁵ Meyendorff, John. *A Study of Gregory Palamas*. London: The Faith Press, 1964. 115.

hostage for over a year, from March 1354 to July 1355. During this time, he learned more about Islam, and met Muslim intellectuals for dialogue and debate.

Palamas wrote a lengthy pastoral letter to his archdiocese,⁵⁶ probably while he was in Nicea towards the end of his captivity. I have not been able to find a copy of this letter in English. I am therefore dependent on the English summaries and analyses of George Papademetriou⁵⁷ and Daniel Sahas.⁵⁸ In his letter, Palamas described three dialogues with Muslims. These encounters are of great interest because Palamas viewed his captivity as a way to share his Christian faith with his Muslim captors.⁵⁹ The first dialogue was with one Ishmael, the grandson of the Great Emir Orkham. In it, Palamas demonstrates that he had much to learn about Islam, and vice versa. They cover areas of Christian practice, such as fasting and almsgiving. Palamas' second dialogue was with the "Chiones," a group of Muslims who appear to have had converted from Judaism. This dialogue covers the most topics, Biblical and Quranic material, and ends with one of Palamas' interlocutors getting up and slapping him across the face. I will focus on this dialogue, below, for its trinitarian content. The third dialogue was with a Muslim imam in the city of Nicaea. The two men compare Jesus and Muhammad, covering questions of whether they were both prophesied, in what literature, whether Christians tampered with the New Testament, and whether they were effective.

In the second dialogue, Gregory Palamas faces the Chiones before Ottoman Turkish rulers. Because of the Chiones' background in Judaism, and the possibility that they were apostates from Christianity as well,⁶⁰ the dialogue covers topics related to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The Chiones begin by discussing Moses and the Ten Commandments. After being prodded by the Turkish rulers to reply, Palamas explains attributes of God. God always exists and remains in eternity without beginning (*anarchos*). He is endless (*ateleutetos*), unchangeable (*atreptos*), unaltered (*annalloiotos*), unbroken (*atmetos*), unconfused (*asynchyotos*), and infinite (*aperioristos*). All creatures, by contrast, are changeable (*trepto*) and perishable and corruptible. Creation's beginning, in fact, is a change from non-being to being. Palamas does not explain how he knows these things about God.

Seeking to build a linguistic bridge to Quranic terms, Palamas says that God always has Wisdom (*sophia*) also called Reason (*logos*), and that this Wisdom-Reason has Life (*pneuma*). Muslims believe this as well. Palamas asserts that these attributes are like the rays of the sun, emanating from the sun and coming down to us. He might have explored the transcendence-immanence dynamic from there, but instead uses the patristic idea of the sun and its rays to argue for the unity between them. This strategy, as I argued above, is not particularly convincing to the Muslim, who wonders about the separation into persons. Palamas then asserts that Christians are instructed to believe and talk this way about God by Christ, the Logos of God. This assertion assumes that Jesus spoke truly, and that the Logos and the Spirit can be logically hypostasized as different divine persons, as Christians believe for reasons, of course, outside the Quran.

Palamas then quotes the Shema of Deuteronomy 6:4 as an argument for the Trinity. He also quotes from the creation hymn of Genesis 1 where we find God, God's speech, and God's Spirit. He seems to hold straightforwardly that these quotations can be used as an argument for the distinction of the three divine persons.

Palamas is on stronger footing when he quotes, "The Spirit of God has made me and the breath of the Almighty gives me life" (Job.33:4), referencing Genesis 2:7, because of the textual identification of the Spirit of God as such,

⁵⁶ Palamas, Gregory. *Letter to Thessaloniki*. The Athonite manuscript of Saint Panteleimon Monastery, Number 215, was copied by A. Adamantios on August 3, 1895. Lambros verified the accuracy of the transcript. The Letter was published by K. Dyovouniotes in *Neos Hellenomnemon* (Athens), XVI (1922), 7-21.

⁵⁷ Papademetriou, George C. "Saint Gregory Palamas: Three Dialogues With Muslims." Edited by Papademetriou. *Two Traditions, One Space: Orthodox Christians and Muslims in Dialogue*. Boston, MA: Somerset Hall Press, 2011.

⁵⁸ Sahas, Daniel. "Gregory Palamas (1296-1360) On Islam." *The Muslim World*. Vol. LXXIII, January 1983, No. 1.

⁵⁹ Palamas, Gregory. *Letter to Thessaloniki*. 8. Quoted by Sahas, Daniel. 13

"For it seems to me that it is through this dispensation that the truth about our Lord Jesus Christ, the God over all, becomes manifest even to those most barbaric among the barbarians, so that they may be without excuse in front of His most fearful tribunal, in the age to come, which is already at hand."

⁶⁰ Papademetriou, George C. 59

and the implicit immanence involved when the Spirit is breathed into the human being to provide the principle of life. This is a movement of God's Spirit, to be sure, but this localization does not exhaust who God is (transcendence). Palamas also enlists Psalm 107:20, "God sent forth His word (logos) and delivered them from destruction" for a similar purpose, interpreting it by the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. Then he quotes Psalm 103:30, "I will send my Spirit and will create and renew the face of the earth." If God can send forth His logos and pneuma into the creation and yet still be transcendent, then the transcendent God has the ability to become immanent. This would have been enough to mount an argument against the tawhid, though not necessarily to establish the three persons of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.

Curiously, the Chiones claim to believe what Palamas has said. They question him, instead, about why Christians believe that Christ is God and that God became a human being. Palamas replies that human beings disobeyed God's commandments and brought about death. God desired to deliver them, but could not because God cannot violate human freedom without destroying it and us. "For this reason the only sinless word of God becomes a son of man . . . [and] he takes upon himself the passions of us who were responsible."⁶¹ God became man in the womb of the Virgin, fought the devil's temptations, took our passions with him to death, and was victorious over sin, death, and the devil. He even descended into Hades to save those of the dead who believed in him.

The Turks interrupt and ask how the Logos, who they presume is infinite by nature, was contained in the woman's womb. They maintain, by contrast, that God spoke, and the man Christ was conceived without being divine. Palamas replies, "God is not a massive body who cannot be contained in a small place... He is incorporeal and can be present everywhere: in small places, great spaces, above and below: God is not limited." The Chiones, agitated, insist that the man Christ was conceived without being divine, by a speech-act of God. Palamas responds by holding them to account for their earlier agreement:

"You say that Christ is the Word of God. How can the Word 'become' by another word? That would mean that the Word is not coeternal with God. It was pointed out at the beginning of our dialogue, and you agreed, that God has coeternally the Word and the Spirit... The eternal Word of God, as Spirit and Word, was without body. He later took on human nature for our sake; however, He remained coeternal with God, Who also created time."⁶²

Of course, Muslims can say that Christ was the Word of God because he bore a message from God. For a Muslim, bearing such a title does not logically preclude the possibility that a rational (*logike*) God spoke rational words in order to create the man Jesus in the virgin womb. But it does not require that Jesus be divine, or that the Quranic saying indicate agreement with the Christian Trinity.

Another person asks Palamas to answer why Muslims accept Christ as a prophet, but Christians do not accept Muhammad as a prophet. Palamas replies by saying that Christians cannot believe in the words of Muhammad. He repeats Christ's reminder that he will personally return as Judge to judge the entire world. Palamas cites Jesus' warning to not believe other "prophets" (Jn.5:43), and Paul's warning to not believe another gospel (Gal.1:8).

The Chiones challenge Gregory Palamas about why Christians do not observe circumcision, since it was commanded from the time of Abraham. Palamas replies that they, too, do not observe many commandments from the Old Testament. I grant that Palamas might have perceived that their line of inquiry was more hostile and merited a retort rather than an answer. Nevertheless, Palamas might have also taken the occasion to point to "circumcision of the heart" as the ultimate goal of physical circumcision (Dt.30:6; Jer.4:4; 9:25 – 26), which is accomplished by Christ and in Christ (Rom.2:28 – 29; 6:6; 8:3 – 4; Col.2:12). This Jewish idiom expresses standard christology. Biblically and logically, it reinforces Palamas' earlier point about how a loving God could cleanse humanity of the corruption of sin without destroying human free will and thus destroying us. And it might have resonated with the Muslim concern for "cleanliness" as well as the Quranic material about Muhammad. Even Muhammad called himself a sinner, later in life (Qur'an 40:55; 48:2; 47:19). Moreover, Quran 94 says that God had to purify the prophet Muhammad's heart before he could receive the revelation of the Qur'an. Two hadiths also say this (Sahih Muslim, Sahih al-Bukhari). This raises important questions, not only about a comparison of Jesus and Muhammad,

⁶¹ Sahas, Daniel. 16

⁶² Ibid. 16

but also about the Muslim conception of the need for humanity to be cleansed, and about God's consistency (or not) in the way He cleanses and forgives.

The Chiones question him about venerating icons. The bishop responds by saying that friends venerate each other without worshiping each other. Furthermore, Moses made many physical representations (images) of the heavenly things, like cherubim, without these images being worshiped (Ex.20:5 – 23:24; Dt.4:19; 5:9). Palamas says, adding to that point, "The temple itself was constructed in the likeness of the heavenly temple."⁶³ I will explore this comment below. One can be guided, says Palamas, by these images to God. At last, the Turks bid a respectful farewell. But one of the Chiones remain behind and slaps Palamas in the face. The Turks there restrain him and report the incident to the Emir, who punishes him.

How effective was Gregory Palamas? In the assessment of Daniel Sahas,

"The topics discussed are the traditional ones found in Muslim-Christian conversations since the time of John of Damascus. Obviously the Christian uses the Christian scriptures as his point of departure, and the Muslim the Qur'an, at times leading to an impasse. And there is no real bridge-building even when either one of the parties is using the Scripture of the other, for in those cases the other's Scripture is interpreted from within the framework of one's own tradition and for one's own apologetic purposes. So Palamas is using Qur'anic affirmations about Jesus as Christ, Word and Spirit of God, born of a virgin and ascended into heaven, while the Muslim refers to the Christian Scripture as a source of foretelling the coming of Muhammad as prophet. In short, Scriptural arguments derived from each other's Scripture are no more convincing—in either case—to the partner in this dialogue than those deduced from one's own Scripture."⁶⁴

Sahas's assessment is honest. Palamas' strategy was to establish a correspondence with Muslims by words used in common between the Bible and the Quran. He assumed that such points of connection gave him a real opening to change the underlying content and meaning of these words as they are found in the Quran. It did not. Merely mining the Quran for material to find "support" for Christian theology does not produce Christian theology. However, pointing out fundamental contradictions in the tawhid, and the Quranic portrayal of God might produce new avenues for dialogue.

Curiously, Palamas first sought to establish agreement about the characteristics and attributes about God with which he believed the Muslims would agree. This seems to me to be a Hellenistic philosophical opening on which he built further theological points. Perhaps Palamas believed this would be fruitful because Byzantine Christians and Muslims shared exposure to classical Greek philosophy. But Palamas did not opt to also go the route of Judaic phenomenology, if the transcendence-immanence principle can be termed that, in order to assert that before theology can go any further, an epistemology utilizing the ostensibly historical data of revelation must be established. One's theology is immediately implicated, of course, because whether God can localize His own self-revelation to communicate to certain angels or human beings is a matter of theology proper. But, as far as the human mind works, the epistemological and historical questions exist simultaneously to the theological ones, and can be dealt with in parallel or even prior to theology. Put simply, Palamas sought to find points of theological agreement before insisting that Muslims explain how, given their understanding of the absolute transcendence of God expressed in the tawhid, they do theology at all.

As further evidence of my point, consider Gregory Palamas' statement about the Jewish temple. In the context of defending Christian iconography, Palamas said, "The temple itself was constructed in the likeness of the heavenly temple."⁶⁵ By the time of Palamas, this tradition had been well established for over a millennium. Jewish speculative theologians like Philo of Alexandria and the community behind 1 Enoch imagined things of this sort; the Qumran Jews believed that there existed a heavenly temple which served as the pattern for Jewish sanctuary-style worship.⁶⁶ In the Christian tradition, Hebrews refers to "the greater and more perfect tabernacle" (Heb.9:11) as "the

⁶³ Papademetriou, George C. 67

⁶⁴ Sahas, Daniel. 20

⁶⁵ Papademetriou, George C. 67

⁶⁶ Dimant, Devorah. "Men as Angels: The Self-Image of the Qumran Community." Edited by Berlin, Adele. *Religion and Politics in the Ancient Near East*. Bethesda, MD: University Press of Maryland, 1996. 98

heavenly things” (Heb.9:23) which needed the cleansing, purifying work of Christ. Theologians like Origen of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa, drawing on Philo, speculated on what was meant by this, especially in their respective portrayals of Moses’ ascent up Mount Sinai; Ephrem the Syrian re-envisioned paradise as a mountain with a temple pattern; etc.

Despite the richness of this tradition in both Jewish and Christian circles, I also wish to maintain two points that I think are vital. First, mention of the Jewish temple in the Hebrew Scriptures should immediately call to mind the simultaneous transcendence and immanence of God for the functional purpose of revelation. Specifically, when God came to rest in Solomon’s temple, Solomon said in awe, “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain You, how much less this house which I have built!” (1 Kings 8:27) God’s cloud of glory in the temple, as I mentioned before, is a specific theophany continuous with the tabernacle before it, the fire on Mount Sinai before that, the pillar of cloud and fire before that, the burning bush before that, the appearances in Genesis before that, and God in Eden before that. God’s immanent appearances make the case for the uniqueness of whatever content God communicates. As I explored above with the pre-Nicene theologians, this was a well-established pattern of Christian discourse, and a Christian understanding of God’s theophanies. In the Christian view, of course, these theophanies culminated in Christ, but in such a way that the previous historical and biblical patterns stress the absolute uniqueness of Jesus of Nazareth.

Second, we need to be much more certain about how God, in His temple-patterned transcendence and immanence, calls for our partnership in the cleansing of our human nature, foreshadowing Christ, than it does about whatever we imagine heavenly worship to be like. That is because the likely meaning of “the pattern... which was shown to [Moses] on the mountain” (Ex.25:40) has as much to do with Moses looking *down* from the height of Mount Sinai and seeing three levels, than it does with Moses looking *up* further into the heavens. Israel on the whole remained at the base of Mount Sinai (Ex.19:17), despite God’s invitation to all of them to come up (Ex.19:13; Dt.5:5). The elders of Israel went up halfway to the top (Ex.24:9 – 11). Moses alone, aided by Joshua, went up all the way to the summit (Ex.24:12 – 13) into the cloud of glory, and – in a manner of speaking – saw God “face to face” (Ex.33:11). These three vertical levels became institutionalized spatial distances from God in the tabernacle and then, the temple. Israel could come to the outer court. The priests, representing the elders at Sinai, could come into the holy place. The high priest alone, representing Moses, could come into the holy of holies. And he could only do that once a year, on Yom Kippur (Lev.16), to reenact the making of the Sinai covenant between God and Moses, as God “cleansed” the Israelites throughout the year, much like a dialysis machine, receiving their impurity and giving back purity, climaxing on Yom Kippur.

In other words, the vertical ascent of Moses up Mount Sinai, which resulted in some kind of purification and transfiguration for him (Ex.34:29 – 35), was reenacted every year in the horizontal movement of Israel and the priests and the high priest into the holy of holies, resulting in a form of purification of Israel. Whether or not heavenly worship has a three-fold “spatial” model goes beyond what the Epistle to the Hebrews could possibly suggest. Given Jesus’ use of Mount Tabor to represent his enthronement “on the clouds” as the divine “Son of Man” of Daniel’s vision (Dan.7:13 – 14; Mt.16:27 – 17:8), we might say it involves an “ascent” of some sort. But beyond that, what can we really know? Actually, given that the three-fold spatial model of Israel’s sanctuary was a reminder and recapitulation (an Irenaean concern) of Israel’s *failure* as a community, it makes more sense that there would *not* be a three-fold partition in heavenly worship. But again, this is the realm of speculative theology.

As relates to Gregory Palamas’ dialogue with the Muslims, the point I am making is that Palamas seems to reflect the distance that Greek-speaking Christian theological attention had traveled, and the new habits of mind into which Christian theology had settled with respect to Islam as a theological opponent. Christian theology had shifted its focus away from its Judaic roots and into a robust engagement with Hellenistic thought, especially concerns about ontology in Plato and Aristotle. This focus was at the core of the Arian controversies in the fourth century, and the theological achievements which resulted in the great ecumenical creeds. This engagement with Hellenistic language and philosophy was a necessary step for Christian theology to take in order to contextualize its original biblical message into the formal category of ontology in philosophical Hellenism, and faithfully preach the gospel. Of course Orthodox theologians would want to defend those achievements, or otherwise advocate for them. But, I suggest, this led to a tendency among Orthodox theologians to allow Hellenistic ontology to *eclipse* Hebraic historicism, to see Islam as a Hellenistic Christian heresy about ontology alone, and therefore to debate Islam as if the Quran itself were an Arian document which could not help but be Nicene despite itself, or a semi-Christian document secretly struggling to be Trinitarian. Paul of Antioch seems to have been the most exceptional to this

pattern, but even he did not entirely break free from it. Christian theologians who spoke Arabic and Greek did not seem to fully recognize that in Islam, the Arabic *sbb* and *rwh* for the Greek *logos* and *pneuma* had now been drawn into a new context, given new meanings, and had a new relationship with one another. Islam constituted a new philological, epistemological, and theological challenge altogether.

Daniel Sahas continues his reading of Gregory Palamas' dialogues by saying,

“Rather than ending with a critical remark about this fourteenth-century instance of, and in many respects, unimaginative use of arguments and counter-arguments it seems appropriate to admit that even in our time we have made in many circles little progress towards a more open-ended and truly common search for the truth.”⁶⁷

I am a bit more hopeful, however, about the prospects of other avenues of Christian-Muslim dialogue and debate. By no means am I saying that critiquing the tawhid is a silver bullet. But it is one important angle with which to come at the question of God's nature and God's knowability from within Islam. If observation and experience matter for something, I do think it can be of help.

Finally, I am hopeful that Christian-Muslim dialogue will actually help Christians continue to recognize and rediscover Christianity's Hebraic roots. To a large degree, this effort has been underway since Christian scholars unnerved by World War II found much reason to examine how Christian faith contributed to anti-Semitism, and how colonialism led Western Christians to appropriate the biblical story of Israel in wholly inappropriate ways. But the Christian-Muslim dialogue of the medieval period, and the Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogues as well, have their own important roles to play in this effort. Perhaps these dialogues will show that the notion that Hellenism alone brought ontological concerns to Christian faith, as if the Hebrew Bible was simply oriented towards “functionality,” is a gross exaggeration. There are biblical-Hebraic words, phrases, and narratives (not least in the sacrificial system) reflecting ontological concerns which can and should be coordinated with the Greek creedal language and the sophisticated inheritance of Greek, Syriac, and Arabic-speaking Christianity. We must reexamine the patristic theologians, as well, perhaps especially Irenaeus and Athanasius because of their strength as biblical theologians who give more theological and exegetical reflections on why God needed an Israel prior to Christ, and whose theological anthropology and christology are more informed by the experience of Israel. Yet, as I hope this paper suggests, Christianity will emerge the stronger for it.

⁶⁷ Sahas, Daniel. 21

MORE

“It should be added here that refutations written of the Qur’an or works in which the Qur’an is a target specifically do not begin to appear until the middle or even late ninth century, and with those such as the “Refutation of the Qur’an” by Nicetas of Byzantium (fl. 842–67) in the Greek-speaking world, and the Apology of ‘Abd al-Masih ibn Ishaq al-Kindi (9th/10th century) in the Arabic one.⁵⁵ Nicetas’ work has as its main aim the discrediting of the Qur’an as a book divinely revealed. He was apparently working from a Greek translation of the Qur’an, and did not know Arabic, but the translation he had was faithful to the original Qur’an in most cases. Al-Kindi, who worked in Arabic, was not solely concerned with the refutation of the Qur’an, but does devote some considerable space to that project in his work attempting to refute Islam. He quoted the Qur’an frequently in an effort to demonstrate its fallibility. In comparison with these works, nothing of the kind appeared during the lifetime of John of Damascus or Theodore Abu Qurrah, and in general verses from the Qur’an were often used by Christians to support Christianity, as was the case with Theodore.”

David Thomas, *Christian Muslim Bibliography*, p.399

Maqāla fī l-tawhīd, ‘Treatise on the unity (of God)’

Date Unknown, late 8th or early 9th c.

Original language Arabic

Description

We know nothing about the contents of the work apart from what we might expect from its title. We may wonder, however, whether Abū Nūḥ al-Anbārī was the first to exploit Aristotle’s definitions of ‘the same’ (often translated in Arabic as ‘the one’), found in the Topics, in order to discuss the nature of the unity of God.

Significance

This is a very early Arabic Christian treatment of the unity of God, and we must hope that a copy can be discovered.

Manuscripts

MS Cairo, Collection of al-qummuṣ Armāniyūs Ḥabashī (inaccessible MS in private collection; see Sbath, *al-Fihris*, Supplément, p. 11, no. 2531)

Letter 59 (Disputation with the Caliph al-Mahdī); incipit of oldest manuscript: Tub dilēh kad dīlēh d-mār Ṭimātē'ōs qātō līqā drāshā da-'bad lwāt Mahdī 'amīrā da-mhaymānē b-sharbā d-haymānūtā da-kresty ānūtā ba-znā d-shū'ālā wa-dpūnāy petgāmā, 'And now the disputation of the same Catholicos Mār Timothy with Mahdī, the Commander of the Faithful, about Christianity in the form of question and answer'

Date 782/83

Original language Syriac

Description

Letter 59, the so-called Disputation (drāshā) or Dialogue or Apology, is a conversation on religion, which Timothy held in Arabic with the Caliph al-Mahdī (r. 775-85) in Baghdad on two days of the year 782/83. Afterwards he wrote down the conversation in the form of a record from memory ('Gedächtnisprotokoll') in a letter to a friend, though it was probably composed with a larger audience in mind. This text is a theological tractate in Syriac in the form of a dialogue. The plan of the text has a circular structure: the most important themes are the doctrine of the Son of God and of the two natures (chs 2-3 and 20, following Heimgartner's numbering), the Trinity (chs 4 and 16-19), the significance of Muḥammad and the question of the continuity of Heilsgeschichte between Christianity and Islam (chs 7-8, 10, 13-15). Between these main blocks, various other themes have been integrated, such as circumcision (ch. 5), the direction of prayer (ch. 6), the significance of the cross (ch. 9), the death of Mary (ch. 11) and the question of whether Jesus was 'good' (ch. 12). The introduction (ch. 1) is addressed to the recipient of the letter; the text ends with the 'parable of the pearl' (ch. 21).

At several points, Timothy refers to themes that were discussed in Islamic theological circles at the time, such as the meaning of the word al-Ṣamad in Q 112:2 (ch. 18, 42-44), and the significance of the Islamic comprehension of the oneness of God (tawḥīd) (chs 16, 34-35; 17, 10-13). Timothy does not consider Muḥammad to be a prophet, but nevertheless accepts that he was an important teacher of the Arabs (ch. 15). Likewise, the Qur'ān is not a text that can be characterized as revelation, but it can support Christian truth. He makes Muḥammad a 'theologian' of the Trinity: the enigmatic three letters at the head of several sūras are interpreted as vestiges of the Trinity, as are the verses in which God is referred to in the plural. For Timothy, Q 4:171 is the locus classicus of Qur'ānic Trinitarian doctrine (chs 16, 90 and 19, 20). But the Letter also contains early indications of a Muslim tradition of biblical interpretation: the caliph interprets the Paraclete of John's Gospel as Muḥammad (ch. 7, 16-51), and also sees references to him in Deuteronomy 18:18 (ch. 10, 44-62) and Isaiah 21:6-9 (ch. 8, 23-43, where the rider on the ass is Jesus and the rider on the camel is Muḥammad). There are no Islamic sources to show how far the caliphal figure of the debate conforms in his theological insights to the historical al-Mahdī.

The authenticity of the Disputation is certain. Although Nau (pp. 241-46), Graf (pp. 115-16) and Putman (pp. 184-85) have disputed whether it reproduces a conversation that actually took place, a number of reasons confirm that the discussion really did take place. In the first place, Timothy tells us about audiences with the caliph in other letters (8 and 50), while Islamic sources report that from al-Mahdī onwards the tradition of disputations often held at the caliph's command, although usually only between Muslims, became highly important (Van Ess, TG iii, pp. 10 and 199). Furthermore, this Disputation is unlike manuals that give answers to all the 'frequently asked questions' of Christian-Islamic controversial literature in the form of a fictitious conversation. For the caliph is not depicted as a pupil who asks Timothy as his teacher, and time and again he is portrayed as cleverer than the patriarch: he scrutinizes and caricatures the explanations given by Timothy, and he is not finally convinced by what he hears.

The Disputation became a favorite apologetic text among Syriac and Arabic-speaking Christians of various denominations. It was translated into Arabic several times, and at least four different Arabic recensions of it survive; as far as we know, it is the only one of Timothy's letters that has been translated into Arabic. These translations are distinct recensions that re-work the text in their own ways. Recension A I, from the 14th century at the latest, has been edited by Caspar (Caspar, 'Les versions arabes', pp. 125-50). A further recension from the 16th century (unedited; named by Heimgartner A IV) is an adaptation for Melkite readers: Timothy and al-Mahdī are replaced by Theodore Abū Qurra and al-Ma'mūn (Caspar, 'Les versions arabes', p. 108).

Recension A II (unedited), from the 16th century at the latest, mocks al-Mahdī as a naive admirer of Timothy (Caspar, 'Les versions arabes', pp. 110-11). Its aim seems to be not to defend Christianity, but to show its superiority. Recension A III of the late 19th century (Caspar, 'Les versions arabes', pp. 111-12) has been edited by L. Cheikho and Putman. MS Beirut, Bibliothèque orientale – 662, might be the autograph of this recension (Putman, p. 174).

It is not known when the earliest Arabic translation was made, but it seems that the East-Syrian recension of the Disputation of the Monk Ibrāhīm al-Ṭabarānī (q.v.) (9th c.) already quotes from it. The oldest surviving manuscript that contains an Arabic translation is to be found in the Cairo Geniza and probably dates from the 11th century (K. Szilágyi, 'Christian books in Jewish libraries. Fragments of Christian Arabic writings from the Cairo Genizah', *Ginzei Qedem* 2 (2006) 107*-62*, pp. 138*-40*). There is also a very short Syriac recension, represented by MS BNF – Syr. 306, fols 107v-111r (1889); it is edited by Van Roey.

Significance

The Disputation is Timothy's best-known work and must have been of immense interest for Christian-Muslim relations, judging from its reception history. The West-Syrian Dionysius bar Ṣalībī (d. 1171) used it in his work against Islam and quotes it without mentioning the source (Heimgartner, *Disputation*, p. 35), and 'Abdīshō' bar Brīkhā (d. 1318) mentions the Disputation with al-Mahdī as the second of the writings by Timothy. The various Arabic recensions from later centuries also bear witness to its continuing popularity among Middle Eastern Christians.

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Kitāb al-tawḥīd, 'Divine Unity'

Date Unknown, before 944

Original Language Arabic

The Kitāb al-tawḥīd is the earliest surviving Muslim work that can be regarded as a systematic theology, in that it brings together individual questions debated among theological specialists into a structured whole. It can be divided into five parts: epistemological introduction, the contingent nature of the world and existence of God, prophethood, divine and human action, and faith (see the discussion in Thomas, *Christian doctrines*, pp. 80-82). Like other works of its kind from slightly later in the same period, it combines the presentation of positive theological teachings with refutations of opposing views, and among these is a brief examination of Christian claims for the divinity of Jesus Christ. This comes at the end of the third part of the work, on prophethood, and follows defenses of the position of prophet in principle and of Muḥammad as prophet in particular. As a consequence, this refutation focuses almost entirely on the question of the divinity of Jesus without reference to other Christian doctrines.

While the structure of this section is not immediately easy to see (like the rest of the work, it contains few indications of a change of topic), it begins with a brief exposition of Christian teachings about the divine and human natures of Christ, and then turns to arguments against these. Al-Māturīdī starts by questioning the relationship between the Son and the other divine Persons in the Incarnation, and then proceeds to compare Jesus' miracles with those of Moses and other prophets, employing a source that was almost certainly known to the other 10th-century theologians, al-Ḥasan ibn Ayyūb (q.v.) and al-Bāqillānī (q.v.). He next comments on the old question of Jesus as Son of God in adoptive terms, which is discussed by Ibrāhīm al-Nazzām and his pupil Abū 'Uthmān al-Jāhīz in the early 9th century, and he almost certainly refers to al-Nazzām's arguments. He moves on to show, with the aid of quotations from the Qur'an, that Jesus' human traits rule out his divinity, and concludes with a series of brief points that reinforce his earlier arguments (see Thomas, *Christian doctrines*, pp. 83-92).

In this sequence of seemingly original and borrowed arguments, all presented in the severely compressed language that characterizes the Kitāb al-tawḥīd, al-Māturīdī proves to his own satisfaction that the Christian teachings about Jesus are logically unsustainable, with the obvious implication that the teachings of Islam about him are correct. The refutation thus serves the twin purposes of disproving Christianity and vindicating Islam.

Significance

The position of this refutation in the Kitāb al-tawḥīd is significant in that the exposition of prophethood shows that both what Islam teaches about it is right and what other faiths teach is rationally unsupportable. As an element in the treatise, the refutation thus functions primarily as part of the structure of Islamic theology and only secondarily as a direct response to Christians. This feature suggests that, for al-Māturīdī, the activity of engagement with followers of the other faith was less important than the systematic exposition of Islamic theological teachings.

Al-Māturīdī's borrowings from earlier theologians point to the strength and richness of the anti-Christian polemical tradition in Islam in the early 10th century.