


PER L1183 / FT189879P
CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS SUPREMACY
IN THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY

THE LETTER FROM CYPRUS AS INTERRELIGIOUS
APOLOGETIC

BY
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INTRODUCTION: CHRISTIANS UNDER ISLAMIC RULE

In the early centuries of Islam, when the rule of the dynasties in Damascus and Baghdad extended over vast populations of many faiths, Muslims mingled with Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians and others on a daily basis. Islam had spread so quickly from the peninsula of Arabia, and its rule had absorbed such huge territories, that for some centuries Muslims actually remained a minority within their own empire. They had pressing practical need of people whose technical skills could bring the basic necessities of civilized life, whose bureaucratic experience could bring organization and stability to the rule of empire, and whose knowledge of ancient learning could bring intellectual advancement and arcane insights. And they largely observed the pragmatic requirement to leave their client populations un molested in their religious practices and community life.

Relations between Muslims and people of other faiths in these early centuries have the makings of a paradox. In the case of Christians, for example, on the one hand it is known that Muslims relied heavily upon them for the arts of civilization they possessed, including competence as doctors, financiers, civil servants and translators, and they gave them respect and considerable freedom in their daily living and religious observances. But, on the other hand, Muslims were instructed by their scripture to distance themselves from Christians and to look on their holy book and fundamental doctrines as flawed, and they accorded them the status of protected people, Ahl al-dimmah, who were bound by rules that in principle restricted their movement and sense of equality. It must have been an odd experience for Christian scholars and church leaders to be shown esteem but never full approval, to be treated well but rarely warmly, and never quite to know when their activities would be restricted by the imposition of the dimmi regulations that always lay ready in reserve, and from time to time were actually enforced.

In the uneasily open atmosphere of early Islamic times Christians seem to have kept their new rulers at some distance, and when they did have dealings with them they often showed barely disguised disdain. There is an amusing story of the famous third/ninth century translator from Greek and Syriac Ḥunayn Ibn Ishāq and the Caliph al-Ma'mūn. The latter, maybe naively, promised to pay for the Christian’s translations by weight, whereupon Hunayn employed the thickest, heaviest paper he could find and wrote in over-large Arabic characters. He clearly knew that the service he could perform was virtually unique, and he had no qualms about taking advantage of his expertise.
In a similar way, Christians often appear to have virtually mocked Muslims when they met in discussion. The literary stylist and theologian Abū ʿUṯmān al-Ǧāḥīz comments bitterly on the treatment given by some unscrupulous Christians to unsophisticated and clearly unsuspecting Muslims over matters of scripture:

They choose contradictory statements in Muslim traditions, equivocal verses in the Qurʾān, and Ḥadīṣ with defective chains of guarantors. Then they enter into private conversations with our weak-minded, and question them concerning the texts which they have chosen to assail... And how unfortunate that every Muslim looks upon himself as a theologian, and thinks that everyone is fit to lead a discussion with an atheist!

Here, the Christians are portrayed, maybe with some artistic licence, as premeditatedly setting a trap by selecting awkward passages in an obvious ploy to wrong-foot their Muslim victims. They themselves appear confident of their intellectual ability and maybe religious superiority, and their only interest is to expose the inexperience of their opponents.

More seriously, Christians who felt free to express themselves frankly habitually discounted Islam as the superficial concoction of a self-interested scoundrel. John of Damascus, writing in Greek in the mid-second/eighth century when few Muslims could read his words, set an influential trend when he employed the Baḥīrab story and ascribed all Muhammad’s pretended revelations to borrowings from an ‘Arian monk’. In a similar vein, the author of the Epistle of ʿAbd al-Masʿūl al-Kindī, writing under a pseudonym some decades later, summed up all the Prophet’s exploits as motivated by greed for power and lust for women: ‘En effet sa seule préoccupation et son unique pensée étaient de trouver une belle femme pour l’épouser, ou des gens à razzier, dont il répandait le sang, s’emparait de leurs biens et copulait avec leurs femmes’. These serious, and scurrilous, accusations illustrate the disdain Christians appear to have felt for Islam, and the general distance they maintained from it.

Such attitudes cannot be detached from the huge volume of Muslim

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works written against Christianity that can be documented from the start of the Abbasid era. These were often attempts to show the logical inconsistency and other incoherences of Christian beliefs and doctrines, and at the same time were essays in distinguishing the true, pure monotheism of Qurʾān-inspired reflection from the deviant forms in which followers of other faiths had embodied it. They must on one level have been provoked by insults from Christians and others about the soundness of Islam, and in turn incited Christians to further invective about Islamic claims to be the definitive truth from God.

A. EARLY CHRISTIAN EVALUATIONS OF ISLAM

These remarks are somewhat speculative, because lamentably few of the works known to have been written against Christianity in the earliest times have survived⁴, and those that have typically say little, or often nothing, about the circumstances in which they were written and the social context from which they emerged. To try to place a single work in its controversial and wider setting is usually a precarious task.

Despite this difficulty, it stands to reason that all the works that survive or are known about emerge from precise situations and must often reflect particular preoccupations, even though these cannot now be known for certain. It also stands to reason that some Christians must have pondered questions about the appearance of Islam in the first place, its incredible military and political success, and its claims about the Qurʾān as God’s word and the Prophet Muhammad as God’s last messenger, in a way that took them beyond mockery and disdain to deep theological problems. Despite the difficult nature of many texts, and their relative paucity, it is possible to detect the elements – maybe no more – of a systematic Christian evaluation of Islam in the early centuries. This functioned both as a polemical demonstration to Muslims that the older faith had not been superseded, as they often claimed, and also as an apologetic reassurance to Christians that their faith was valid and God-given despite all appearances to the contrary.

1. The Patriarch Timothy I

An early indication of this deeper thinking comes in a well-known and

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often-studied text, the Apology of the Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I before the Abbasid Caliph al-Mahdi, a letter written by the Patriarch to a Christian friend. This is usually dated to a year or so after 165/781, when the actual meeting between the two leaders of which it purports to be an account is thought to have taken place. Whether it is an accurate record of what passed between the two must remain an open question, though it is highly likely that while it preserves the main outlines of what occurred, it was touched up as Timothy wrote it out for the correspondent to whom he sent it. This explains why he comes off so well in the encounter, and why his answers are so full, with apt illustrations and epigrammatic flourishes.

As might be expected from a dialogue between a churchman and the ruler of the Islamic empire, the Caliph takes the lead, and the record of the meeting in essence comprises a series of questions put by him together with Timothy’s long and eloquent answers—in this respect, at least, the Apology reflects the likely circumstances of real interfaith encounter between such individuals. Given this character, much of the discussion consists of questions and replies about Christian doctrines and their comprehensibility. However, at one point in the record of the first of the two days discussion the Caliph asks about Christian belief in Muḥammad, and initiates a strand in the exchange in which Timothy is compelled to explain his own thinking about the status of the Prophet.

This stage in the discussion begins with a question about the testimony of Christ and the Gospel to Muḥammad (p. 168), evidently based on the references in Q 7.157 and 61.6. Timothy replies that there are no such testimonies, upon which al-Mahdi asks about the Paraclete verses in chapters 14, 15 and 16 of the Gospel of John (p. 169). Again, Timothy argues that since Muḥammad was human and the Paraclete evidently divine, these verses could not refer to him, to which the Caliph retorts that Christian scripture has been corrupted (p. 171). Timothy rejects this by saying that Christians would never dare to corrupt their sacred books; if Muḥammad had been mentioned, they might quibble over whether the Arabian prophet was in fact the one whom scripture predicted, but there could be no gain in corrupting the Gospel.

To this point Timothy does no more than apply traditional Christian teaching about the integrity of the Gospels and their silence about any figure coming after Christ. But his replies leave unresolved the issue about who

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6) MINGANA, “Apology”, p. 147.
Muḥammad was, whether a charlatan as other Christians such as John of Damascus and the author of ʿAbd al-Masīh al-Kindī’s Epistle would say, or someone else.

Then, at the beginning of the second day of the meeting al-Mahdī raises this issue of the Prophet in terms that compel Timothy to give a direct answer: ‘What do you say about Muḥammad?’ (p. 197). Timothy’s reply has been repeated ever since it became known to Western scholarship:

Our gracious and wise king said to me: ‘What do you say about Muḥammad?’ And I replied to his majesty: ‘Muḥammad is worthy of all praise by all reasonable people, O my sovereign. He walked in the path of the prophets and trod in the track of the lovers of God. All the prophets taught the doctrine of one God, and since Muḥammad taught the doctrine of the unity of God, he walked, therefore, in the path of the prophets. Further, all the prophets drove men away from bad works and brought them nearer to good works, and since Muḥammad drove his people away from bad works and brought them nearer to good ones, he walked, therefore, in the path of the prophets. Again, all the prophets separated men from idolatry and polytheism, and attached them to God and to his cult, and since Muḥammad separated his people from idolatry and polytheism, and attached them to the cult and knowledge of one God, beside whom there is no other God, it is obvious that he walked in the path of the prophets. Finally Muḥammad taught about God, his Word and his Spirit, and since all the prophets had prophesied about God, his Word and his Spirit, Muḥammad walked, therefore, in the path of all the prophets (p. 197).

Timothy goes on to draw direct comparisons between Muḥammad and Moses and Abraham, and concludes by saying that because, like Abraham, Muḥammad turned his people from idol-worship to monotheism, God honoured him by giving to him and his successors power over the kingdoms of the Persians and Romans. Therefore,

Who will not praise, O our victorious King, the one whom God has praised, and who will not weave a crown of glory and majesty to the one whom God has glorified and exalted? These and similar things I and all God-lovers utter about Muḥammad, O my sovereign (p. 198).

Of course, this is diplomatic language, to some extent forced out under the pressure of a public audience in which denial of Muhammad could be taken as blasphemy with the direst consequences, and unqualified acceptance could be taken as capitulation to Islam and desertion of Christianity. Nevertheless, Timothy retained his words when he wrote the account for correspondence, and so it is worth considering closely what he does and does not say.
The reply can be divided into three parts, the first Timothy's immediate response containing the famous words 'He walked in the path of the prophets, and trod in the track of the lovers of God', the second his comparison between Muḥammad and the two Old Testament prophets, and the third his curious acknowledgement that God has given to Muḥammad and his followers military and political success.

In the first part Timothy draws attention to the activities in which Muḥammad resembles the ancient prophets, teaching about the oneness of God, forbidding bad and encouraging good deeds, abolishing idolatry and polytheism and inculcating monotheism, and finally teaching about God, his Word and his Spirit. In all these activities he is just like the prophets who led up to Christ. But what is important is that Timothy never calls Muhammad a prophet as such, that he restricts Muḥammad's activities to the pagans of Arabia, repeatedly referring to what he did among and for his own people, and that he sees in Muḥammad's teachings vestiges of Trinitarianism and hence endorsement of Christian doctrines. It would appear that even though Muḥammad was maybe not among the prophets of old in name, in effect he did for his people exactly what they did for theirs, which was to prepare the way for Christ by encouraging them to turn from idol-worship to the one God and by saying something about his Trinitarian nature.

In the second part Timothy takes these thoughts further by comparing Moses' action of putting God above his own people, when he punished them by death for worshipping the golden calf, with Muḥammad's action of evincing 'an ardent zeal towards God, and lov[ing] and honour[ing] him more than his own soul, his people and his relatives', and comparing Muḥammad's action with Abraham's 'turning his face from idols and from his kinsmen, and looking only towards one God and becoming the preacher of one God to other peoples'. Timothy sees Muhammad as a sincere monotheist who places his faith in God above loyalty to his own people, and in consequence abandons them in their idolatry to turn to 'other peoples', the Arabs of Medina. He ranks with those leading Old Testament figures because of the faith he placed above every human relationship.

The implication of what Timothy says in these two parts of his answer is that Muhammad was a preacher of monotheism for his own people in the peninsula of Arabia. His signal activity was in leading the pagan Arabs of

7) Cf. Samir Khalil Samir, "The Prophet Muhammad as seen by Timothy I and other Arab Christian Authors", in Thomas, Syrian Christians, pp. 91-106.
his native town and the surrounding area from their pagan ways to strict monotheism. Therefore, his actions do not contradict the proclamation of Christianity, but complement it and lead into it in a geographically and doctrinally restricted way. In this respect Muḥammad is comparable with the prophets of the Old Testament, and is effectively, if not actually, just like one of them.

This is what Timothy may well have meant by his famous judgement that Muḥammad ‘walked in the path of the prophets, and trod in the track of the lovers of God’. It was not so much that he was a prophet in the institutional sense that the great figures of Israelite history were, or that he aped them in a secondary way by self-consciously copying what they did. But rather, it was that in his sphere of activity, the Ḥiğāz and Arabia, he effectively served God’s purpose in the same way that they did.

It is worth at this point drawing attention to what Timothy says about Muḥammad’s echoing of the Trinity in his teaching: he ‘taught about God, His Word and His Spirit, and since all the prophets had prophesied about God, His Word and His Spirit, Muḥammad, therefore, walked in the path of all the prophets’ (p. 197). This is clearly an allusion to Q 4.171, ‘The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only a messenger of Allah, and his Word which he conveyed unto Mary, and a Spirit from him’, which Timothy evidently takes as a reference to the Trinity. This is curious, because the verse continues, ‘So believe in Allah and his messengers, and say not “Three” – Cease! (it is) better for you! – Allah is only one God. Far is it removed from his transcendent majesty that he should have a son’. Where a Muslim would see a denial of three divine beings, and an affirmation that Jesus was no more than a human rasūl, Timothy has happily seen an attestation of the Trinity: he may have read the prohibition against saying “Three” as a confirmation of his own Trinitarian monotheism, and has evidently ignored the denial that God has a son. In effect, he has Christianised the meaning of this verse, and in doing so has selected part of it and elided part.

The third part of Timothy’s answer about Muḥammad is as intriguing as the two preceding parts. His argument is that in return for Muḥammad’s complete dedication to monotheism, God rewarded him and his successors by giving them victory over the empire of the Persians, ‘who worshipped the creatures instead of the Creator’, and the empire of the Romans, who ‘attributed suffering and death in the flesh to the one who cannot suffer and die in any way and through any process’ (p. 198), in other words who held Christological views that implicated the divine nature in the crucifixion and
death of the human nature, quite different from the beliefs of Timothy’s own Nestorian church. Here he suggests that God has made Muhammad and Islam a power for monotheism against powers that have deviated from this strict belief, and even hints at the possible outcome that in so doing God has paved the way for Timothy’s own form of Christian belief to triumph as others are crushed by the Muslim force. There is no more than an implication of this, but it is certainly possible to surmise that he saw Islam as God’s instrument for defeating wrong beliefs and ultimately vindicating his own.

Timothy does not expand upon the points he makes in this answer, because the discussion immediately moves on to other matters and does not return to this fascinating succession of ideas about Muḥammad in a Christian context. But even without developing them further than they allow, it seems clear firstly that in Timothy’s mind Muḥammad was a sincere, God-fearing monotheist; secondly, was restricted in his activities to his own people and geographical area; thirdly, was concerned above everything else to turn his people from polytheism to basic monotheism; fourthly, resembled famous prophets from the Old Testament, not least in anticipating a fuller perception of God in his Trinitarian reality; and fifthly, was used by God to defeat misguided beliefs and to preserve the true church of Christ. Far from being a self-serving charlatan, Muḥammad for Timothy was a true believer who was favoured and used by God.

While it is important to remember the circumstances in which Timothy gave this eloquent answer, and the pressure upon him to be diplomatic in his choice of language in order to please his audience, it is still justifiable to conclude that his assessment of Muḥammad bears traces of a systematic response to the reality of Islam and the circumstances in which Christians living under Islamic rule found themselves. There seems to be a distinct element of theodicy at work in Timothy’s mind, making it untenable in the circumstances of evident Muslim success all around, at the expense of Christian Byzantium among other states, to conceive of Muḥammad as anything but a divinely guided figure, and of Islam as a form of true belief. But it does not rival Christianity, in that it promotes simple monotheism and was directed primarily at the pagan desert-dwellers of Arabia. In fact, it anticipates Christianity in the hints of the Trinity it contains, and may ultimately be intended to vindicate the true form of Christianity that Timothy himself represents by defeating other deviant versions of belief. Although they are still somewhat rudimentary, these intriguing fragments of thoughts point to an elaborate understanding about the relationship between Christianity and Islam.
that must have helped Christians as they tried to make religious sense of their position as *Ahl al-dimmah*, and comforted them as they strove to hold onto beliefs they saw assailed from all sides.

In the decades following this meeting between the most influential Christian and the most powerful Muslim in the empire, Christians were thrown increasingly on the defensive by Muslims who studied their faith in impressive detail and fashioned arguments that forced them to look at their beliefs in a new way. Among these were such apparently simple but awkward points as: if only one of the Persons of the Trinity became incarnate, this Person must be distinguished from the other two, even though they are all supposed to be completely identical; God is eternal and unrestricted and Jesus is temporal and delimited, and yet they are supposed to have united in the Incarnation; God is above the contingencies of human life, yet Christ's divine nature must have been born, grown and matured, and suffered torture and death, if it was indeed Christ in his totality of divine and human natures who underwent these experiences. If such questions did not prove wholly devastating for Christians, they nevertheless express the intellectual hostility that was felt between the faiths, and the lack of conviction that Christian doctrines commanded among Muslims.

At the beginning of the third/ninth century, a trio of theologians for the first time articulated Christian doctrines in Arabic and employed terms and logic that their Muslim counterparts could at least recognize and appreciate, if not accept, since some of them were borrowed from the flourishing discipline of Muslim theology itself. These first substantial Arabic-speaking and thinking Christian theologians were the Melkite Theodore Abū Qurrah, the Jacobite Ḥabīb b. Ḥidma Abū Raʾīṣah and the Nestorian ʿAmmār al-Baṣrī. Their surviving works leave no doubt that they took seriously the pressure from Islam, since many of their arguments are characterized by an apologetic tone and responsive concern. Even so, one glimpses in them the results of sober reflection upon the relationship between Christianity and Islam, and some effort to place this new faith in relation to their own. Usually there are no more than fragmentary hints and implications, as with Timothy's words to the caliph, but enough to show these theologians were conscious of having to assess Islam with due seriousness, rather than dismiss it outright.

8) Cf. David Thomas, "Early Muslim Responses to Christianity", in David Thomas (ed.), *Christians at the Heart of Islamic Rule, Church Life and Scholarship in 'Abbasid Iraq*, Brill, Leiden, 2003, pp. 231-254.
2- ʿAmmār al- Báoī’s “Kitāb al-burḥān”

The best place to see this embryonic interfaith theology is in one of the two surviving works of ʿAmmār al-Be‘rī, the Kitāb al-burḥān (Book of the Proof)⁹. This is the only work among all those that survive from the three theologians that has claim to be an attempt at connected systematic theology¹⁰. Here ʿAmmār is clearly writing with Muslims in mind, and makes plain the soundness of his own faith in relation to Islam. This relationship can be demonstrated from his explanations of the Trinity and the Incarnation.

ʿAmmār’s debt to Islamic theology is obvious in what he says about the Trinity. His arguments here alone would be enough to provoke the leading Muʿtazilī Abū al-Huḍayl into refutation¹¹, since ʿAmmār not only borrows from the conceptuality of kalām, but also shows how the Muʿtazilī perception of God is inadequate. The various stages of his demonstration are worth tracing in outline (pp. 56-79).

ʿAmmār begins by sketching out polemically the great difference between the conception of God propounded by his unnamed but clearly Muslim opponent, whom he calls al-muʾmin bi-l-Wāḥid, and himself. It appears that while this opponent agrees that God can be described as, for example, living, he will not allow that this description entails the existence of an attribute of life or an eternal entity within God’s essence, bi-ḥayāt lahu ǧī dātihi azaliyya (p. 46), to which this description corresponds. ʿAmmār himself, on the other hand, ascribes to God the two paramount attributes of Life.

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9) Hayek, ʿAmmār. This work postdates 224/838, since it apparently refers to an event that took place in that year; Hayek, ʿAmmār al-Be‘rī, p. 19.

10) Most of Theodore Abū Qurrah’s and all of Abū Raʾīḥān’s surviving works are in the form of short essays, while ʿAmmār’s other work, the Kitāb al-masāʾil wa-l-agwibah (Book of Questions and Answers), is exactly what its title indicates. There is clearly coherence in the progression through the work, as is also visible in the related topics of some of Abū Raʾīḥān’s essays. But they do not bear the integrated character of ʿAmmār’s Kitāb al-burḥān. The only equivalent as a systematic exposition of Christian theology at the time is another work entitled Kitāb al-burḥān, ed. and trans. Pierre Cachia and William Montgomery Watt, Eutychius of Alexandria, the Book of the Demonstration (Kitāb al-burḥān) (Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium vols. 192, 193, 209 and 210), Louvain, 1960 and 1961. Its author used to be thought to be Eutychius of Alexandria, but has now been shown to be Peter of Bet Ra’s; cf. Samir Khalil Samir, “La littérature Melkite sous les premiers abassides”, in OCP 56 (1990), pp. 482-484.

and Word as of the very being and structure of God’s essence itself (p. 52), and from these all his other attributes devolve (pp. 52-6).

The difference between these positions is considerable. The opponent, who is evidently portrayed as upholding the agreed view of most Mu’tazilī Muslims, is concerned to stress the absolute unity of God, and so will not allow the existence of any notional entities within his divine essence that might entail multiplicity or partitioning within it. But in the terms of the debate, this opponent surrenders any possibility of characterizing God in any stable manner because the descriptions of him as living, articulating and so on, are no more than that. Since they have no corresponding referent within his eternal being, they are no more than human attempts to comprehend him. Conversely, ʿAmmār himself can argue that God is certainly known to be living and articulating because he possesses within his divine being eternal attributes to which these descriptions correspond. ʿAmmār’s own perception gives guarantees that God is vividly existing and active in the ways his attributes predict. But, at least as ʿAmmār maintains, this does not entail multiplicity within the being of God, since the attributes cannot be separated from God’s essence or identified as additional to it.

ʿAmmār regards his own position as infinitely superior to that of the Muslim. He strongly implies this in a brief exchange in which he shows the fallacy of his opponent’s case:

We say to him also: Why do you call him living, even though you are not willing to ascribe life to him? If he says: In order to deny that he is dead, we say: Then the position you are fleeing from, in denying this, is forced upon you. For as you call him living in order to deny that he is dead, if you deny that he has life and do not predicate it of him you are undoubtedly compelled to predicate death of him. For there is no difference in calling him living in order to deny that he is dead and between not predicating life of him and predicing death of him (p. 47).

This effectively amounts to saying that the Muslim has no safeguard against nonsensical statements about God, or that he cannot go beyond the mere statement of fact that God exists: nothing more can reliably be said about his mysterious being. By implication, ʿAmmār argues that his opponent has a pared down, impoverished perception of God in comparison with his own fuller perception of God in all his glorious characteristics and attributes. In a word, Islamic teachings add nothing to the fullness of Christianity, but rather reduce it.

The same implication is given in a later section of the Kitāb al-burhān,
on the Incarnation, where ʿAmmār shows that God’s self-revelation in Christ is supreme and complete. His impressive argumentation is based on logic and historical facts that both Christians and Muslims acknowledge, and hence is intended to compel acceptance by anyone with a sound and fair mind.

Here, ʿAmmār dispenses at the outset with the major Muslim objections that God could not take a wife or a son (Q 72.3), and that the Divinity has neither begotten nor been begotten (Q 112.3) (pp. 56-62), and goes on to show how God must become incarnate in order to be true to his own being. His demonstration comprises four elements.

In the first, he argues that since God created humankind through his grace and generosity, he should complete this act by communicating knowledge of his existence and his instructions for his creation. Hence, he spoke to humankind in various forms throughout history – like a human to Adam and Noah, and through a book to Moses. But it follows logically that if God is to meet the human need for communication in the fullest way, he will speak directly to humans in a human form (pp. 62-67).

In the second argument ʿAmmār complements this by explaining that since humans have an innate desire to know, and a desire to discover about God, it follows that because God is generous he must satisfy this need. Hence he revealed himself in a human body that was perceptible to the senses (pp. 67-68).

Thirdly, since God is just and has made known his commands and prohibitions to his creatures, he must come in person to make these clear and to judge. The human form in which he revealed himself in Christ veiled his true being, but made known his immediate presence in the world (pp. 68-69).

Fourthly, since God has given humankind power in the temporal world, in his generosity he must give them power in the eternal world as well. By appearing in human form as God, he makes human power something that will last in the temporal and divine worlds (p. 69).

These four subtle elements of argument show ʿAmmār concerned with two main preoccupations. The first is that God, as a gracious and generous being, expresses his nature by moving outside himself and communicating with his creation. In this, ʿAmmār of course follows a central theme of Muslim salvation history, which portrays God communicating his will and guidance by means of verbal instructions through the line of prophetic messengers. But the second preoccupation takes him far beyond this. For he argues
that if God is truly generous then he will communicate directly, will satisfy the human urge to know about him by giving direct and unmediated knowledge of himself, will personally clarify the commands he has communicated, and will himself guarantee that humans have a place in eternity by coming to them as a human. ¦Ammār repeatedly emphasizes the logic of God's personal and immediate involvement with humankind on the fullest surety of his intention that they should carry out his desires for them.

It is here that ¦Ammār divulges his attitude towards the relationship between Christianity and Islam most clearly. For he implies that if both faiths are to be true to their agreed belief that God speaks his will to the world, they will acknowledge that the supreme form of this speech will be human.

I mean a man whom he formed from the Virgin Mary without matter from semen. He spoke to the world from him, addressed them through his tongue, he was friendly enough to be seen by them in him, and came close to them through him. When they were far away from him through the trickery of Satan over them, he gave them victory over their foe, and made them powerful over him. And, through the tongue of a body of one of them with which he was united, he called them to know him without any messenger, rasūl, between him and them (pp. 70-71).

Communication through a messenger cannot be superior to this; that is at best mediated address, this immediate and direct.

The implication in this elaborate and original defence of the Incarnation is clear: Christian teachings about the Incarnation as God's supreme act of communication are sound, and Christianity has not been superseded in any way.

It is of considerable significance that in his defence of both the Trinity and the Incarnation ¦Ammār makes repeated comparisons between the Christian and Islamic systems of belief. In the case of the Trinity this is between his own assertion that God's character is truly and reliably revealed in his threefold nature, as opposed to the Mu'tazili assertion that human depictions of God cannot penetrate the mystery of his being; and in the case of the Incarnation it is between his own belief that God’s generous nature is expressed in his communication to inquisitive humanity directly, as opposed to the secondary means of prophets and scriptures. In so doing, he suggests (though without explicitly saying so) that Islam is on the right track of understanding about God, is not entirely misguided, but has not reached the full perception afforded through the Christian revelation.
One can only guess at the reaction to these innovative arguments on the part of the Mu'tazili Abū al-Huṣayl and other Muslims, as they effectively saw their beliefs exposed as secondary or elementary, and were treated to a discourse about the much more excitingly vibrant teachings in Christianity concerning God's full communication of his being and his will for human-kind. One can also surmise that Christians living in Abbasid society would have felt affirmed in their faith and encouraged not to abandon it for what was implicitly portrayed as second best.

B. 'ISLAM PREPARES THE WAY FOR CHRISTIANITY'

ʿAmmār al-Baṣrī was writing an apologetic proof of Christianity in the Muslim context. His work is an impressive exercise in contextualized thinking that merits a systematic appraisal as such. But it is not an assessment of Islam, and it gives no direct evaluation of the status of the Prophet Muḥammad or his relationship to the Christian revelation. ʿAmmār says nothing that corresponds to Timothy I's well-chosen words, although the implied consequence of what he says is that Islam is unnecessary since it gives nothing that is not present already in Christianity, and merely repeats the richness of Christian teachings in a much more straitened and meagre form. But in his close attention to what Muslims say about Christianity, and the repeated comparisons he makes between the doctrines of the two faiths, he suggests that Islam is not fatally misguided, and certainly not demonic.

The Letter from Cyprus

Thus, Christians might have no need to refer to this younger faith. But then why had it appeared so long after their own? The rudiments of an answer to this question are given by Timothy. But they are worked out much more elaborately a few centuries later in two Christian letters written at the time of the Crusades. The first of these came from the Melkite bishop of Sidon, the monk Paul of Antioch, who probably wrote it towards the end of the fifth/eleventh century, and the second from an anonymous Christian in Cyprus just before 716/1316. These two letters are closely related, because the second is an edited version of the first, though close comparison shows that

12) HAYEK, ʿAmmār, introduction, 48: 'Cette apologie est essentiellement une réfutation des objections que l'Islam élève contre le Christianisme, et plus positivement une justification de la doctrine, de la morale et du culte chrétiens'.
whereas Paul was writing to force Muslim readers to acknowledge the compelling truth of his arguments and bow to his rational and scriptural proofs that Christianity is the true religion, the anonymous Cypriot was making the gentler attempt to invite Muslims to see the truth of Christianity by persuasive quotations from scripture and rational arguments. While his letter is undoubtedly an edited version of Paul’s, it contains sufficient to recommend it as an original essay in interfaith reflection in its own right. In the remainder of this article this second Letter will be discussed.

Although we are not told directly, it is possible to make a number of deductions about the circumstances in which the Letter was written. These have a direct bearing upon its contents because they reflect relations between Christianity and Islam, and also indicate the Christian assessment of Islam in comparison with their own faith. Most immediately, the Letter was written (or altered from Paul’s original) expressly for the purpose of inviting Muslims into discussion about the merits of its contents. It was sent to the great Ibn Taymiyya at Damascus in 716/1316, provoking him to compose his monumental Al-ğawāb al-ṣaḥīh li-man baddala dīn al-Masīh in response, and to a fellow Damascene, Muḥammad Ibn Abī Ṭālib in 721/1321, who also produced an elaborate response. So it was not so much a defensive apology for Christianity as a confident discussion piece that invited considered replies to its balanced points.

The Letter was composed and sent at the end of a startling series of events between Christians and Muslims in the eastern Mediterranean. Throughout the seventh/thirteenth century the Crusader hold on the eastern littoral had gradually been loosened, until in 690/1291 the port of Acre was conquered by the Mamlûks and their last foothold was lost. Cyprus became the easternmost European stronghold, and also the refuge of many Christians from the former Crusader states, including missionary orders, monastic communities and for a time the armed order of Hospitallers.

Despite this forced retreat, however, and the reality of Muslim supremacy in the Holy Places and former outremer kingdoms, Christian Europeans

continued to harbour live hopes of recovery, fuelled by rumours and predictions that the situation would soon be reversed and Christianity would again prevail. As early as 670/1271 William of Tripoli detected the overthrow of Islam in the Qur’an itself:

It is written in their laws that the Romans or Latins shall be defeated by them, but that shortly thereafter they themselves will be defeated and destroyed; no one denies this. Thus they all predict, expect, and believe that the age of the Saracens must quickly end, while that of the Christians will last until the end of the world, which is coming.

And earlier still in 665/1267 Roger Bacon the English Franciscan claimed on the basis of a computation from a Muslim astronomer that Islam would come to an end 693 years after its inception, therefore imminently. Rumours of such apocalyptic downfalls must have given hope to all who witnessed the might of the Mamluks increase without check, and if any such rumours reached Cyprus they must have revived the spirits of all who accepted their truth.

In the same period towards the end of the seventh/thirteenth century plans were repeatedly drawn up to organize another Crusade, often with Cyprus as its point of departure. And faith was periodically lodged in a coalition with the Mongols, who had been threatening the Mamluks in Syria since the middle of the century. It is not unreasonable to imagine that by 700/1300 many perceptive minds in Cyprus were keyed up as the expectation that a change would come soon and the supremacy of Christian beliefs would be vindicated by renewed Crusader might.

All this is circumstantial detail, of course, since the Letter that was sent from Cyprus to the Damascus scholars shares the character of many writings of this time in giving no information about the circumstances in which it was written, its dating or its author. It is possible to add to them a few more definite facts that arise from the work itself to suggest a likely author and motivation. Listed briefly, these facts are that, although he was writing from Cyprus, the author was at home in Arabic, he knew well the earlier Arabic letter written by Paul in Sidon, and he was at least as familiar with the Qur’an as with the Arabic Bible. In fact, he was able to complete Qur’an


16) Ebied & Thomas, Muslim-Christian Polemic during the Crusades, pp. 15-17.
quotations given in part by Paul and could add more, and he could name the Sūrahs from which they came with greater ease than he could quote from parts of the Bible. Added to this, he knew the best experts in Damascus to whom the Letter should be sent, not only the famous figure of Ibn Taymiyya but also the local celebrity Ibn Abī Ṭalib al-Dimaṣqī. These details make it permissible to surmise that he himself had originated in the Damascus area, knew Islam very well, and may even have been a convert from Islam whose knowledge of his original scripture remained unimpaired. If so, he was writing from Cyprus because this was a necessary refuge in the circumstances.

Thus, this author may have been writing to a situation he knew well, with details about the circumstances of his fellow believers under the power of Mamlūk Muslims vividly in his mind, and buoyed up by the expectation that a European Christian force might soon put an end to Muslim rule and maybe to Islam itself. If those circumstances correspond at all to the reality in which the anonymous Christian author wrote, they give piquancy to the arguments in his Letter, which is framed to do no less than persuade Muslims to accept the validity of Christianity on the basis of the witness of the Qurʾān itself, supported by Christian scripture. The audacity of the author’s undertaking bespeaks an expectation inflated by fervent hopes that this literary crusading endeavour might be blessed with as much success as the military exploits that were being discussed and reported all around.

The Letter is given the imaginary form of a dialogue between the author and Christian experts he has met on a journey to Cyprus (this feature is based on Paul of Antioch’s imaginary meeting with experts he meets while on a journey to Europe). It transpires that they have read the Qurʾān thoroughly and have formed their own view about its contents, and particularly about its teachings on Christianity. They provide excellent literary mouthpieces through which this author, who was evidently avid to secure an Islamic justification of Christianity, can express his views.

1. The Qurʾān supports Christianity

After an introductory explanation in which the experts explain that the Qurʾān was not intended for them, the Letter proceeds to argue that the Qurʾān endorses the basic Christian teachings about Christ, that he was born of a virgin, was divine, and sent out disciples.

Further, we also find in this book eulogies of the Lord Christ and his mother in what he says in Banning, 'And Mary, she who was chaste, therefore we breathed into her of our Spirit and made her and her son a
token for peoples'. And in *The Family of 'Imrān* he says, 'And when the angels said: O Mary! Lo! Allah hath chosen thee and made thee pure, and hath preferred thee above the women of creation'.

There are also the testimonies to the lord Christ in the miracles, that he was conceived not through the intercourse of a man but by the annunciation of an angel of God to his mother, that he spoke in the cradle, brought the dead back to life, healed those born blind, made lepers whole, created from clay the likeness of a bird, breathed into it, and it was a bird by the permission of God (pp. 61-63).

He clearly has no hesitation about using appropriate verses from the Qur'ān to make his points.

He goes on to show that the Qur'ān attests to the inspired status of the Gospels and Christian scriptures and that it defends them against the accusation of corruption. Furthermore, it and the Old Testament commend Christian worship and particularly the eucharist.

In a long section of the *Letter*, the author goes on to show that the doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation are both attested in the Qur'ān and Old Testament, and supported by rational argument.

On the matter of the uniting of God's creative Word, by which God created all things, with the created man taken from the Virgin Mary, the chosen one who was honoured 'above the women of creation', it united with him in a union free from mixing or altering, and addressed people from him as God the exalted addressed the prophet Moses from the thorn bush. He performed miracles by his divine nature and exhibited weakness, such as pain, death and so on, by his human nature, both actions being in the one Christ.

Furthermore, in this Book which this messenger brought occur his words in *The Family of 'Imrān*, 'O Jesus! Lo! I am gathering thee and causing thee to ascend unto me'; and it also says in *The Table Spread* when Jesus son of Mary said, 'I was a witness of them while I dwelt among them, and when thou tookest me thou wast the watcher over them' - by his being taken it means the death of his human nature which was derived from the Virgin Mary; it also says in *Women*, 'They slew him not nor crucified, but it appeared so unto them' - by these words it refers to the divine nature which is the creative Word of God, by analogy with which we say that Christ was crucified in his human nature and not crucified in his divine nature (pp. 125-127).

And he concludes triumphantly by saying that Christ is the climax of God's revelation and nothing is needed after it:

The Qur'ān witnesses that he spoke in the cradle and wished peace upon himself, 'Peace on me the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I
shall be raised alive!' Consider this instance of a child being made mighty enough to wish peace upon his own self alone; if there had been any other who was more prominent than him he would have wished peace upon this other. Observe how profound this address is, in that he was pre-eminent over creation and wished blessings and peace to himself, for if there had been any human before or after him more glorious than he, he would have wished peace upon him and then followed with a greeting on himself.

The Qur'ān also says that God made Mary and her son a sign to the worlds, which supports the preceding explanation. If the rank of the complete man born from Mary outstrips the ranks of all humans in exaltedness, including the prophets, the blessed and the angels, to the limit I have described of the creative Word of God and his Spirit uniting with him, then he must be perfection. After such perfection there was nothing left to institute, because everything that preceded it necessitated it, and there was no need for what came after it. For nothing can come after perfection and be superior, but it will be inferior or derivative from it, and there is no need for what is derivative.

This statement is final, so peace be upon those who follow guidance (pp. 145-147).

This is indeed a bold argument that, against all the evidence of the recent flow of historical events, proclaims Christianity as the final revelation from God. But the author resists inflammatory details as much as he can (he systematically tones down Paul of Antioch's sometimes outrageous Qur'ān exegesis) and supports what he says in the strongest way that both Christians and Muslims will accept by introducing copious quotations from both the Qur'ān and the Old Testament.

Here the author is careful to build his case on sound foundations. After his first demonstration that the Qur'ān endorses Christian beliefs about Christ, he immediately turns to the issue of the Bible and quotes a series of verses from the Qur'ān which proclaim its authority. He concludes:

By this it confirms what we possess, and indeed by giving assent to what is in them it rejects any suspicions about the Gospel and books which we possess, and any substitution or alteration to what they contain (p. 71).

The integrity of the Bible is clearly of immense importance to the author:

I said to [the Cypriot Christians]: What if someone should say that substitution and alteration had taken place after this declaration? They said, We would be amazed at how these people, despite their knowledge, intelligence and perceptiveness, could confront us with such a remark. For if we were to argue with them in the same way, and say that they had
made alterations and substitutions in the book which they possess today, and had written in it what they wanted and desired, would they tolerate our words?’ I said to them, ‘This would not be tolerated, nor could anyone ever say it. It is impossible for a single jot of it to have been altered’ (pp. 71-73).

The strength of his language here, uncharacteristically direct towards Muslims, is indicative of his concern to maintain the Biblical books as authorities which both Muslims and Christians will accept. Having done so, he can employ the Bible together with the Qur’an to show how Christianity is founded on an authentic revelation from God, and as such is the supreme act of communication from God to humankind.

2. The Purpose of Muhammad’s Mission

A Muslim reader of this Letter might be puzzled by the Christian author’s desire to persuade him in the manner he does. For nowhere does the author confront the problem of his selective use of the Qur’an, choosing passages that support his contention and ignoring passages that refute it. In fact, he edits out Paul of Antioch’s attempt to defend this method, and puts nothing in its place. But his approach can be largely understood by taking into account what he says about the ministry of Muḥammad.

At the very start of the Letter the author makes a series of revealing statements about the scope of Islam, when he makes the Cyprus Christians say:

The book is in Arabic and not in our language, according to what is stated in it, ‘And we have revealed it, a Lecture in Arabic’. Also, we have found what is said in The Poets, ‘And if we had revealed it unto one of any other nation than the Arabs, and if he had read it unto them, they would not have believed in it’ (pp. 57-59).

And he gives a succession of quotations which show that the Qur’an was revealed in Arabic to the Arabs, and significantly by a prophet from among themselves. The Christians continue:

When we noticed this in it, we knew that he had not been sent to us but to the pagan Arabs, about whom it says that no messenger or warner had come to them before him, and that it was not obliging us to follow him because messengers had come to us before, addressing us in our own tongues and warning us about our religion, to which we adhere today (p. 59).

Muḥammad was sent only to the pagan Arabs, and the Qur’an plainly states this. Therefore, his ministry has nothing to say to Christians, and in fact because they have a revelation already they should keep to that.
The Cypriots return to this point later in the Letter, where they make their view about the ministry of Muḥammad clear:

Also among the words of this man [Muḥammad] is where he next says that he was not sent to us and his own doubts about what he was bringing, in his words in this book in Sabaʾ where he says, ‘Lo! we and you assuredly are rightly guided or in error manifest’, and also in The Wind-Curved Sandhills, ‘Nor know I what [God will do] with me or with you’, together with the command to him in The Opening of the Book to ask for guidance on the straight path, ‘The path of those whom thou hast favoured; not the (path) of those who earn thine anger nor of those who go astray’. By these words of his he means the three communities that existed in his day, Christians, Jews and idol worshippers. Now, ‘those who are favoured’ are we Christians, ‘those who are the object of anger’ are without doubt the Jews, upon whom God directed anger in the Torah and books of the prophets, and ‘those who go astray’ are the idol-worshippers who went astray from knowing about God the exalted. This is a clear, evident and manifest fact to everyone, particularly intelligent, knowledgeable people. And ‘the path’ which is followed is a highway: it is a Greek word, for ‘highway’ in Greek is ʾistirāṭ (pp. 89-91).

Here the author comes close to explaining openly his understanding of the relationship between Christianity and Islam. For he suggests that the revelation brought by Muḥammad cannot be understood in its own terms alone, and requires the assistance of Christianity to make it clear. This offers a suggestion as to why the author felt he could use the Qurʾān in the way he did: it is fragmentary in itself, and it only becomes fully comprehensible when read within a Christian context. It is then that its partial teachings are completed and it can be seen exactly for what it really is.

Bringing together the points made in the Letter, it is clear first of all that the author has no qualms about asserting the validity and universality of his own faith, and he sees earlier scripture and later scripture attesting to this and leading up to it. Secondly, he portrays Islam as a faith for the pagan Arabs alone, and Muhammad as having been sent to give them a revelation for themselves and no others. This revelation teaches something about God and gives some insights into Christian teaching, as long as it is understood properly. Being able to hold these two elements of his construction together is the author’s great achievement, and in doing so he brings together the strands of positive Christian thinking about Islam that are earlier seen represented in Timothy I and ʿAmmār al-reative.

The Patriarch had briefly identified a positive role for Muḥammad within the context of Christianity as a prophet-like figure who performed for
his own people the same services as the Old Testament prophets, and even dimly perceived God as Trinity. Thus, in Timothy’s eyes Muḥammad and Islam prepared the Arabs for the richness of Christianity. ‘Ammār on the other hand, had demonstrated that the truth of Christian doctrines is supported by both rational argument and Islamic teaching, though it goes beyond other forms of revelation and shows their incompleteness, effectively rendering them unnecessary. While there is no potential conflict between these two strands, because Muḥammad’s restricted role in Timothy’s Apology logically gives way to the fullness of Christianity in ‘Ammār’s proof, as the Arabs who are brought to the truth from Islam appreciate and grasp the fullness of truth in Christianity, they are only brought into a coherent argument and properly reconciled in the Letter.

3. The abiding Truth of Christianity

What can the function of this audaciously innovative piece of apologetic have been? The envoy reads:

This is what I was able to ascertain about the views of the people I met and conferred with, and about the arguments they were using on their own behalf. Praise and blessing be to God, for he has brought unanimity of view and put an end to suspicion between his servants the Christians and Muslims, may God protect them all! (p. 147).

But the author surely cannot have meant this seriously, because it requires Muslims to agree not only that their own scripture is incomplete in meaning, but also that their faith must give way to the fuller and final form of Christianity. It defies common sense to imagine even a convert from Islam who is fired with the ideals of a new Crusade (if the general background events referred to above are at all relevant) seriously thinking that his relatively brief arguments can persuade leading exponents of Islam to acknowledge they have been wrong.

On the other hand, it may be reasonable to think that the author was seriously inviting his Muslim correspondents to consider some value in Christianity, rather than dismiss it in the way habitual among Muslims as a deviation from the true teachings brought by the human messenger Jesus, based on unjustifiable interpretations of corrupted scriptures. Part of his intention may have been to encourage Muslims to think again, and he may have been stimulated by the expectation that Islam was facing imminent military collapse and apocalyptic failure.

The realism of this part of the author’s intention cannot be known; what
is certain is that he failed in it because his correspondents Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Abi Talib replied with two of the longest, most elaborate and most hostile refutations against Christianity known from the whole Islamic era. But, as the arguments outlined above indicate, there must have been another element in the Cypriot author’s intention, which held in more urgent consideration those nearer at home than members of a hostile other faith.

It is clear from the evidence of the Letter itself that the author was concerned to explain the relationship between Christianity and Islam. He does so by showing that Islam supports the truth of Christianity and is, in fact, completed by the teachings of this supreme revelation. But at the same time he solves a problem that many Christians must have pondered by locating Muhammad within the scheme of revelation as a local teacher sent to the Arabs alone with a revelation intended expressly and exclusively for them. Here he goes one step further than the Patriarch Timothy, for where the earlier Christian carefully avoided saying whether Muhammad was a divinely-sent prophet or not – he only walked in the path of the prophets, and performed acts like those of the prophets – this author makes clear in the language he uses that Muhammad was sent by God with an authentic scripture that is valid as far as it goes. The author can thus locate Muhammad within God’s eternal plan, making him into a kind of missionary of monotheism (and maybe incipient Christianity) to people who were too far immersed in paganism to hear the full Gospel directly. In this scheme Muhammad does not present a problem to the finality of Christianity, but rather represents it.

There may also have been another element in this author’s intention in sending a letter of this nature to leading Muslims in Damascus. As news of its existence spread, he may have hoped that Christians living in the city and around (one of whom he may have been himself) would take heart. Most of them had lived through times of immense trial and disappointment. Not only would they be able to remember Muslims capturing their city and destroying the Christian kingdoms that had been so precariously implanted by European armies, but they would have witnessed the withdrawal of episcopal and monastic establishments and much that gave their religious observances life. On top of this they would have suffered opprobrium from Muslims, renewed imposition of taxes and restrictions, and maybe incidents of active persecution. This Letter, although nothing within it indicates as much, may have been intended to inform them that they were right in their faith, for not only did the prophets of old and the Gospel tell them, but the foundation scripture of Islam confirmed this as well. In addition, they might also see in the Letter
confirmation that they held the true interpretation of the Qurān, which by implication had been misunderstood for centuries.

If this was part of the author's intention, and it can only be surmised by relating the arguments in the Letter to the possible immediate and more general background from which it emerged, then the Letter was intended to function as a reassurance and encouragement to beleaguered Christian communities in Syria to remain true to their faith. Unlike their predecessors of a few centuries earlier, they were not in a position to ignore Islam or treat it with disdain. But they had no reason to surrender either, because despite setbacks they were in the right, and so must eventually triumph.

CONCLUSION

It is, then, possible to detect in the writings of some Christians who lived under Islamic rule, or were closely connected with Islam, traces of considered thinking about the relationship between the two faiths. They saw in Islam rather less fullness than in Christianity, but they did not discount it entirely or condemn it as a purely human phenomenon. To take either of these views would be to deny historical reality, given the amazing success that Islamic faith and culture enjoyed all around them. Rather, they saw a place for it in God's dispensation either as a more elementary version of true religion than Christianity (Ammār al-Bāṣrī) or as a local revelation meant for a part of the world not touched by the Gospel hitherto (Timothy and the anonymous Cypriot author). In present-day theological terms they were inclusivists, allowing validity to Islam though always reserving supremacy to Christianity. But in terms of the power balances of the times in which they wrote they were defending Christianity in straitened circumstances and reassuring Christians that they possessed the truth no matter how affairs might appear.

Such theologizing was, thus, less remote from everyday life between Christians and Muslims than it first might appear to be. In various ways they were enabling their fellow believers to continue in their faith with integrity, and were assisting them to take a creative and respectful view of Islam. One wonders how far their writings, which are now for ever separated from their original contexts, succeeded in fulfilling this estimable purpose.

17) Of course, the examples discussed in this article are not the only ones. Cf. Barbara Rogema, "A Christian Reading of the Qurān: the legend of Sergius-Bāhirā and its use of Qurān and Sīra", in Thomas, Syrian Christians, pp. 57-73, for another.
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