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RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN THE EIGHTH CENTURY:
EXAMPLE FROM THEODORE ABŪ QURRAH TREATISE

BY

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INTRODUCTION

In the eighth century, Syria and Palestine were a land ruled by Muslim Caliphs, dominated by the emerging Islamic *kalam* (dialectics) of the Mu'tazilites, and the heated debates among Arab Christians over the Monothelite controversy and the iconoclastic movement. The earliest known Orthodox Christian scholar and apologist writing in Arabic is Bishop Theodore Abū Qurrah (ca. 755-829). Abū Qurrah left an invaluable legacy of Arabic Christian literature revealing much to us of the world of his time.

A. BISHOP THEODORE ABŪ QURRAH

Bishop Abū Qurrah's challenge was to defend the Orthodox Faith. As a man of dialogue, he earned the respect of his contemporaries, both Christian and Muslim theologians, who respected his insights. Ḥabīb Abū Rā'īṭah, a well-known Jacobite theologian and an antagonist of Abū Qurrah, called him a "scholar," a "sage" and a "philosopher"¹.

Abū Qurrah's apologetic treatise, *On the Confirmation of the Law of Moses, the Gospel and Orthodoxy* represents eighth-century Orthodox views on Religious and Ecumenical Dialogues.

B. THE TREATISE

1. *The basis of dialogue with Jews and Muslims*

In the first part of the treatise, "On the Law of Moses and the Gospel," Abū Qurrah rhetorically addresses an anonymous Jew². He stressed that Mosaic religion typologically pointed to the coming of Christ. On the other hand, he asserts that both Christ and the New Testament confirm Old Testament prophecies, and are further confirmed by the miracles Christ worked, which surpassed those of Moses. Abū Qurrah laid great stress upon the fact that people accepted Christianity because of miracles³. He said that only miracles explain why Christianity prevailed despite the fact that Christianity: 1) is not permissive; 2) is not identified with a particular ethnic group; 3) does not offer worldly power; and 4) caters neither to the wise, to the ignorant, nor to the common man.

1) Georg GRAF, *Die arabischen Schriften des Ḥabīb ibn Ḥidma Abū Rā'īṭa*, col. CSCO 130 (Peeters, Louvain, 1951), pp. 65-66, 73, 79, 86.

2) Sidney H. GRIFFITH, "Jews and Muslims in Christian, Syriac, and Arabic Texts of the Ninth Century", in *Jewish History* 3 (1988), pp. 65-94.

3) Constantine BACHA, *Les œuvres arabes de Théodore Aboucara évêque d'Harraan*. Imprimerie al-Fu'ād, Beirut, 1904, pp. 71-75.

While ostensibly it is Jewish arguments that Abū Qurrah painstakingly rebuts, Abū Qurrah's target audience is in reality much larger. A close reading of this essay reveals that Abū Qurrah is also targeting the Muslim *mutakallimun* (theologians) of his time.

During the Abbasid period, when Islamic theology was initially developing, a major challenge for the *mutakallimūn* was to compare and contrast logically and consistently Islam with *ahl al kitāb*, or the "people of the book" (i.e. the Jews and Christians). They tried to prove that Prophet Mohammed confirmed all prophecies, and that he was the last and greatest prophet of God. The figure of Moses was interesting to Muslims because of the parallel they made between Mohammed and Moses: both introduced a monotheistic religion and a covenant with God, and both led their people to military victories over their adversaries. Thus, by focusing on Moses, a good defense of Christianity could simultaneously address both Jews and Muslims. However, because of the prevailing circumstances at the time, Abū Qurrah and other Christian apologists were often forced to veil their rebuttal of Islam as a direct rebuttal of Judaism alone⁴.

Abū Qurrah dissects many Jewish arguments against Christianity. One argument, for example, is that the Gentiles followed Christ because of a fanatical ethnic attachment. He points out the obvious fact that the Gentiles were not even of the same ethnic background as Jesus, who was a Jew. In fact, the Gentiles actually despised Jews, and, under normal circumstances, would have been repulsed by Christ's Jewishness. Rather, Abū Qurrah contends, such a charge should be turned around on the Jews, who obviously have an ethnic attachment to Moses. By extension, Abū Qurrah's argument could equally apply to the Arabs, who followed Mohammed because he was ethnically and culturally one of them.

The reliance upon reason is characteristic of Abū Qurrah's works. The Mu'tazilite and Jewish polemicists believed, through the influence of the newly translated Greek philosophy, in the autonomy of human reason and were convinced that Man could come to a knowledge of God through reason alone, without divine revelation⁵. Abū Qurrah therefore **uses logic, the weapon of his antagonists, to disprove their own deductions.**

4) Kenneth CRAG, *The Arab Christian* (Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville Kentucky, 1991), p. 80. Also, Adel-Theodore KHOURY, *Polémique Byzantine contre l'Islam* (Imprimerie des Sacrés Cœurs, Louvain, 1972).

5) William Lane CRAIG, *The Kalam Cosmological Argument* (Macmillan Press, London, 1979), p. 5.

However, while he may resort to reason in order to disprove the “logic” of his adversaries, Abū Qurrah does not rely on logical proof alone – **he also relies on faith**. For if, according to Abū Qurrah, people accepted Christianity mainly because of miracles, and the miracles are only accepted by faith through the power of the Spirit, then faith ought to be the cornerstone of his reasoned defense of Orthodoxy⁶.

If you have accepted what we’ve said [about wise, ignorant and mediocre intellects], then certainly you’ve been forced to acknowledge that the Gentiles – who represent five-sixths of mankind – only accepted Christ because of the miracles they witnessed (as mentioned in the Gospel and the books of the disciples) and the power of the Holy Spirit which crept secretly into their minds. [This power] convinced them that Christ is God and the Son of God (as He Himself claimed to be) even though He endured suffering and crucifixion, just as [the apostles] preached of Him. And He bore this pain neither helplessly nor vainly, but for a righteous objective, even if that objective is hidden from the one whose heart is not radiant with the Holy Spirit. So our reasoning certainly demonstrates that the Gentiles only accepted Christ because of the miracles that are mentioned in the Gospel and the books of the disciples. The [evidence therefore] compels you to acknowledge and believe in these miracles just as though you witnessed them yourself – and these miracles are sufficient proof that Christ is [both] God and the Son of God, as He Himself said.

2. *The basis of dialogue with other Christian Denominations*

After proving that Christianity is the true religion, Abū Qurrah in the second part of his treatise “On Orthodoxy” argues that there must be one “denomination” (*millah*) out of all Christendom that represents authentic Christianity. He categorically **refuses to accept any syncretistic views of religion**. For him, there is one true religion, Christianity, and one authentic Christian tradition having “Christ abiding in it”, the Orthodox Tradition as he concludes.

For Abū Qurrah, the difference between Orthodox Christians and those who embrace aberrant forms of Christianity lies in **biblical hermeneutics**. All Christians agree on adherence to Scripture, but each individual group of Christians interprets the Bible differently. Abū Qurrah affirms that Christianity is not complete unless its hermeneutic conforms to the Holy Spirit’s intentions (Cf. 1 Cor. 2:16, 12, 13).

6) ABŪ QURRAH, *On the Confirmation* = Theodore ABŪ QURRAH, *On the Confirmation of the Law of Moses, the Gospel and Orthodoxy*, Bassam A. NASSIF (trans.), section I, 10 (unpublished).

He starts by defining his **exegetical approach to Scripture, which is historical and typological**. He assumes the Holy Scriptures were written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Then he explains that it is through the **Holy Councils**, which speak for the Holy Spirit, that the Church is led to the **correct interpretation of Scripture**.

According to Abū Qurrah, **the Holy Spirit first introduced this hermeneutical approach to Moses and the council of the Levitical priests** (Dt. 17:8-13), along with the judges. Whoever did not obey its decisions were executed. Like its Old Testament prototype, the judgments of the Church councils are attributed to God, who alone is infallible by nature. Thus the decisions of the Ecumenical Councils of the Church are inspired by God and ought to be followed by all Christians. Abū Qurrah emphasized that the Church is conciliar by nature, and that no one – be he King, patriarch, bishop, or St. Peter himself as Abū Qurrah stresses – is allowed to lay special claim to the truth, or even to conduct an investigation independently of the councils.

In arguing this, Abū Qurrah defines the councils as being not only the final arbiter of Faith and doctrine, but also the sole hermeneutical authority on Scripture. Upon this basis, Abū Qurrah refutes the Nestorians, Jacobites, and Maronites, none of whom accepted conciliar decrees.

On the other hand, Abū Qurrah beautifully distinguishes the role of the bishop of Rome. He writes that St. Peter is the “foundation of the Church, entrusted with the care of the flock. Whoever has faith like Peter’s, his faith will never fail”⁷. At the end of the treatise, he declares that salvation comes to “all who are built upon the foundation of St. Peter’s faith, which is from the Holy Spirit”⁸. These comments echo many Eastern Church Fathers, especially St. John of Damascus⁹ and St. Maximus the Confessor¹⁰, both of whom greatly influenced the thinking of Abū Qurrah. The rock of faith which is the foundation of St. Peter is embodied in Peter’s confession that “Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (signifying Christ is consubstantial with the Father) as revealed to Peter by the Holy Spirit.

7) ABŪ QURRAH, *On the Confirmation*, section II, 8 a.

8) ABŪ QURRAH, *On the Confirmation*, section II, 12.

9) For some examples from Abū Qurrah’s teacher, St. John of Damascus, explaining the Petrine rock of faith, see, “Homily on the Transfiguration”, in PG 96, col. 556B; “Sacred Parallels”, in PG 96, 149D; “Saint Barbara the Martyr”, in PG 96, 789C.

10) Juan-Miguel GARRIGUES, “Le sens de la primauté romaine chez saint Maxime le Confesseur”, in *Istina* 21 (1976), pp. 6-24.

Abū Qurrah emphasizes the distinct role of the bishops of Rome to confirm their brethren, the successors of the apostles, in the Orthodox Faith, and to strengthen them in time of heresies. In the historical context, prior to the Sixth Ecumenical Council, St. Martin, the bishop of Rome, had convened a general council in the West to condemn the Monothelite heresy, thus confirming his brothers the Orthodox bishops. He was later tortured in Constantinople for his anti-Monothelite stand along with St. Maximus the Confessor, a Palestinian who had been a monk at the monastery of Chariton near Jerusalem. Maximus had found it necessary to publicly affirm Roman primacy of honor and love (defined as “first among equals”) in his fight against Monothelitism, especially that during that era, Rome alone among all other Christians, stood firmly against this heresy.

In addition, Abū Qurrah asserts that the ecumenical councils were convened “by order of the bishop of Rome”. One naturally wonders if Abū Qurrah was really unaware that none of the Ecumenical Councils gathered at the bidding of the bishop of Rome? Of course he did know, but he used these claims in order to clear some accusations by his Christian and non Christian antagonists.

The heretics argued that the Roman emperors convened and orchestrated these councils, and then enforced their decisions; consequently, these councils were illegitimate. Along the same lines, Muslim polemicists also argued that these councils were directly influenced by Byzantine civil authority, and the bishops had sheepishly bowed to the Imperial will. However, while the emperors hosted the councils, Abū Qurrah insists they remained merely servants of the Church and had no doctrinal say at the councils.

Thus, “drawing on the heritage of Maximus the Confessor, Abū Qurrah elaborated a view of the role of the bishop of Rome in the Ecumenical Councils which in his view extricated himself and the Orthodox followers of the Byzantine emperor from the charge of an emperor-based faith as it was leveled by both Muslims and Monothelites”¹¹, as Sidney Griffith well mentioned.

Although Abū Qurrah was clear in his views and honest in his dialogues, later Christians misused his words for their personal interest. Seeing that Abū Qurrah gives the bishop of Rome an exceptionally pivotal role in the ecumenical councils caused him to become the darling of Uniate Chris-

11) Sidney GRIFFITH, “Muslims and Church Councils: Abū Qurrah’s Apology”, in Elizabeth A. LIVINGSTONE (Ed.), *Studia Patristica* 25, (Peeters Press, Leuven, 1993), p. 276.

tians and Roman Catholic polemicists ever since his works were first studied in the West during the late nineteenth century. Indeed, this Western “discovery” of Abū Qurrah followed in the wake of the First Vatican Council (1870), which defined the infallibility of the pope for Roman Catholics and proclaimed his supremacy or his virtually unlimited rights within the Church.

CONCLUSION

Abū Qurrah’s writings speak volumes to us today, more than a millennium after his death. Given the times in which Abū Qurrah wrote, when the position of Orthodox Christians in the Middle East was tenuous at best, the *Confirmation* is relatively **mild in the tone of its polemic**. This is not to say, though, that Abū Qurrah doesn’t at times voice exasperation with his opponents.

Using the Arabic idiom of the Qur’an, the Righteous Abū Qurrah argued that Christianity is the only faith worthy of credence. **He found the scriptures, his own and that of the others to provide a basis for dialogues**. He was certainly an expert in the language, arguments, holy books and teachings of his antagonists.

While **refusing to accept any syncretistic views of religion, he stood firmly in faith, honesty, and love. All these qualities made him to be the chief interlocutor from Egypt to Armenia**. He fought for the unity of Christians by seeking to clarify, by way of reason and Holy Scripture, the doctrines of the Church to others despite personal risk. He argued for Christ not with the histrionics of the religious fanatic, but with **the simple and lucid discourse of a man of deep conviction**; and in the end he not only strengthened his flock in Harran, but also future generations throughout the Christian world.

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