

The Role of the Intellect in Theodore Abu Qurrah's  
On the True Religion / Orsolya Varsanyi. — In :  
Parole de l'Orient : revue semestrielle des études  
syriaques et arabes chrétiennes : recherches  
orientales : revue d'études et de recherches sur les  
églises de langue syriaque. — vol. 34 (2009), pp. 51-  
60.

Cover title : Actes du colloque melkite : Jounieh,  
janvier 2008

1. Abu Qurrah, Thawdhurus, ca 750-825 — Critique  
et interprétation. 2. Théologie dogmatique.

PER L1183 / FT259685P

THE ROLE OF THE INTELLECT IN THEODORE ABŪ QURRAH'S  
*ON THE TRUE RELIGION*<sup>1</sup>

IN COMPARISON WITH HIS CONTEMPORARIES' USE OF THE TERM

BY  
Orsolya VARSANYI

1. The intellect according to Theodore Abū Qurrah .....	52
2. The intellect at a Christian contemporary: Abū Rā'īṭah .....	54
3. The intellect at Moslem contemporary authors .....	56
<i>a. al-Ġāhiz</i> .....	56
<i>b. Al-Rassī</i> .....	57
<i>c. Al-Tirmidhī</i> .....	58
Conclusion .....	60

---

1) THEODORE ABUQURRA, *Al-dīn al-qawīm*, in THEODORE ABUQURRA, *Traité de l'existence du Créateur et de la vraie religion*. Introduction et texte critique par Ignace DICK, "Patrimoine Arabe Chrétien", n° 3, Jounieh, 1982, pp. 199-270. (Later on *Al-dīn al-qawīm*).

In order to understand the role and the concept of the 'intellect' in Theodere Abū Qurrah's above-mentioned piece of writing, in the present paper I am going to examine the way this author used the term and I will try to point at the peculiarities of this use comparing it to other contemporary authors' use of the term.

## 1. THE INTELLECT ACCORDING TO THEODORE ABŪ QURRAH

In the present paper by pointing at the peculiarities of Theodore Abū Qurrah's method I wish to emphasize its significance. In his contemporaries' apologetic, polemic or other works the role of intellect is also very important, but (at least in the works I know) not as essential as in the case of this treatise of Theodore Abū Qurrah. I am going to cite examples from the writings of his Christian contemporaries, and from the Moslem counterpart I am going to examine al-Djahiz's (+ 255 A. H. / 868 A. D., Mu'tazilī) refutation on Christians, al-Rassi's (+ 860 A. D., Šī'ī, Zaydī) and Tirmidhī's (Šūfī, Sunnī) views of the intellect.

Theodore Abū Qurrah (+ c. 825), the Melkite writer of the first half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century tries to demonstrate in his tract *On the True Religion* that the only true religion (*al-dīn al-qawīm*) is the religion of the Christians. The way he does it is exceptional: he does not try to prove his being right in contrast with something else only, i.e. by an indirect syllogism, or by criticizing others, nor does he depend on the sacred writings of his own denomination, instead, he searches for and finds an objective basis: the intellect. And then as an objective observer, he enumerates and examines the main religious groups and denominations of his epoch, puts writings aside, and turns to the cognitive and analyzing abilities of human reason/intellect. Human nature and human intellect are the bases of human recognition, so the "narrator" in this tract of Theodore Abū Qurrah turns to them in his pursuit of objective truth. And only after having reached some outcome on the bases of these "independent" tools does he take and examine the scriptures, and accepts that religion as true that brings a congruent message with the results of his objective research.

Like other Christian apologists and his Muslim contemporaries, Abū Qurrah likes using stylistic means, so his narrator introduces the intellect and its role by an allegory. He finds himself in a hard situation and starts thinking about what he should do. The narrator is a "natural man" who has never previously belonged to any denominations. Now he meets religious groups and wants to find the right one. At this point he introduces the above-mentioned allegory.

Getting to know the allegory in its details is very important for us in order to understand what our author thinks about the intellect. The characters in the story are the benignant, hidden king, who has never been seen by anyone. He has a beloved son, and for the sake of his protection, health and prosperity, he renders a doctor by his side. The son ignores the doctor, so he falls ill. By the way of a messenger, the king sends him medicament and a book describing himself and the use of the medicament in it, and then prescribing what he should do in order to get and stay healthy and what he should not do, and what the result of committing forbidden things would be. And there are the enemies of the king, who cannot do any harm to the king in himself, so they try to benefit from the illness of his son, and they send poison instead of remedy and forged books with false descriptions of the king, the free and forbidden things and the results of these actions. So the books differ, but each messenger claims himself to be the true one. At this point the doctor tells the son to dismiss them all, and he is going to make the case of each of them clear saying: “I am the doctor and I know these things because they are my profession” (*li-annī ṭabīb wa-a‘rif hādīhi al-ašyā’ li-annahā šinā‘atī*)<sup>2</sup>. He also tells the son the way he is going to examine the question: being a doctor he knows what makes man ill or healthy, and he is sure to recognize the description of the king from the resemblance of the son. (*Wa-'ana 'alā mā ḍakartu laka ṭabībun, wa-'a'rif 'ayḍan 'āhāt al-'amrāḍ allatī tusqimu wa-l-ḥālāt allatī tuṣiḥḥu. Wa-'a'rifu ṣifāti 'abīka min šibhika li-'annaka ibnuhu*)<sup>3</sup>. So the doctor tells what to do: the remedies have to be examined, the things prescribed or forbidden in the different books should be studied, and the king’s description (*ṣifāt*) ought to be looked at. The real *ṣifāt* of the king can be established by the resemblance of the son by way of *qiyās*. And so does he act, and sees that all the books but one exhort the son to do things that would do him wrong, and they discourage him from doing things that would do him good. And the remedy belonging to that book is the only truly healing one. And as for the description (*wasf*) of the king: the doctor compares the different descriptions with the features of the son (*fa-qāsa al-ṣifāt kullahā ilā ṣifāt l-ḡulām*)<sup>4</sup>, and he finds similarity between them in only one book – the one that described the illness correctly and which the right remedy came with.

Abū Qurrah compares this situation to that of his narrator who meets

---

2) *Al-dīn al-qawīm*, p. 214.

3) *Al-dīn al-qawīm*, p. 215.

4) *Al-dīn al-qawīm*, pp. 215-16.

nine religious groups or denominations, all of which claim to have the only true message and religion. All the characters and happenings of this allegory can be paired with a piece of reality. The hidden, benignant and loving king is God. The beloved son who goes astray and falls ill is Adam and his offspring (i. e. mankind). The doctor is the intellect/reason that was given to Adam in order to recognize what is right and act in accordance with it, and in order to recognize what is wrong and avoid acting so. The son's ignoring the doctor and falling ill stands for Adam's or humankind's leaving the intellect/reason out of consideration and going astray. The king's sending remedy and a book stands for God's sending messengers and scriptures that contain his description and determine the good and forbidden deeds together with their results that is reward or punishment. Enemies that want to do the king wrong by doing harm to his son are the evil ones or satans. And man should follow suit of the doctor, and put books aside, relying on the intellect and asking it how to recognize the unperceivable and incomprehensible God on the sole basis of his resemblance with our human nature. We have to ask the intellect how to make out what is right and wrong, detestable or favourable (*qabīh - ġamīl*), and what to think about eternal reward or punishment. If we have found the answer for all these questions, we can use *qiyās* on these books and we will see which one of them is from God.

So in Theodore Abū Qurrah's view the intellect is a "doctor", God's "agent" that originally belongs to/comes from him (*fa-ba'ata ibnahu..., wa-huwa hadatun, wa-ba'ata ma'ahu ṭabīban kāna lahu*)<sup>5</sup>. The original task of the intellect is to protect man from illness, this is why God made him man's guide (*li-yahfazahu min al-'āhāt al-'ārīḍa, wa-ṣayyara lahu ayḍan wazīran*)<sup>6</sup>. But if man ignores the intellect and falls ill, it is the intellect that can help him find the way to health and prosperity again, and this is what can lead him back to God. So according to Theodore Abū Qurrah's opinion, the intellect is God's gift for mankind.

## 2. THE INTELLECT AT A CHRISTIAN CONTEMPORARY: ABŪ RĀ'ĪṬAH

If we turn to another Christian author, Theodore Abū Qurrah's Jacobite contemporary and opponent, Abū Rā'īṭah, we might find some points of agreement and some points of disagreement as well. As Theodore Abū Qurrah's tract might be considered a general apology for Christianity, I chose

---

5) *Al-dīn al-qawīm*, p. 212.

6) *Al-dīn al-qawīm*, p. 212.

the general apology by Abū Rā'īṭah. This *risālah* (*Risālah li-Abī Rā'īṭah al-Takrīṭī fī iṭbāt dīn al-naṣrāniyyah wa-iṭbāt al-ṭālūt al-muqaddas*)<sup>7</sup> is also in pursuit of the only true religion, but lacking any propedeutical introduction or other theoretical basis. He does not enumerate religious groups, but finds something else to contrast Christianity with: he lists various motivations or intentions that can make people follow a religion. There are six motives that are far from God's intention and there is only one according to His will. These motives are the following:

- the first: desire for some immediate benefits or later ones
- the second: aspiration for reaching the other world
- the third: a coercive fear that forces one to accept a religion
- the fourth: a religion permits forbidden things
- the fifth: one likes the ornament of a religion
- the sixth: "clan-ism", that is belonging to a certain group that follows this religion, and so gain power.

These six motifs are false, and the groups having these intentions deviate from the true divine religion in Abū Rā'īṭah's view, because they do not endeavour to obey God. The author does not give us more reasons why he thinks so, the only thing he says: these approaches bear corruption (*fasād*) and contrariety (*tanāquḍ*).

- The seventh type is the right one, the one for which there is proof and upon which faith relies, by the support of the Lord of Majesty, which is inaccessible for reason to understand and impossible for creation to do so, except for people of the truth, the rightly guided ones. (*allaḍī bihi yaqūmu al-burhān wa-'alayhi mu'tamadu al-īmān min ta'yīdi Rabbi al-'izza bimā ya'aḡizu al-'aqlu 'an taḥṣīlihi wa-yamtani 'u al-ḥalqu 'an fi'lihi illā li-ahli al-ḥaqqi al-murṣadīn*)<sup>8</sup>.

I suppose Abū Rā'īṭah's work might be paralleled to that of Abū Qurrah from many aspects, but there is some difference between their approaches to the intellect/reason. While Abū Qurrah talks about contemporary religious groups and denominations, Abū Rā'īṭah does not enumerate them, but from his list of motives his contemporaries might have well known who he thinks about. Right at the beginning he enumerates these motives and talks about

---

7) *Die Schriften des Jacobiten Ḥabīb Ibn Ḥidma Abū Rā'īṭa*, Ed. Georg GRAF, CSCO, vol. 130; *Scriptores Arabici*, tom. 14., Louvain, 1951, pp. 129-158. (Later on *Fī iṭbāt dīn al-naṣrāniyyah wa-iṭbāt al-ṭālūt al-muqaddas*).

8) *Fī iṭbāt dīn al-naṣrāniyyah wa-iṭbāt al-ṭālūt al-muqaddas*, p. 132.

them briefly. And then he returns to each and every motif, and gives a more detailed contrast between them and Christianity. As he has already claimed that these approaches are not godly intentions now he only has to prove that Christianity is not followed for any of them. He does not always need the intellect as a basis for demonstrating something. While Theodore Abū Qurrah builds everything upon the intellect, Abū Rā'īṭah sometimes seems to underline that the characteristic of faith is that it goes beyond reason/cannot be comprehended only by the intellect/reason. With the aid of God we can still believe what we cannot comprehend with our intellects/reason. In some later parts he refers to the intellect, but I find the above-cited example representative, so I am going to draw my general conclusions on the basis of that citation. For Abū Rā'īṭah not only the intellect is important, the divine help (*ta'yīd Allāh*) is of crucial importance. With the divine help and the intellect one can gain knowledge about God (*taḥṣīl ma'rifa*).

Both authors consider the intellect the gift of God, and the task of the intellect is getting to know God, knowing right and wrong; and also establishing and defending the religion.

### 3. THE INTELLECT AT MOSLEM CONTEMPORARY AUTHORS

#### a. *Al-Ġāḥiẓ*

If we turn to the Moslem contemporaries of Abū Qurrah, we have a wide range of authors to study, e.g. al-Ġāḥiẓ. As the works of Abū Qurrah and Abū Rā'īṭah were of apologetic kind, let us examine *Al-radd 'alā al-naṣārā*<sup>9</sup>, a polemical work dealing with Christians, even if we know there are some works of al-Ġāḥiẓ dealing explicitly with the intellect. However, in this piece of writing we haven't found any general description of the intellect: al-Ġāḥiẓ uses an intellectual kind of argumentation without introducing the intellect on its own. We can find the term '*aql*' many times in this tract. Sometimes it means 'mind' as in the case when the author talks about silly people (*ḍa'īf al-'aql*)<sup>10</sup>, sometimes it means scholarly knowledge, as in the case of the Greek authors, whose heritage had been taken over by Christians (*wa-hā'ulā'i nāsun, min ummatin qad bādū, wa-baqiyat āṭār 'uqūlihim*)<sup>11</sup>. And sometimes it is the means of understanding, comprehension as in the case of

9) AL-ĠĀḤIẒ, *Rasā'il al-Ġāḥiẓ*, Ed. 'Alī Būmalḥim, Beirut, 2004, pp. 235-279. (Later on: *Al-radd 'alā al-naṣārā*).

10) *Al-radd 'alā al-naṣārā*, p. 262.

11) *Al-radd 'alā al-naṣārā*, p. 262.

meeting Christians and trying to understand what they say about the Messiah (*wa-law ġahadta bi-kulli ġuhdika, wa-ġama'ta kulla 'aqlika 'an tafhama qawlahum fī al-Masīh, la-mā qadarta 'alayhi*)<sup>12</sup>. The reason why we might find it interesting, though, is the possibility of another comparison it offers. Abū Qurra uses more than one method in his work in establishing his religion. The above mentioned examples of Abū Qurra demonstrate that he mostly used the intellectual way of reasoning (*dalīl 'aqlī*) and after having established his religion he uses the tradition-based reasoning (*dalīl naqlī*). His narrator is asked why Moses is accepted, and he responds: based on our intellect we would never have accepted him, but as the Gospel that we accept accepts him, we also have to do so. Al-Ġāhiz mostly uses the *dalīl naqlī*: when he wants to prove that some claims of Christianity are false, he refers to the Jewish tradition or the Torah. He considers the Torah *aṣl* and the Gospel *far'*, and what is not present is the Torah, but is present only in the Gospel cannot be accepted. And the way they look at things is also different: Abū Qurra built up a universal, "all-inclusive" system, whereas al-Ġāhiz's writing consists of small parts, lacking intellectual basis. In the case of their *qiyās* another parallel might be drawn. Al-Ġāhiz knows the Torah (*aṣl*) and he judges what is or is not true in the Gospel (*far'*) on this basis. In Abū Qurra's story the king father is the *aṣl* and the son is the *far'*, but the *aṣl* is the unknown one, and we can reach it on the basis of the *far'*, using our intellect.

#### b. *Al-Rassī*

Al-Rassī's tract on the intellect is much closer to Abū Qurra's view. He defines it as the basis of *'adl* and *tawhīd* in his *Kitāb 'uṣūli al-'adli wa-l-tawhīdi*<sup>13</sup>. And when talking about this basis he talks about its uses, and about how it can be employed in the service of God.

First he draws attention to the fact that God made man recognize good and avoid all detestable things by creating each of his servants to be reasonable beings for his worship. Worship (*'ibāda*) is of three kinds: knowing/recognizing God (*ma'rifatu Allāhi*); knowing/recognizing what pleases God and what makes him angry; following the way that pleases God/acting according to what pleases him and avoiding what makes him angry<sup>14</sup>. These

12) *Al-radd 'alā al-naṣārā*, p. 267.

13) *Raṣā'il al-'adl wa-l-tawhīd*, Ed. Muḥammad 'Amārah, vol. 1, pp. 95-100. (Later on *Kitāb uṣūli al-'adli wa-l-tawhīdi*).

14) *Kitāb uṣūli al-'adli wa-l-tawhīd*, p. 96.



three kinds of worship can be traced back to three proofs (*huğğ'a*), the first of which is the intellect/reason, the second of which is the scripture, and the third of which is the Prophet. The intellect (*huğğ'atu al-'aqli*) has resulted the knowledge of the one that we worship, the scripture has brought along the knowledge of the worship (*ta'abbud*), and the prophet has given us the knowledge of the servants (*'ibād*)<sup>15</sup>.

The intellect is the basis (*aşl*) of the other two, as the other two are recognized on the basis of the intellect, whereas it is not true the other way round, because intellect is not recognized on the basis of the other two. And there is a fourth *huğğ'a* that comprises all of them<sup>16</sup>.

The recognition of God is an intellectual action (*'aqliyya*). It can be categorized into two subsections: one of them contains the things we can establish about God (*iṭbāt*), and the other one contains the things that have to be denied about him (*nafiy*). The first one means certitude in God and the second one means we deny any similarities/similes (*taşbīh*) in connection with God. We have to differentiate between God and creature in three fields: essence (*dāt*), features (*şifāt*), and actions (*fi'l*) in order not to describe God by any of the characteristics of the created beings<sup>17</sup>.

So he can also be paralleled with Abū Qurrah as he speaks about the intellect as something that leads us to the knowledge of the one that we worship, i.e. God. Since the intellect is said to be the basis of the other two arguments, namely the scripture and the Prophet another parallel is offered here: Abū Qurrah also establishes everything on the intellect: the intellect helps us recognize the right book or scripture and it is what helps us recognize the right messenger too. The difference is its "place": whereas at Abū Qurrah it just had to lead to the recognition of the right religion, al-Rassī makes it and its action a part of worship.

### c. *Al-Tirmidhī*

Al-Tirmidhī has more than one possible approach to the concept of the intellect<sup>18</sup>. He names the first one *'aqlu al-fiṭra*<sup>19</sup> – natural disposition / instinc-

15) Idem.

16) *Kitāb uşūli al-'adli wa-l-tawhīdi*, pp. 96-97.

17) *Kitāb uşūli al-'adli wa-l-tawhīdi*, pp. 98-99.

18) AL-TIRMIDHĪ, Abū 'Abdallāh Muḥammad ibn 'Alī, *Bayān al-farq bayna al-şadr wa-l-qalb wa-l-fu'ād wa-l-lubb*, ed. Niqūlā Hīr, Cairo, 1987. (Later on AL-TIRMIDHĪ).

19) AL-TIRMIDHĪ, p. 74.

tive intellect, and this is what helps the child and then the man quit stupidity and understand what he is told, ordered or what is prohibited to him. And he can distinguish between good and bad using his intellect (*yumayyizu bi-‘aqlihi bayna al-ḥayr wa-l-šarr*)<sup>20</sup>. The second one is what he calls ‘*aqlu al-ḥuḡḡā*<sup>21</sup> – the intellect of the proof, and this is by what the servant asks God to speak (*bihi yastahiqqu al-‘abdu min Allāhi al-ḥiṭāba*)<sup>22</sup>, and by the help of his intellect he gets to the message of God (*fa-yu‘ayyidu ‘aqluhu fa-yašil li-ḥiṭābi Allāhi*)<sup>23</sup>. And the third one is the ‘*aqlu al-taḡribah*<sup>24</sup> – the experiencing intellect (endeavour), and this is the most useful and the best of the three, because man gets wise through his experiences. There is also the ‘*aql mawrūṭ*<sup>25</sup> – the transmitted, gifted (‘inherited/hereditary’) intellect. If a wise man dies, God makes the wise man’s stupid disciple inherit all his predecessor’s/master’s wisdom, and he becomes wise too. And it is useful, if it is well-balanced, and imprinted by the light of God’s guidance (*al-nāfi‘ huwa al-‘aqlu al-mawzūnu al-maṭbū‘u bi-nūri hidāyati Allāhi*)<sup>26</sup>.

So the intellect – even if it is divided into categories not present at Abū Qurrah – has mainly the same functions or “roles” as the doctor in Abū Qurrah’s writing. Intellect helps to distinguish between right and wrong, intellect helps man to understand the message of God, that is, to get some knowledge of God. And if we look at the special transmitted intellect, it offers a parallel with Abū Qurrah’s allegory. Abū Qurrah has three main characters: the king is God, the son is man and the doctor is the intellect, and the intellect is the intermediary between them. In the specifically Sūfī approach, there are also three “characters”: God, the shaykh, and a silly disciple. And it is God that gives knowledge (here ‘*aqlun* could be translated as comprehension) to the disciple through the intermediary Shaykh. So there is a great difference in this subsection: the intermediary between God and man is the intellect/the doctor at Abū Qurrah, and the Shaykh at Tirmidhī. This category of Tirmidhī is also unique: while others mainly refer to the argumentative understanding (‘*aql istidlālī*), he refers to an illuminative approach (‘*aql nūrānī*).

---

20) Idem.

21) Idem.

22) Idem.

23) Idem.

24) Idem.

25) AL-TIRMIDHĪ, p. 75.

26) Idem.

## CONCLUSION

As a conclusion we can contrast Theodore Abū Qurrah's 'intellect' with that of all the others', or we can ask ourselves if there could an opposition be found between Christian and Muslim usage in this context. We have seen that in the case of all authors who have mentioned 'intellect', *'aql* follows God (*tābi' Allāh*), and it is a sign of God, something that points out to God (*dalīl ilā Allāh*). In Christian usage faith and intellect (*īmān* and *'aql*) stick to each other, whereas in the Moslem use faith and practice (*īmān* and *'amal*) belong to each other. For Christians the knowledge of God and the knowledge of the truth (*ma'rifatu Allāhi, ma'rifatu al-ḥaqqi*) are the most important things intellect can lead to, for Moslems the task of the intellect is worship (*'ibādah*) of which the knowledge of the truth is only a part. For both parts the intellect is the means of distinguishing (*wasīlatu al-tamyīzi*). This is what produces our decisions/judgements, but it is not totally independent: it comes from God, as it is the gift of God in the views of both parties. Only names differ: Christians use words like *ṭabīb*, *ta'yīd*, while Moslems use words like *ālah*, *āyah*, and *ḥuḡḡah*. And finally we might draw a general conclusion repeating what is said above in the case of the comparison between Abū Qurrah and al-Rassī: Abū Qurrah and his Christian contemporary seem to aim at the recognition of God and the right religion using the intellect (*rubūbiyyah*), while Moslem contemporaries, though the way intellect is used is really close to the Christian approach, consider it a part of worship (*'ubūdiyyah*).

Assistant Lecturer  
Pázmány Péter Catholic University  
Arabic Department  
Egyetem út 1  
2087, Piliscsaba – HUNGARY

Orsolya VARSANYI