



NEW EXPLORATIONS
IN THEOLOGY

Foreword by Gary R. Habermas

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TRIUNE RELATIONALITY

A Trinitarian Response to Islamic Monotheism



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The Rise of the Abbasids and the Golden Age of Islam



AFTER THE DEATH of the prophet Mohammad, Muslims expanded beyond the Arabian Peninsula to the Levant, Mesopotamia, and North Africa. The Umayyad dynasty (AD 661–750) followed the period of the *Rashidun* caliphs (the rightly guided caliphs) and moved their capital to Damascus. After the fall of the Umayyads, the Abbasids ruled (AD 750–1258) in Baghdad through a military revolution. “It was the armies of the Muslims of Khurasan,” says Hugh Kennedy, “which defeated the forces of the Umayyads and swept the new dynasty to power in 750.”¹ The number of the Abbasids’ troops in the late eighth century was around 100,000.² This military power led to many uprisings within the ruling parties. Most of the Abbasid caliphs died through military coups, treason, and treachery.

Like the Umayyad, the Abbasids practiced hereditary rule to keep the caliphate within the family. They even appointed several sons as crown princes, which in many cases led the elder crown prince to isolate his younger brothers in order to deliver the regime to his own son instead of his brothers. This situation resulted in many military coups within the same family.³ Moreover, the Abbasid dynasty included religiously mixed caliphs.

¹Hugh Kennedy, *When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World: The Rise and Fall of Islam’s Greatest Dynasty* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2004), 44.

²Kennedy, *When Baghdad Ruled*, 44.

³Amina Bittar, *The History of the Abbasid Dynasty* (Damascus: Damascus University Press, 1997), 322.

Many of them were religious, prayed regularly, censured or curtailed musical practice, and did not serve wine at their tables.⁴ Others were less religious; they kept concubines and paid more attention to knowledge, music, and translation of literature from different languages to Arabic. This shift in focus led to several improvements in science, language, and art.

The translation movement from Greek to Arabic started under the Umayyad period. The initial Arab conquests in Syria, Palestine, and Egypt, and the move of Arab rulers and tribesmen into Greek-speaking areas, made the transition from Greek to Arabic inevitable, both in government circles and in everyday life. Greek was widely used in Syria and Palestine as the official language of commerce and business and as the language of learning of Christian clerics.⁵ However, most—if not all—of the translation activities during the Umayyad period are “instances of random and ad hoc accommodation to the needs of the times, generated by Arab rule over non-Arab peoples.”⁶ Most of the materials were administrative, political, and commercial documents. They were translated for the purpose of expanding the communication between the new rulers and the allophones.⁷

After the Abbasid revolution and the transfer of the seat of the caliphate to Iraq, the cultural orientation of Islam changed drastically. Hārūn al-Rashīd (AD 766–809) established *Bayt al-Ḥikma* (the House of Wisdom), which reached its pinnacle under the reign of his son al-Maʾmūn (AD 813–833) with the involvement of Aramaic speakers, Christians, Jews, and Persian scholars.⁸ Several resources mention that *Bayt al-Ḥikma* started as a royal library. As an institution, it was adopted as part of the Sasanian administrative and bureaucratic state system.⁹ “With the books brought from both the church schools within the state’s borders and neighboring geographies,” says Mustafa Bariş, “Bayt al-Hikma grew to be the richest library of medieval period and a science center encompassing intense scientific studies. In the foregoing science center were a director, authors and interpreters with

⁴Kennedy, *When Baghdad Ruled*, 13.

⁵Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early Abbasid Society (2nd-4th/5th-10th c.)* (London, UK: Taylor & Francis Group, 1998), 17.

⁶Gutas, *Greek Thought*, 24.

⁷Gutas, *Greek Thought*, 24.

⁸Gutas, *Greek Thought*, 19.

⁹Gutas, *Greek Thought*, 56-58.

clerks working under them, scribes copying the books and bookbinders responsible of binding.”¹⁰ According to Muhammad ibn Ishāq Ibn Al-Nadīm, who closely examined *Bayt al-Ḥikma* and utilized its library, forty-six scholars translated from Syriac to Arabic, fourteen from Persian, and three from Sanskrit.¹¹

The translation movement would have not flourished without the support of the caliphs, such as Hārūn al-Rashīd and al-Maʿmūn, and the scholarly zeal of Syriac-speaking Christians, who were fluent in Greek, Syriac, and Arabic. Christian theologians who wrote in Arabic in the early Islamic period were associated with monasteries and ecclesiastical institutions. Under the influence of the caliphs and Christian thinkers, intellectual life flourished in Baghdad and beyond. As Griffith mentions, “Some were physicians, some were philosophers, and some were logicians, mathematicians, copyists, or translators. Some were also Christian apologists and theologians. . . . All of them contributed something to the newly flowering culture of the classical period of Islamic civilization.”¹²

THE STATUS OF CHRISTIAN SCHOLARSHIP DURING THE EARLY ABBASID PERIOD

Under the Byzantine rule and the invasion of Islam into the Levant, Christians were divided into three major groups. The monasteries of Jerusalem, the Judean desert, and (to a certain extent) the ecclesiastical establishment in Edessa in Syria were filled with Greek and Syriac-speaking confessors of the Chalcedonian faith. They were known later in the ninth century by the name Melkites¹³ “because of their acceptance of the doctrinal decisions of the imperially sponsored, sixth ecumenical council in Byzantium, Constantinople III (681 CE), along with its five equally imperially sponsored predecessors.”¹⁴ After the invasion of the Muslims to the Levant, the Melkites

¹⁰Mustafa Necati Barış, “First Translation Activities in Islamic Science History and their Contribution to Knowledge Production,” *Cumhuriyet İlahiyat Dergisi* 22, no. 1 (2018): 716.

¹¹Muhammad ibn Ishāq Ibn al-Nadīm, *The Fihrist of Al-Nadīm: A Tenth-Century Survey of Muslim Culture*, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 586-90.

¹²Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims In the World of Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 106.

¹³The word *Melkite* comes from the Arabic word *malik*, which means “king.”

¹⁴Sidney H. Griffith, “The Melkites and the Muslims: The Qurʾān, Christology, and Arab Orthodoxy,” *Al-Qanṭara* 33, no. 2 (2012): 414.

adopted the Arabic language in the ninth century. John of Damascus (AD 655–749) was the first theologian/apologist who wrote against Islam in Greek, and Theodore Abū Qurrah (AD 750–820) was the first theologian to write in Arabic. He even translated the Greek secular work of the pseudo-Aristotelian treatise *De virtutibus animae* into Arabic and submitted it to Ṭāhir ibn al-Ḥusayn, the caliph al-Ma'mūn's famous general.¹⁵

The second Christian group that had knowledge of Greek were Jacobites. They took their name and existence after Jacob Baradeus (AD 500–578), who was credited with organizing the Syrian Orthodox “Jacobite” Church.¹⁶ This group is pejoratively called Monophysites by the Chalcedonians, who thought that Monophysites believe in the single nature of Christ, particularly Jesus' divinity being the principle of the union of his two natures, in which his humanity is absorbed.¹⁷ They were separated from the Chalcedonians in the sixth century because they thought mistakenly that Chalcedon was Nestorian.¹⁸ However, Baradeus continued to travel throughout Egypt, Syria, Mesopotamia, Armenia, Arabia, and many other countries, ordaining numerous bishops and priests.¹⁹ As he traveled, his preaching was all the more effective because of his fluency in Greek, Syriac, and Arabic.

It is worth noting that in the age before the printing press, copyists and booksellers were closely related professions. Yaḥyā Ibn 'Adī, for instance, who received most of his education in Baghdad, was a member of the Jacobite church and quite knowledgeable in Syriac and Arabic. He devoted considerable time to copying manuscripts. Even though he was Christian, he did not restrict himself to writing only about Christianity or Christian theology. On the contrary, he boasted of being a scribe, copying Islamic manuscripts. He states,

¹⁵Griffith, *Church in the Shadow*, 107.

¹⁶J. W. Childers, “Baradeus, Jacob (c. 500–578),” in *The Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization*, ed. G. T. Kurian Wiley (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

¹⁷Dietmar W. Winkler, “Monophysites,” in *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World*, ed. G. W. Bowersock, Peter Robert Lamont Brown, and Oleg Grabar (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

¹⁸A. A. Luce, *Monophysitism Past and Present: A Study in Christology* (New York: The Macmillan Co. 1920), 1.

¹⁹Philip Wood, “Christians in the Middle East, 600–1000: Conquest, Competition and Conversion,” in *Islam and Christianity in Medieval Anatolia*, ed. A. C. S. Peacock et al. (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 24.

I have transcribed with my hand two copies of the Tafsīr [Quranic Commentary] of al-Tabarī [d. 923], which I have taken to the kings of the frontiers, and I have copied innumerable works of the Muslim theologians. In fact, I have forced myself to write a hundred pages each day and night, though I felt this to be little.²⁰

Ibn ʿAdī did not speak or read Greek; instead, he worked from existing translations into his native Syriac and was a major ambassador for Greek ideas into the Christian and Islamic worlds.²¹

In addition to the Melkites and the Jacobites, the Church of the East made up the community of scholars inspiring the next generation of thinkers to follow their footsteps in learning, writing, and translating philosophy. The Church of the East lived in Iraq, yet they had their own Greek and Syriac learning tradition. Gutas states that the same Greek-Syriac learning atmosphere existed in Monophysite and Church of the East congregations throughout the area,

If we are to judge by scholars who appeared during the early ʿAbbasid period with a solid background in Greek learning; witness Dayr Qunnā south of Baghdad on the Tigris [EI II, 197] the site of a large and flourishing Nestorian monastery, where Abū-Biṣr Matta ibn-Yunus (EI VI, 844-51), the founder of the Aristotelian school in Baghdad early in the tenth century, studied and taught.²²

Many cities in the Levant and Mesopotamia maintained a Greek-Syriac learning tradition, which the Church of the East contributed effectively to in the pre-Islamic era.

The previous analysis shows the important role that the Christians played in launching Arabic language, philosophy, and science. These scholars participated in the translation movement out of altruistic motives for the improvement of society and the promotion of their own religion. The translation movement created new developments in studying philosophy in the Arabic world, which in turn allowed some Christian and Muslim

²⁰“Yahya ibn ʿAdī,” in *Encyclopedia of World Biography Online*, vol. 37 (Detroit: Gale, 2017). Accessed December 7, 2020. https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/K1631010726/BIC?u=vic_liberty&sid=BIC&xid=c5dd4b6a.

²¹Mohd. Nasir Omar, “The Life of Yahya Ibn ʿAdī: A Famous Christian Philosopher of Baghdad,” *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences MCSER* 6 no. 2 S5 (2015): 310.

²²Gutas, *Greek Thought*, 14.

scholars to dialogue and debate. Both Christian and Muslim scholars leveraged their skills to employ philosophical, theological, and logical ideas to support the faith of their communities.

THE STATUS OF CHRISTIAN SOCIETIES UNDER THE ABBASIDS

Some Christians held notable positions in the government under the Umayyads, valuable in service because of their knowledge of Greek and the previous positions they held during the Byzantine's power. When the Arabs came to the Levant and Mesopotamia, they ruled as a minority community over established societies. Their expertise in the existing administrative systems helped them to establish their own methods and maintain order over the newly conquered lands.²³ Thus, non-Muslims were in demand as professional state administrators, and they often rose to influential and important positions, especially at the beginning of the Islamic conquest. However, several conditions changed when the Abbasids took over after the Umayyads. While many of the Christians did work for the Abbasid caliphs in translation, this does not mean they had total freedom or that all Christian communities were treated respectfully during the extended period of the Abbasid reign. On the contrary, even with Christians in key positions of influence, they were unable to prevent Abbasid rulers from imposing new restrictions on Christians and non-Muslim communities.

One of the restrictions that Abbasids applied on local non-Muslims in the Levant and Mesopotamia is called the *dhimma*—a covenant of protection between Muslims and certain tolerated non-Muslim religious communities (Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and Sabaeans) living permanently within its boundaries.²⁴ Muslims were a minority at the beginning of the conquest; however, their number increased rapidly as many locals converted to Islam after being given the choice of conversion, paying taxes, or being killed. The people who refused to convert and opted to pay taxes are called *ahl al-dhimma*, or *dhimmis*. They did not have to pay any *zakat* (alms) on their properties, vines, crops, or livestock like Muslims did, but they had to

²³Mun'im Sirry, "The Public Role of Dhimmis during 'Abbāsīd Times," *Bulletin of SOAS*, 74, no. 2 (2011): 188.

²⁴Norman A. Stillman, "Dhimma," in *Medieval Islamic Civilization*, ed. Joseph Meri, vol 1, (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2016), 205.

pay *jizya*—a poll tax imposed on non-Muslims in lieu of military service. Women and senior citizens did not pay *jizya*, only men who were able to hold the sword and fight.²⁵

Jizya is a Qur’anic command that Mohammad himself imposed on non-Muslims during his *ghazawat* (raids). In Surah 9:29, Mohammad commands the Muslims to “fight those who do not believe in Allah, nor in the latter day, nor do they prohibit what Allah and His Messenger have prohibited, nor follow the religion of truth, out of those who have been given the Book, until they pay the tax in acknowledgment of superiority and they are in a state of subjection.”²⁶ The amount of *jizya*, however, is not defined in the Qur’an. The Ḥadīths mention briefly that Jews and Christians should pay a tenth of their profits if they are making trade outside their area of residence.²⁷ *Muwatta Malik* includes a Ḥadīth stating that *jizya* is imposed on

the people of the Book to humble them. As long as they are in the country they have agreed to live in, they do not have to pay anything on their property except the *jizya*. . . . This is because *jizya* is only imposed on them on conditions, which they have agreed on, namely that they will remain in their own countries, and that war will be waged for them on any enemy of theirs, and that if they then leave that land to go anywhere else to do business they will have to pay a tenth.²⁸

Non-Muslims (mostly Christians and Jews) who lived under Islamic rule paid a certain amount of money on their properties in exchange for protection, but if they traveled from their area of residence to do business in other Islamic regions, they had to pay one-tenth of their trade, whereas Muslims did not. In another Ḥadīth, Mohammad explains that tithing is not imposed on Muslims: it is only for the Jews and the Christians.²⁹

²⁵Christian C. Sahner, *Christian Martyrs under Islam: Religious Violence and the Making of the Muslim World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 6.

²⁶Unless otherwise noted, all Qur’anic passages referenced are in *The Quran*, ed. M. H. Shakir (Medford, MA: Perseus Digital Library, 2016).

²⁷Ḥadīths are the collective records of the traditions of Prophet Mohammad’s words and acts. Many of the Ḥadīths are treated as authentic (which goes directly in unbroken chain to the prophet himself) and second in authority to the Qur’an. These Ḥadīths are called *Ḥadīth Ṣaḥīḥ* (correct Ḥadīth). This study will use only *Ḥadīth Ṣaḥīḥ*.

²⁸Mālik Ibn Anas, *Al-Muwatta of Imam Malik ibn Anas: the first formulation of Islamic law*, Book 17, Ḥadīth no. 46. Accessed December 14, 2020. <https://sunnah.com/urn/506220>.

²⁹Tirmidhī, Muḥammad Ibn, ‘*Isā*, “Jami’ at-Tirmidhi,” Book 7, Ḥadīth no. 634. Accessed December 14, 2020, <https://sunnah.com/tirmidhi/7>.

As for the people of the Book who do not travel and remain in their area of residence in the Islamic regions, their *jizya* was not standardized, and its conditions fluctuated. The amount was left to be negotiated with individual Muslim monarchs. Al-Qurtūbi records several cases he heard from different resources about *jizya*, detailing how Mohammad and the caliphs after him treated the non-Muslims among them.³⁰ He recalls al-Ṭabari saying that *jizya* should be at least one dinar with no maximum amount, while others say it should be more than one dinar or be based on whatever the Muslim potentate defines.³¹

As Islamic dominance in the region increased with time, Islamic law and administrative practice evolved, and the rule of *dhimma* became more closely defined. At the beginning of the Abbasid's reign, the tribute paid by the non-Muslims varied from one province to another, depending on the conditions of the Arab commanders. Eventually, Islamic law required all adult dhimmi males to pay *jizya* "of five dinars for the wealthy, three for the middle class, and one for the working poor (although not for the total [*sic*] indigent), as well as a land tax (*kharaj*) for those who owned real estate."³² Hārūn al-Rashid was the first Abbasid caliph to discuss the proper administration of the *jizya*. During his time, *dhimmis* were required "to pay a five percent tariff on their merchandise, as opposed to the Muslims, 2.5 percent."³³ Some historians like to argue that *dhimmis* were not oppressed, mistreated, or taxed beyond their means and that *jizya* was not as restrictive as we might think today, especially since Muslims themselves are required to pay *zakat* (alms). Amira Bennison, in her comment on *Muwatta' Malik's* Ḥadīth, states that "the distinction between the two was therefore not so much a matter of quantity but quality: Muslims paid taxes for the benefit of their own souls and the needy amongst them, while non-Muslims were obliged to pay their masters taxes of no particular benefit to themselves, except to guarantee their protected status."³⁴ While these are helpful observations,

³⁰Muhammad Iben Ahmad Al-Qortobi, *Tafsir Al-Qortobi* (Ar-Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, 2003). Accessed December 13, 2020. <https://quran.ksu.edu.sa/tafseer/qortobi/sura9-aya29.html#qortobi>.

³¹Al-Qortobi, *Tafsir Al-Qortobi*.

³²Stillman, "Dhimma," 206.

³³Stillman, "Dhimma," 206.

³⁴Amira K. Bennison, *The Great Caliphs: The Golden Age of the 'Abbasid Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 123.

Bennison completely overlooks the fact that *jizya* was mandated as a way out of conversion or death. It is true that *dhimmis* were not obligated to go to war, but they also missed the booties of war that their Muslim neighbors gained. Bennison also does not discuss the percentage that the *dhimmis* were asked to pay, which is double the amount that the Muslims paid in regular circumstances—and four times the amount paid if they were traveler merchants.

If there is any doubt left about the intention of *jizya*, note that *dhimmis* were required to pay their *jizya* publicly “in broad daylight, with hands turned palm upward, and to receive a smart smack on the forehead or the nape of the neck from the collection officer.”³⁵ As these actions clearly demonstrate, *jizya* not only served as a means of protection, but it was also intended to humiliate the *dhimmis*.

In addition to their obligation to pay the *jizya*, Christians were subject to persecution and subordination. Ira M. Lapidus explains that in the eighth century, “Muslims increasingly treated Jews and Christians as subordinate minorities, forbidding non-Muslims to ride horses, bear weapons, ring church bells, stage processions, or display religious symbols in public.”³⁶ Bennison admits that *ahl al-dhimma* were sometimes required to wear “distinctive garments or markers of their various faiths—coloured shoulder strips, shawls and belts were all stipulated at different times—and forbidden to build ostentatious places of worship, ring bells or sound clappers, sell wine and pork in Muslim areas, carry weapons or hold positions of power over Muslims.”³⁷ During al-Mutawwakil reign, *dhimmis* were not persecuted or forced to convert to Islam but rather were subject to public shaming. Kennedy mentions that in AD 850, al-Mutawwakil issued a decree that forced all *dhimmis* “to wear yellow on their clothes. Upper-class *dhimmis* had to wear yellow hoods and simple belts. They also were required to ride with wooden stirrups and sport two pommels on the backs of their saddles. Their slaves were to wear yellow patches on their fronts and backs, not less than four finger spans (8 centimeters) across.”³⁸ These markers represent

³⁵Stillman, “Dhimma,” 206.

³⁶Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 3rd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 155.

³⁷Bennison, *Great Caliphs*, 122.

³⁸Kennedy, *When Baghdad Ruled*, 240.

another way Muslims discriminated against the non-Muslim communities, creating a system by which they could restrict freedom of movement.

After the establishment of the Islamic government, the Abbasid caliph al-Mutawakil (AD 847–862) “banned non-Muslims from holding state office. Not only did he forbid the employment of non-Muslims in government offices, he also ordered that all churches built since the commencement of Islam should be demolished and imposed several other discriminatory regulations on them.”³⁹ The hagiographical literature of Christian communities from this time period is rife with stories of Christian martyrs executed by Muslim authorities while confessing their Christian faith, opposing Islam, converting Muslims from Islam, or preaching against Islam.⁴⁰ The church’s hagiography tells several stories about people who lost their lives during the Abbasid dynasty. Christian C. Sahner records that “these martyrs were a varied group, including monks, soldiers, shopkeepers, village priests, craftsmen, princes, and bishops. They were women and men, young and old, peasants and nobles. Although capital punishment disproportionately affected certain groups, especially the clergy, martyrs hailed from across the social spectrum of the early medieval Middle East.”⁴¹ This is not to say that Muslims were killing people by the sword in a massive way; rather, it is to show that the historical picture is more complicated than one might assume at first glance. Capital punishment, while real and furious, was also largely bureaucratic in nature and relied on state institution. Sahner states that “the Umayyads and Abbasids were not much interested in persecuting Christians, at least systematically. In fact, the state took a rather *laissez-faire* attitude toward the governance of *dhimmis* . . . It allowed them to live as they wished provided they paid the *jizya* . . . and accepted their subordination as laid down by the law.”⁴² The newly established religion and law led to massive conversion to Islam, especially for people who were not firm in their faith or did not have the means to pay *jizya*.

³⁹Sirry, “public role,” 188.

⁴⁰Mark N. Swanson, “Saints and Sainthood, Christian,” in *Medieval Islamic Civilization*, ed. Joseph Meri, vol 2, (New York: Taylor And Francis, 2016), 688.

⁴¹Sahner, *Christian Martyrs under Islam*, 2.

⁴²Sahner, *Christian Martyrs under Islam*, 6.

THE CHRISTIAN THINKERS IN THE COUNCIL OF THE CALIPHS

The Abbasid regime founded its influence on the idea of proselytism. By definition, proselytism is “One religion, and within that religion, one version of it, is true.”⁴³ This idea, when it is imposed on a local community by a foreign ruler, generates opposition—both inward-facing within the religion itself and outward-facing toward the adherents of other religions who resist. The leaders of the subjugated religion do not only resist because they believe that their own religion is true but also because they are losing power and followers. Right after the Abbasid’s control was consolidated and its firm political power established, the stage was set for confrontations between the Abbasid religion—defined as Islam—and the other religions in the area. Most of the debates that transpired in the History of Islam took place between the traditionalists and many other parties. Caesar Farah illustrates how the different views in early Islamic theology were formed into a standard belief system:

Qadarite, for instance, stressed the doctrine of free will, while the Jabrites denied it; the Sifatites argued for the eternal nature of the attributes of God, while the Mu’tazilites denied they were eternal; the Murji’ites stressed that human actions must not be subject to human judgment, while their opponents, the Wāḍites, insisted on the condemnation of man in this life, before the Day of Judgment; the Kharijites played down the importance of the role of secular leadership, i.e., the caliphate which they considered merely a human institution, while the Shi’ites went so far as to consider their imam as divine.⁴⁴

At the time, the three major debates among Muslims were as follows: (1) Faith versus works. The Kharijites equated faith and works, insisting that “there could be no compromise, no middle ground. A Muslim was either rigorously observant, a true believer, or not a Muslim at all.”⁴⁵ (2) Predestination versus free will. The Qadarites argued for *khalq alaf’al* (that man determines his own fate) against Jabrya, who followed the majority of the Kharijites and believed in *jabr* (predestination). (3) Qur’an—the created

⁴³Gutas, *Greek Thought*, 64.

⁴⁴Caesar Farah, *Islam: Beliefs and Observance* (Hauppauge, NY: Barrons Educational Services, 2000), 207.

⁴⁵John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 69.

Word—versus Qur’an—the uncreated word of God. Mu’tazilites and Jahmites argued against traditionalists that God’s speech is as eternal as any of his attributes, and they are inseparable from his essence. Mu’tazilites viewed God speaking or revealing as an anthropomorphic act, which ultimately would destroy the unity of God because there would be two eternal entities (God and his word) rather than one that existed eternally.⁴⁶

On the Christian side, there arose a need to defend Christian belief against Islamic objections. At the center of the debate was the Trinity: both communities believed they did not worship the same God, although they both called him *Allah* in Arabic. Due to the spread of heresies in the early church period, defending ecclesiastical doctrine was not a foreign practice among Christians. However, Sara Leila Hussaini suggests that the Trinity itself was not widely discussed among Arab Christians before the rise of Islam because “the doctrine had been largely settled within the tradition by the end of the fourth century, and the expression of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit as ‘one ousia and three hypostases’ would have been accepted in most Christian communities.”⁴⁷ However, it is important to mention that the doctrine of the Trinity cannot be separated from the doctrine of Christology (the two natures of Jesus Christ as the Son of God and Son of Man). The Melkites, Jacobites, and Church of the East were in constant contact with each other to defend their conflicting Christology, both among themselves and with many Muslim scholars who debated them.

During the Abbasid dynasty, the new challenge that faced Christians was the need to communicate their beliefs in Arabic. Muslims were not willing to learn the local language of the land, but they were spreading Arabic, the language of the Qur’an, in schools and public systems. Christian scholars needed to write their apologies in Arabic because Muslims did not speak, read, or write Greek or Syriac. The church faced a palpable need to move to the Arabic language in their ecclesiastical worship. It needed to reach out to Arabic-speaking/reading Christians and defend the tenets of orthodoxy

⁴⁶Ignác Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 95.

⁴⁷Sara Leila Hussaini, *Early Christian-Muslim Debate on the Unity of God: Three Christian Scholars and Their Engagement with Islamic Thought (9th Century C.E.)* (Danvers, MA: Brill, 2014), 23.

from the new Islamic religion. Switching to Arabic would also be necessary in order to maintain the church's existence and enlarge as a community.⁴⁸ As a result, the first Abbasid century saw an unprecedented rise in Arabic Christian apologetic writings directed against Islam.⁴⁹ The Melkites were at the forefront of the shift from Greek into Arabic, and their monasteries in the Judean desert produced the first translations of the Gospels and patristic literature.⁵⁰ John of Damascus's writings were the first books to be translated into Arabic, and Theodor Abū Qurrah was the first Christian theologian to write in Arabic.

Al-Ma'mūn received a thorough education in the most important fields of learning of his day. His father, caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd, used the best teachers in the country to teach his sons the Arabic language, literature, music, and poetry.⁵¹ Concerning the religious sciences, al-Ma'mūn was trained in *Ḥadīth* and studied *fiqh* (Islamic law) under the experts in the field. Among other things, he was known for hosting debates between Muslims and representatives of other faiths at his court.⁵² Under his supervision, many debates took place between Christian and Muslim scholars. But before we examine the debates that took place under the council of al-Ma'mūn, we need to understand the Qur'anic conception of the Trinity.

It is important to mention that in AD 833, al-Ma'mūn initiated what is called *miḥna* (inquisition) between Sunnis and Mu'tazilites. During this time, the *miḥna* was carried out to ensure that all Muslim scholars professed the doctrine of the created (as opposed to uncreated and eternal) nature of the Qur'an. The Mu'tazilites believed that the Qur'an had been created at a certain point in time by God to confess that God is the only divine and eternal being.⁵³ Al-Ma'mūn imprisoned or exiled those who did not comply, most famously Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal (AD 780–855), a respected *Ḥadīth* scholar and founder of the Ḥanbalī legal school, who actively

⁴⁸Sidney H. Griffith, "Eutychius of Alexandria on the Emperor Theophilus and Iconoclasm in Byzantium: A Tenth Century moment in Christian Apologetics in Arabic," *Byzantion* 52 (1982): 161.

⁴⁹Gutas, *Greek Thought*, 64.

⁵⁰Lapidus, *History of Islamic Societies*, 158.

⁵¹John Abdallah Nawas, *Al-Ma'mun, the Inquisition, and the Quest for Caliphal Authority* (Columbus, GA: Lockwood Press, 2015), 21.

⁵²Hussaini, *Early Christian-Muslim Debate*, 31.

⁵³Kennedy, *When Baghdad Ruled*, 250.

opposed the Muʿtazilite’s doctrine.⁵⁴ Though his definitive motive is unclear, it is likely that al-Maʿmūn wanted to restrict the religious and the secular affairs and keep them under his direct control. Hussaini believes that even for a short time “the Muʿtazila enjoyed a ‘golden period’ of theological and political dominance, which had implications for the nature of Christian-Muslim debate during this period.”⁵⁵ The *miḥna* period and the ideology of the Muʿtazilites allowed the use of human reason to investigate the divine mysteries. This period in the Abbasid dynasty produced several theological writings on both the Islamic and the Christian sides.

THE WIDELY RECORDED ISLAMIC PERCEPTION OF THE TRINITY

Against the backdrop of Arabic-Islamic rule, it is no surprise that the doctrine of the Trinity would become the center of the debate between Muslims and Christians. Muslims believe in a strict form of monotheism called *tawḥīd* (divine unity), which is one of the cornerstones of the Islamic faith. The first pillar of Islam, the *shahada*, witnesses that “there is no God but Allah,” indicating the existence of one God. Muslims believe that God is one, without associates, separation, or division of parts. Allah is also indivisible, eternal, merciful, and transcendent, and possesses ninety-nine beautiful names (*Asmāʾ Allah al-Husnā*), which reflect his essence, nature, and acts. This belief is supported in the Qurʾan. Allah says, “Take not two gods, He is only one Allah; so of Me alone should you be afraid” (Surah 16:51). Any belief that is contrary to what Allah requires is considered blasphemy and *shirk* (associating someone with Allah in worship), which is the unforgivable sin. The next sections shall examine the Quranic and the Islamic medieval understanding of the Trinity and objections thereof.

The Qurʾanic understanding of the Trinity. Mohammad was in direct contact with Christians, and they probably shared some of their beliefs with him. However, the Qurʾan includes several verses that do not reflect orthodox Christian belief about the doctrine of the Trinity (the Nicene belief) but rather directly criticize it. The *locus classicus* of denying the Trinity in the Qurʾan is found in Surah 4:171, where Mohammad exhorts the Christians to stop being dishonest and declare the truth that “the Messiah, Isa

⁵⁴Hussaini, *Early Christian-Muslim Debate*, 31.

⁵⁵Hussaini, *Early Christian-Muslim Debate*, 32.

son of Marium is only a messenger of Allah and His Word which He communicated to Marium and a spirit from Him; believe therefore in Allah and His messengers, and say not, Three.” Here Mohammad speaks directly to the people of the Book (Christians) and calls Isa (Jesus) the Messiah, but he orders them not to say “three.” Some new translations render *three* as the Trinity.⁵⁶ The word *thalātha* (three) in Arabic shares the same root of the word *Trinity*, but the specific Christian phrase for the Trinity—*Uqnūm* (singular), *Aqanīm* (plural)—does not appear in the Qur’an. It seems obvious that the meaning of the phrase “say not, Three” implies the belief that Christians are not monotheists because “three” indicates the understanding of polytheism.

Mohammad also thinks that the Trinity includes three gods: Allah, Jesus, and Mary. In Surah 5:116, he recounts a conversation in which Allah asks Jesus, “did you say to men, take me and my mother for two gods besides? Allah he will say: Glory be to Thee, it did not befit me that I should say what I had no right to (say); if I had said it, Thou wouldst indeed have known it; Thou knowest what is in my mind, and I do not know what is in Thy mind, surely Thou art the great Knower of the unseen things.” Most commentators project this text to the Day of Judgment. Jesus denies that he taught the crowd about his and his mother’s divinity. The followers of Jesus are accused of taking Jesus and Mary *as gods* in derogation of Allah. The implied relationship—father, mother, child—is very foreign to the Christian identity. This verse contradicts the Nicene understanding of the Trinity that all Christians agree upon.

The inclusion of Mary in the Trinity occurs at different occasions in the Qur’an. Mohammad teaches the Muslims that “Certainly they disbelieve who say: Surely, Allah—He is the Messiah, son of Marium,” and he teaches them to reply: “Who then could control anything as against Allah when He wished to destroy the Messiah son of Marium and his mother and all those on the earth? And Allah’s is the kingdom of the heavens and the earth and what is between them; He creates what He pleases; and Allah has power over all things” (Surah 5:17). It is highly unusual for Christians to express their faith by saying “Allah—He is the Messiah.” Proclaiming Christ’s deity is not

⁵⁶Check out A. Yusuf Ali’s translation of the holy Qur’an and Muhammad Asad’s translation of the Qur’an.

the same as saying “God is Christ.” It is not that simple. James White explains that “we do not believe the Son exhausts all that can be said about God. The proper and balanced assertion is ‘The Messiah is divine and human,’ and, even more to the point, ‘The Son of God is eternally divine and became man in the person of Jesus the Messiah.’”⁵⁷ The contention of Surah 5:17 denies Mary and Jesus’ divinity and attributes the power of creation and destruction to Allah only.

The writer of the Qur’an provides several other reasons not to believe that Jesus is God. First, Jesus himself states that he is not God. Mohammad quotes Jesus directly as stating, “O Children of Israel! serve Allah, my Lord and your Lord. Surely whoever associates (others) with Allah, then Allah has forbidden to him the garden, and his abode is the fire; and there shall be no helpers for the unjust” (Surah 5:72). Al-Ṭabarī explains that Jesus asked people not to worship him but to direct their worship to Allah because he is his God, his king, his master, his creator, and theirs as well.⁵⁸ Al-Qurtubī echoes al-Ṭabarī in his explanation and adds that the Jacobites are the ones who told Mohammad that God is Jesus, son of Mary. Al-Qurtubī repudiates the divinity of Jesus by asking a question: “If Jesus says O Lord! And O God! then how can he call himself God? and how can he ask himself? This is impossible.”⁵⁹ Ibn Kathīr agrees with al-Ṭabarī and al-Qurtubī, adding the other two sects of Christianity to the conversation (the Melkites and the Church of the East) and calling their belief *shirk* (polytheism) to emphasize that the Christian belief is considered an unforgivable sin—people will lose their eternal life in heaven if they persevere in this belief.⁶⁰

The second reason the writer of the Qur’an gives against the divinity of Jesus is that Isa is a mere messenger, a normal man who eats, drinks, and sleeps. “The Messiah, son of Marium is but a messenger,” says Mohammad,

⁵⁷James White, *What Every Christian Needs to Know about the Qur’an* (Grand Rapids, MI: Bethany House Publishers, 2013), 90.

⁵⁸Muhammad Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*. Accessed December 12, 2020. <https://quran.ksu.edu.sa/tafseer/tabary/sura5-aya72.html#tabary>. Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī was one of the earliest and trusted commentators on the Qur’an with al-Qurtubī and Ibn Kathīr. He is not to be confused with Ibn Raban al-Ṭabarī.

⁵⁹Muhammad Ibn Ahmad Al-Qurtubī, *Tafsīr Al-Qortoby*. Accessed December 28, 2020. <https://quran.ksu.edu.sa/tafseer/qortobi/sura5-aya72.html>.

⁶⁰Abi Al-Fida’ Ismael Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr Ibn Katheer*. Accessed December 29, 2020. <http://quran.ksu.edu.sa/tafseer/katheer/sura5-aya72.html>.

“messengers before him have indeed passed away; and his mother was a truthful woman; they both used to eat food. See how We make the communications clear to them, then behold, how they are turned away” (Surah 5:75). Al-Qurṭubī explains that God shows them shreds of evidence against their beliefs. He tells the Christians,

You admit that Jesus was a fetus in his mother’s womb, cannot cause harm or benefit, and if you decided that Jesus does not hear, or see, and does not know, harm, or benefit, then how did you take that to mean he is God? Allah is the one who hears, which means he is still hearing, knowing, causing harm and benefit, and who has these attributes is the real God.⁶¹

Al-Qurṭubī believes that the evidence is clear: Jesus was born, acted, and lived his life like a normal man. He had human desires and needed what human’s need; therefore, he cannot be God. All above-mentioned Islamic scholars—al-Ṭabarī, al-Qurtubī, and Ibn Kathīr—display great ignorance of, or at the very least completely overlook, the classical Christian orthodox understanding of the Trinity—one *ousia*, three *hypostases*. Instead, they just reflect and expand on their own interpretations of the Trinity.

Finally, the Qur’an conveys a literal, materialistic, and anthropomorphic understanding of the title “Son of God.” The writer of the Qur’an states that “the Originator of the heavens and the earth! How can He have a child, when there is for Him no consort, when He created all things and is Aware of all things?” (Surah 6:101). Although Mary’s name is not mentioned directly in this passage, the verse’s allusion is clear: Allah married Mary and had a child called Isa. Ibn Kathīr, al-Qurtubī, and al-Ṭabarī agree that the meaning of *wife* is meant to be understood literally. Since Allah created the heavens and the earth, he does not need a wife and does not need to have a son who looks like him.⁶² He can create whatever he wants and nothing in creation is like him. The writer of the Qur’an thinks of a physical relationship between God and his wife (Mary) and a literal pregnancy and birth. The same idea is

⁶¹Muhammad Ibn Ahmad Al-Qurtubī, *Tafsir Al-Qortoby*. Accessed December 28, 2020. <https://quran.ksu.edu.sa/tafseer/qortobi/sura5-aya76.html#qortobi>.

⁶²Muhammad Ibn Ahmad Al-Qurtubī, *Tafsir Al-Qortoby*. Accessed December 28, 2020. <https://quran.ksu.edu.sa/tafseer/qortobi/sura6-aya101.html>; Muhammad Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsir al-Tabarī*. Accessed December 12, 2020. <https://quran.ksu.edu.sa/tafseer/tabary/sura6-aya101.html#tabary>; Abi Al-Fida’ Ismael Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsir Ibn Kathīr*. Accessed December 28, 2020. <https://quran.ksu.edu.sa/tafseer/katheer/sura6-aya101.html#katheer>.

repeated in Surah 112:1-4. Mohammad teaches his followers to say that “Allah, is One. Allah is He on Whom all depend. He begets not, nor is He begotten. And none is like Him.” The literal understanding of the Qur’an conveys a distorted picture of the orthodox Trinity that most Christians agree upon.

To conclude, the Quran neither mentions the Trinity nor comes close to accurately defining what Christians mean by it. The writer of the Qur’an considers Christians to be polytheists, understands the Trinity in a physical sense and in mathematical terms (i.e., $1+1+1=3$)—three beings are divine, namely Father, Mary, and Jesus. God the Father married Mary and had a baby, named Isa (Jesus). The title *Father* is not mentioned in the Qur’an, but it is implied in the physical relationship—Father (Allah), Mother (Mary), and Child (Jesus). The Nicene profession of the Trinity is not mentioned anywhere in the Qur’an even though it was conducted and widely agreed upon among Christians many years before the Qur’an was written.

Omitting the correct theological concept of the Trinity from the Qur’an is a historical weakness because the Qur’an was written approximately 300 years after the Nicene Creed. Thus it is reasonable to conclude that the Qur’anic way of understanding the Trinity is nonhistorical. No early church father used the concept of the Trinity in the way that Mohammad understood it. Tertullian (AD 155–220), for example, was the first church theologian who introduced the word *Trinity* while explaining the unity of God in the third century.⁶³ He did not believe that God is three separate persons and Mary is one of the divine persons. Augustine (AD 354–430) also believed that “the Trinity is the one and only and true God,”⁶⁴ contradicting the Qur’an and its belief.

Other Islamic resources, such as Ḥadīths, Islamic commentators, and Islamic theologians (*Mutaklimīn*) express the same understanding of the writer of the Qur’an about the doctrine of the Trinity. In *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, Mohammad tells his people about the end of times and how Allah shall conduct his judgment. He states, “Then it will be said to the Christians, ‘What did you use to worship?’ They will reply, ‘We used to worship Messiah, the son of Allah.’ It will be said, ‘You are liars, for Allah has neither a wife

⁶³Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* 3. Accessed March 25, 2021. www.tertullian.org/articles/evans_praxeas_eng.htm.

⁶⁴Augustine of Hippo, *On the Trinity* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1887), 1.2.4.

nor a son.”⁶⁵ This Ḥadīth duplicates the Qur’anic understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity, venerating Mary by making her part of the Trinity and God’s wife.

The medieval Islamic understanding of the Trinity. Under the Abbasid dynasty in the ninth century, several scholars left written apologies against the Trinity. This section shall examine three of them. The intended purpose of this section is to inform the reader of the varieties of Islamic objections to the Trinity.

Alī Ibn Rabban al-Ṭabarī (783–858). The first apology was written by Alī Ibn Rabban al-Ṭabarī, a Christian, the son of a Jewish scholar, and a Muslim later on in his life—he converted to Islam at the age of seventy.⁶⁶ His father was a religious leader in a Syriac-speaking community.⁶⁷ Al-Ṭabarī was a senior member of the Muslim governor’s administration and a trusted supporter. According to Ibn al-Nadīm, al-Ṭabarī converted to Islam at the prompting of the caliph al-Muṭaṣim (AD 833–842) and came to court during caliph al-Mutawakkil (AD 847–861), who later on made him a table companion.⁶⁸ Al-Ṭabarī’s polemic objections to the Trinity are unique because they are written from the perspective of a former Christian. It is hard to know why he converted to Islam, but he states that “the eternal One has called me to write this book of mine as a renunciation of the religion of Christianity (*li-l-tanaṣṣul min dīn al-Naṣrāniyya*).”⁶⁹ He also thanks al-Mutawakkil for his help in writing the book. It seems that he probably felt the need to prove his belief to the caliph. Thus he wrote his polemic against the Trinity to return a favor or gain his trust.⁷⁰

Al-Ṭabarī’s methodology seems to authenticate many sayings of Jesus, especially the ones that indicate his humanity. He starts his polemics against

⁶⁵Muḥammad ibn Ismā‘īl Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, Ḥadīth no. 7439. Accessed April 28, 2020, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/97>.

⁶⁶Mark Beaumont, “Muslim Readings of John’s Gospel in the ‘Abbasid Period,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 19:2 (2008): 180.

⁶⁷Rifaat Ebied and David Thomas, eds., *The Polemical Works of ‘Alī al-Ṭabarī* (Boston: Brill, 2016), 2. Sami K. Hamarneh, “Al-Ṭabarī,” in *Encyclopedia of the History of Science, Technology, and Medicine in Non-Western Cultures*, ed. H. Selin (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008), https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007/978-1-4020-4425-0_9188.

⁶⁸Muḥammad ibn Ishāq Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, ed. M. Riḍā-Tajaddud (Tehran: Dar al-Masirah, 1971), 354.

⁶⁹Ebied and Thomas, *Polemical Works*, 41.

⁷⁰Beaumont, “Muslim Readings,” 181.

the Trinity by dissecting the nature of Jesus Christ and who He is. He lays out twelve points to refute the divinity of Jesus. For the purpose of this study, only the major objections in relation to the Trinity will be listed. For instance, al-Ṭabarī accuses the Christians of being polytheists, believing “in three or even four gods, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and an eternal human who is Jesus Christ.”⁷¹ Al-Ṭabarī separates the title “Son” and the person “Jesus Christ,” making them two different beings. While he does not elaborate on this point, he accuses Christians of believing in four divine beings. This section could be understood as his personal understanding or addition to the Christian belief.

Unlike the Qurʾan and many other Islamic scholars, al-Ṭabarī cites several Christian sources.⁷² He focuses in his Christology on what Jesus says according to his humanity to prove that he cannot be God. For instance, al-Ṭabarī quotes John 20:17, in which Jesus says, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God,” and concludes that Jesus is a mere human, for he is calling God his God.⁷³ He also quotes Jesus declaring that his mission on earth is to do the will of God, not his own (Jn 6:38). Al-Ṭabarī deduces that since Jesus is fulfilling not his will but God’s will, then he is a different person from God and cannot be God.⁷⁴

Al-Ṭabarī mentions the three major branches of Christianity that existed during the Abbasid dynasty. Because of his Christian background, it seems that he was aware of the christological differences among these branches. To know whether Jesus is divine or not, al-Ṭabarī teaches his followers to ask all types of Christians about the eternity of the creator:

Can he [God] be changed from the condition of his eternity and substantiality, and can illnesses and death affect him or not? If they say that he is changed and dies, their belief has died, and the person who says this is like the person whom God almighty in his Book likens to animals. . . . The eternal Creator cannot be changed and does not die, they are at variance with their Creed, and in their eyes the one who is at variance with it does not believe in it, for it says that Jesus Christ is Creator not created, and is true God from true God, of the

⁷¹Ebied and Thomas, *Polemical Works*, 69.

⁷²Al-Ṭabarī does not include biblical references, but he seems to quote the biblical translation that was available to him.

⁷³Ebied and Thomas, *Polemical Works*, 73.

⁷⁴Ebied and Thomas, *Polemical Works*, 73.

substance of his Father, and that he was killed and crucified and made to suffer. Thus, their God was changed and died.⁷⁵

Al-Ṭabarī believes that God cannot be likened to creation (human or animals) and his nature cannot be changed. When he looks at Jesus, he sees a person who gets hungry and thirsty, suffers, and is crucified. For these reasons, Jesus cannot be God.

Most Islamic scholars either ignore the Nicene Creed in their polemics or deem it as a hoax, so they do not quote it to explain the Christian belief. Al-Ṭabarī, on the other hand, is one of few Islamic scholars who use the Nicene Creed in his polemics against the Trinity.⁷⁶ While he acknowledges that all Christian denominations agree on the Nicene Creed, he attributes contradictions to the first part of the creed:

The beginning of the Creed is, “We believe in one God, the Father, Possessor of all things, Maker of what is seen and unseen.” And then, with this they stop referring to God and begin with a new reference, saying, “We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, true God from true God, of the substance of his Father.” But this is a contradiction of the first part of what they say, and no one with any justness or understanding will think this fanciful. For they say, “We believe in one God,” and then immediately after this and in the same way they say, “We believe that Jesus Christ is the Creator of all things by his hand.” In this they affirm another Creator different from the first Creator.

This is another attempt to prove that Christians believe in two different beings, God the Father and God the Son. Al-Ṭabarī’s understanding of the creed implies literal polytheism. Since the Father is a creator and the Son is a creator, then there is no one God, but two.

Last, al-Ṭabarī contests the meaning of the words *Father* and *Son*. He argues that the meanings of *father* and *progenitor* can be understood both literally as referring to procreation and metaphorically “as when a child uses ‘father’ for his uncle or the person who brings him up or teaches him or educates him or does him good, and he will also call the elders of his family and his grandparents ‘fathers’: thus, Adam is called ‘the father of humanity.’ And I have heard Christian scholars say that God is really called ‘father’ because

⁷⁵Ebied and Thomas, *Polemical Works*, 73-74.

⁷⁶Al-Ṭabarī does not use the known verbatim of the Nicene Creed. His resources are unknown. He could be paraphrasing what he had memorized earlier in his childhood.

he is the Initiator and Progenitor of things.”⁷⁷ Al-Ṭabarī does not cite the person who stated this information; instead, he generalizes the meaning and assumes that it is accepted by all Christians. He continues with the same reasoning, explaining that the metaphorical meaning of *Son* is “someone adopts someone, that is, he brings him up, teaches him, educates him and does him good. And people of culture are called ‘sons of culture’ and its ‘brothers.’”⁷⁸ Al-Ṭabarī believes that the metaphorical meanings of the title *Son* contradict the Nicene Creed and the Christian faith “because the followers of Christianity unanimously agree that there are realities to these names, and the realities are not concealed or derived but are obvious and distinct.”⁷⁹ In Al-Ṭabarī’s opinion, if the Son is eternal, then he is not generated, and if he was generated, then he is not eternal. He understands the meaning of the word *generated* in a temporal sense—with a beginning and an end.

Abū ‘īsā Muḥammad al-Warrāq (AD 864). Abū ‘īsā Muḥammad al-Warrāq was an independent scholar who lived in the ninth century. Little is known about his life and background, but it seems that he was active in AD 864.⁸⁰ It is hard to know his religious background. While the Mu‘tazilites scholars (e.g., ‘Abd al-Jabbār and al-Mas‘ūdī) accused him of being a Shi‘ite, a *zindiq* (irreligious), and *mulḥid* (atheist), the Ash‘arī said that he was a Manichee; and Ibn al-Nadīm portrays him as an unconventional Mu‘tazilite with such a deep interest in dualist beliefs.⁸¹ David Thomas believes that al-Warrāq “remained a Muslim, probably with Shi‘ī sympathies, though with his own interpretation of faith.”⁸²

Al-Warrāq left a written work against Christianity called *Radd ‘alā al-Thalāth Firaq min al-Naṣārā*. The book itself is not now available, but Yaḥyā Ibn ‘Adī included it in his reply by making a detailed refutation of its arguments.⁸³ David Thomas managed to edit and translate two volumes of

⁷⁷Ebied and Thomas, *Polemical Works*, 155.

⁷⁸Ebied and Thomas, *Polemical Works*, 155.

⁷⁹Ebied and Thomas, *Polemical Works*, 155.

⁸⁰David Thomas, “Abū ‘īsā Al-Warrāq and the History of Religions,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 41, no. 2 (1996): 275

⁸¹Muḥammad ibn Hārūn Abū ‘īsā Al-Warrāq, *Anti-Christian Polemic in Early Islam: Abū ‘īsā al-Warrāq’s ‘Against the Trinity’*, ed. and trans. David Thomas, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 10.

⁸²Thomas, “Abū ‘īsā Al-Warrāq,” 1.

⁸³Al-Warrāq, *Anti-Christian Polemic*, 3.

al-Warrāq's works, one about the Trinity and the other one about the incarnation. Although al-Warrāq was labeled a heretic by many Muslims, he was recognized by others as a reliable authority on non-Muslim religions. Many scholars in the tenth century, such as al-Māturīdī, al-Bāqillānī, and ʿAbd al-Jabbār, used his works to defeat other religions; but they attacked him because of his criticism of the Qur'an and the prophet.⁸⁴

Al-Warrāq stands out because he is one of a few scholars who studied the Trinity as Christians explain it. He does not quote the Bible in his book, but he mentions that the referenced explanation about the Trinity comes from a Christian source. His intention in the *Radd* is to expose the downfalls of Christian belief by presenting several dilemmas against the concept of God among the three types of Christian sects (Melkites, Jacobites, and Church of the East). He forms his argument in a series of questions and presents them with several dilemmas to force his audience to review their beliefs (i.e., ask this . . . if they answer no, then . . . and if they answer yes, then . . .).

The first dilemma al-Warrāq presents is related to the nature of substance. While the Church of the East and the Jacobites apply differentiation and number to the hypostases, they equate the substance with the hypostases. In al-Warrāq's opinion, this belief is contradictory because they are "claiming that what is differentiated is what is not."⁸⁵ The Melkites, on the other hand, do not believe that the substance is the hypostases, but if they do believe that the substance is the same in some respects "other than the respect in which it is different from them, then if the respect in which it is identical with them is itself, the respect in which it is different from them must be other than itself, requiring an eternal other than the substance."⁸⁶ In other words, if the substance is different from the hypostases in a respect that is different from them and itself, then there is another eternal being other than the substance; and if another eternal is admitted, then Christianity becomes a polytheistic belief.

The second dilemma is presented when the Christians say that the substance is different from the hypostases in every respect. Al-Warrāq believes, "then it necessarily follows, since the substance is divine, that neither the

⁸⁴Al-Warrāq, *Anti-Christian Polemic*, 12.

⁸⁵Al-Warrāq, *Anti-Christian Polemic*, 77.

⁸⁶Al-Warrāq, *Anti-Christian Polemic*, 89.

Father nor the Son nor the Spirit is divine; and if each of the hypostases is divine, that the substance is not divine.”⁸⁷ In other words, whether the Melkites say it is the same or it is different, their belief is wrong.

The third dilemma arises when the Christians say that the substance is neither different from the hypostases nor identical to them. Al-Warrāq asks these questions: “why characterize the substance differently from the hypostases and the hypostases differently from the substance? . . . will people be able to tell at all between the statement: ‘two things, one separate from the other, whose names and descriptions are distinct but they themselves are not?’”⁸⁸ Al-Warrāq’s understanding requires the term *other*, but “the term ‘other’ cannot be applied to it neither can the terms ‘identical and different,’ or ‘identity’ and ‘difference.’”⁸⁹ Therefore, their claim that the substance is neither identical nor different from the hypostases does not stand.

Al-Warrāq raises a different objection to the divinity of the three hypostases. He is one of a few scholars who acknowledge that Christians believe that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are divine; however, they do not believe in three divinities but one. They all believe that each of the hypostases is Lord and Creator, not three Lords and three Creators.⁹⁰ However, al-Warrāq still thinks of this belief as a contradiction. He explains:

If the substance is other than the hypostases then its action must be other than theirs and its creation other than theirs . . . if action must be affirmed of the substance and not of the hypostases, then consequently it must be denied of the Father, the Son and the Spirit, which must all be debarred from it . . . if action and creation belong to the hypostases and not the substance which is other than them, then you have claimed that the eternal divinity, which is the general substance and its hypostases, has no action or work or control.⁹¹

Al-Warrāq seems to consider the substance as a separate being, which is comparable to the three hypostases.

Al-Warrāq presents an objection to the nature of fatherhood and sonship of the Trinity. He asks, “Is it [substance] of the Father’s substance or not? If

⁸⁷Al-Warrāq, *Anti-Christian Polemic*, 93.

⁸⁸Al-Warrāq, *Anti-Christian Polemic*, 95.

⁸⁹Al-Warrāq, *Anti-Christian Polemic*, 97.

⁹⁰Al-Warrāq, *Anti-Christian Polemic*, 109.

⁹¹Al-Warrāq, *Anti-Christian Polemic*, 111.

it is not of his substance then it must be of a substance other than his. . . . If it is eternal then they affirm two eternal substances. . . . If it is contingent, then before the appearance of this substance the Father was not Father and was not entitled to fatherhood.”⁹² His confusion between the substance and the hypostases continues with his understanding of the fatherhood of the Father and the sonship of Jesus. “If fatherhood is of the substance of the father,” says al-Warrāq, “and the substance of the Son is according to you the substance of the Father, then it follows that the Son must be Father and that you must affirm fatherhood of him as you do of the Father, since their substance is one.”⁹³ It seems that although al-Warrāq worked to understand the Trinity according to Christian belief, his grasp of the one divine being and three hypostases remained oblique.

Al-Qāsim Ibn Ibrāhīm al-Husnī, al-Rassī (AD 785–860). Al-Qāsim Ibn Ibrāhīm al-Husnī, known as al-Rassī, was born in AD 785, grew up in al-Medina, and spent eleven years in Egypt.⁹⁴ He was contemporary to Hārūn al-Rashīd, al-Maʿmūn, and al-Mutawakkil caliphs during the Abbasid reign. He was persecuted by the Abbasids for practicing secret *daʿwa* (invitation) to the Shiʿites.⁹⁵ He gained several supporters, however, and was called the star of Mohammad.⁹⁶ While he was in Egypt, he learned about Christianity and debated Christians and Jews. In AD 826, he left Egypt and settled in al-Rass near al-Medina, where he died in AD 860. While he was influenced to a large extent by the Muʿtazilites, he was one of the founders of the theological traditions of the Zaydi branch of Shiʿite.⁹⁷

Al-Rassī’s intent in writing *Ar-Radd ʿalā al-Naṣarā* (a reply to the Christians) is to refute the Christian revelation and their doctrine of God. He objects to the names of the hypostases—Father, Son, and Spirit—categorizing them into three different groups: natural names, which are related to the substance; hypostatical names, which are proper names; and incidental

⁹²Al-Warrāq, *Anti-Christian Polemic*, 127.

⁹³Al-Warrāq, *Anti-Christian Polemic*, 129.

⁹⁴W. Madelung, *Der Imam al-Qasim ibn Ibrāhīm und die Glaubenslehre der Zaiditen* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1966), 86–96. Binyamin Abrahamov, “Al-Qāsim Ibn Ibrāhīm’s Theory of the Imamate,” *Arabica*, T. 34 (1987): 80.

⁹⁵Al-Qāsim Ibn Ibrāhīm al-Husnī Al-Rassī, *al-Rad ʿAla al-Nassara* [The Reply to the Christians], ed. Hanafi Abdullāh (Cairo, Egypt: Dar -al=Afaq al-Arabia, 2000), 15.

⁹⁶Al-Rassī, *al-Rad ʿAla al-Nassara*.

⁹⁷Abrahamov, “Theory of the Imamate,” 80.

names, which are related to the situation/verb. To him, *Father* and *Son* are incidental names. “If you name the Father as father,” says al-Rassī, “because he gave birth, as you stated, he had a son and a child, so these names are not natural nor hypostatical personal names, but they are incidental, when children are born, between the parents and their children, and not natural, or proper names nor in Roma or other than Roma.”⁹⁸ Al-Rassī categorizes *Father* and *Son* as incidental names and not natural or proper. These names, in his opinion, are used to describe a verb or an action. He compares them to *earth*, *heaven*, or *fire*, which denote something that is its substance—something that can be explained by its name and not by anything else.⁹⁹

In the second part of the book, al-Rassī calls the Christian to *al-Inṣāf* (fairness). He bases his invitation on five common points on which all Christians and Muslims agree: (1) the testimony of Allah, (2) the testimony of the angels, (3) the sayings of Jesus and his testimony, (4) the testimony of Mary the mother of Jesus, and (5) the testimony of Jesus’ disciples and their message.¹⁰⁰ He starts by quoting Matthew 1:1: “This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham.” Al-Rassī uses this verse to prove to the Christians that Jesus is the son of David, not God. He explains that the meaning of fatherhood and sonship is not consistent in the Gospels because Jesus says to his disciples that God is their father (Mt 5:48). Al-Rassī also adds the testimony of Mary, Jesus’ mother, to that of the apostle Philip, stating that both give testimony that Jesus is the son of Joseph. However, he never cites any reference from the Gospels.¹⁰¹ Finally, al-Rassī includes the testimony of the angels to Mary,¹⁰² telling her that she will bear a child, not that she would bear the Son of God.¹⁰³ Moreover, while al-Rassī affirms the authenticity of a few verses, he declines the authenticity of others. For example, he declines that Simon Peter may have said that Jesus is the Son of God.¹⁰⁴ It is important to note that Al-Rassī claims to quote the Bible; however, he does not quote from a known Arabic translation. He either cites

⁹⁸ Al-Rassī, *al-Rad ‘Ala al-Nassara*, 40.

⁹⁹ Al-Rassī, *al-Rad ‘Ala al-Nassara*, 40.

¹⁰⁰ Al-Rassī, *al-Rad ‘Ala al-Nassara*, 43-44.

¹⁰¹ The editor adds two wrong citations in his footnotes (Mt 16:13-16 and Mk 8:27-29).

¹⁰² Al-Rassī does not mention angel Gabriel, but he uses a plural description of angels.

¹⁰³ Al-Rassī, *al-Rad ‘Ala al-Nassara*, 45.

¹⁰⁴ Al-Rassī, *al-Rad ‘Ala al-Nassara*, 46.

the Bible from memory without paying attention to the accuracy of the verses or paraphrases the verses according to his own understanding.

CONCLUSION

During the eighth, ninth, and tenth centuries, Christian-Muslim relations were complicated. Some of the Christians were professional state administrators under the Umayyads. They were in high demand, both because they knew how to run the government and because they knew Greek, Syriac, and Arabic. Under the early reign of the Abbasids, circumstances changed for the Christians. Some caliphs, like Hārūn al-Rashid and his son al-Ma'mūn, were not religiously strict. The former started the translation project of *Bayt al-Ḥikma*, which contributed to the development of several sciences, and the latter encouraged debates between Muslim and non-Muslim scholars under his council, which resulted in several religious writings. The translation movement would not have flourished without the support of the caliphs and the contributions of Syriac-speaking Christians.

Although many Christians worked for the Abbasid caliphs in translation, several also lived under restrictions, and various were persecuted. Various social, religious, and financial restrictions were implemented on Christians and *dhimmi*s under caliph al-Mutawakil, resulting in persecution to the extent of martyrdom. However, Christian scholars were able to defend and debate Muslim scholars for a short period, especially during al-Ma'mūn's reign. A need to defend the Christian belief against Islamic objections arose, and the Trinity was at the center of the debate as Christian and Muslim scholars worked to demonstrate that they did not worship the same God.

During this time and under these circumstances, many disputations were written between Muslims and Christians. From the Muslim side, the majority of them are directed against the Trinity and the Christian understanding of the nature of God. Some objections are based on a fundamental misunderstanding of what the Christians actually teach because they are based on nonhistorical arguments, others are rooted in semantic confusion, and others are based on personal observation, accusing Christians of being nonrational.

The nonhistorical objections ignore the Gospels and the Nicene Creed's explanation of the Trinity. They ridicule the Christian belief, label it as

contradictory, and add what does not belong to it. In the Qur'an, Mohammad clearly confuses the doctrine of the Trinity with the notion of divine cohabitation, deifying Mary from whom Christ was born, and making her a member of the holy Trinity. He also describes the Christian faith in a polytheistic way, including God, Mary, and Jesus to the Godhead.

The semantic objections are more christological in nature because they are related to the literal and metaphorical meanings of the titles "Father" and "Son." These objections convey a literal, materialistic, and anthropomorphic perception of the title "Son of God." Muslims argue that the Christian belief includes God having a wife or a son in a literal sense. When the title "Father" is used literally, it must mean progenitor, which indicates procreation. When it is used metaphorically, it conveys the idea of God being the Creator of all things. "Son," on the other hand, may be understood in an adoptionist sense if it is used metaphorically. According to the Muslims, this thinking contradicts the Nicene Creed because while Christians claim to believe in one God, they announce two creators. Moreover, some scholars went further to argue that Christians' explanation of the terms "Father" and "Son" indicates more than three persons. Some scholars separate the "Son" and "Jesus," making them two persons, resulting in great confusion as to what Christians actually teach regarding the Trinity.

The "being nonrational objection" is agreed upon by most ancient, medieval, and contemporary Muslim scholars.¹⁰⁵ They accuse Christians of being nonlogical in their explanation of the Trinity because they believe in three persons and call them one God. The animus with which Islamic tradition views core Christian doctrines is still very much alive today.¹⁰⁶ Most Muslims and Christians who have entered into serious conversation have found the doctrine of the Trinity to be a "dead end." I do not intend to solve this dilemma; instead, I seek to add to the conversation.

¹⁰⁵abd al-Majid al-Sharafi, *The Islamic Thought about the Reply to the Christians: To the End of the Tenth Century* (Tunisia: al-Dar al-Tunisya LilNashir, 1986), 6. Al-Sharafi concludes that most of the Islamic replies to the beliefs of the Christians after the tenth century were copying the arguments of the previous centuries, especially the ninth and the tenth centuries.

¹⁰⁶Hugh Goddard, "Muslim and Christian Beliefs," in *Contemporary Muslim-Christian Encounters: Developments, Diversity, and Dialogues*, ed. Paul Hedges (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 294.

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