Is There Anyone Listening?

Polemics and Apologies of Christian and Muslim Intellectual Authors of the Early Abbasid Era (780-880) on the Christian Doctrine of the Trinity and the Islamic Qur'anic Doctrine of the Attributes of God:

Engagement and Interaction, but Influence?

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CHAPTER 1

A Longer Introduction

This Introduction has three ojectives. First, it outlines the topic (intellectual Christian-Muslim encounters in early Abbasid era and their interactive effects) and the research questions of this paper (the accuracy of certain scholarly claims on this topic). Second, it is highlighting the divergence of scholarly opinions with a view to illustrating the relevance of the research questions, in this particular era and between these particular communities. Third, it set forth the primary sources I will use. At the outset I would like to make clear that my examination will be conducted predominantly from the developments in the East Syrian apologetics. The Abbasid authors will get a more sober examination.

The Topic

For all the intellectual efforts of Christian and Muslim intellectuals (philosophical and theological) in the era of Islam in its infancy to engage themselves with the others' opinions in their respective writings on issues of doctrine and practices of their respective faiths and in their respective use of certain argumentative methods, the question remains whether these efforts resulted in "*influence*" on the other? In other words: were their intellectual efforts unilateral and internal reactions to issues that had a universal, but paralel bearing on each intellecual community individually[1] or, when interactive, was there responsiveness, appropiation or change as a result of "influence?

When put so general and abstract and keeping the concept of "influence" so vague, the answer is affirmative. As Sabine Schmidtke and Gregor Schwab put it: these processes of interaction exhibit "numerous

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1 Adam H. Becker, 'The Comparative Study of "Scholasticism" in Late Antique Mesopotamia: Rabbis and East Syrians', *Association for Jewish Studies Review* 34.1 (2010) 91-113.

instances of cross-border communication, exchange, encounters, appropiation, reception, adaptation, and transmission".[2]

Divergent Answers

However, answers tend to diverge when it comes to determining the *extent* and *nature* of interactive "influence", on *which* issues "influence" could be detected (and: on which not) and *which* conditions (philosphical, religious, societal, economical etc.) could be taken as contributing factors thereto and which as opposing thereto. It is to examine these latter questions that I set out in this paper.

Naturally, though the focus is on intellectual writings, it is indispensable to contextualize these writings. They are not written in a vacuum. Though religion (doctrine, rituals and practices) was amongst the markers *par exellence* of one's communal belonging and communal identity, the ways and means of observance of one's own religious faith "on the ground" was not confined to digesting and following the teachings of the intellectuals. Not only represented these intellectuals only a very small minority of the community, class distinctions and traditional ways of life in the worlds of the peasantry struck, also in religious matters, deep divides between the (urban) elites and the others. In addition, at the outset I would like to note that context is not only represented by polical-societal (ecclesiastical or religious-institutional included) developments, cultural factors need to be taken into account as well. As put by Patel: "A study of early Islam highlights how the first Muslims imagined religion beyond abstract doctrine; aesthetically mediated practice filtered through the body and the senses concretely shaped the configuration of Islam in early Muslim societies. One cannot appreciate how Muslims fashioned Islam into a distinct monotheistic religion without attending to the concrete acts of imitation and distinction that signaled membership in the Muslim community. It was through these acts that Islam bled into culture and politics. Religion is

2 Sabine Schmidtke and Gregor Schwarb, 'Introduction', *Intellectual History of the Islamacate World* 2 (2014) 1-6.

therefore not a sacred category set apart from everyday life. Religion infuses everyday practice."[3] And the other way round, I would like to add.

This occurrence of divergent answers to the question of "influence" emanates, in the first place, from the broad spectrum of meanings of the concept of "influence": impacted change from dialogue or unilateral borrowing, unilatral defence, but also influence as result of common (educational, cultural or epistomological) milieu or "coincidence" of unrelated developments in similar direction or as different answers on similar questions, guided by "Zeitgeist" or "Spirit of the Age".[4] Hence, conceptualization issues will have to be adressed (see below). Within this spectrum a brief discussion of some specific questions, in the second place, suffice to illustrate appropiately this wide divergency of answers to the question of "influence". A first specific question concerns (whether or not) the Christian apologetics and theologizing contributed to Muslim theology and (whether or not) this occurred through conscious, Islamic borrowing, that brought about a certain maturation of early Islamic theology in its first phase, as, amongst others, Casper H. Becker has argued. This assertion is shared by many scholars.[5] Yet, Sarah Stroumsa, in a study on the signs of prophethood in early Islamic theology, stipulates the existence of two camps in regard of the roots of Islamic theology: "[...] those who see early Islamic theology as a product of the encounter with Christian theology, and those, who, without denying certain influences, emphasize the independence of Muslim thought and regard *Kalam* as a genuine, original reflection of the inner development of Islam".[6] It is this latter view that may have brought David Thomas to his conclusion that the development of Islamic theology was unaffected by kinds of cross-effects: "So it can be seen that Muslims

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3 Youshaa Patel, *Muslim Distinction: Imitation and the Anxiety of Jewish, Christian and Other Influences* (diss. Duke University, 2012), iv.

4 Becker, 'The Comparative Study', 91.

5 C.H. Becker, 'Christliche Polemik und islamische Dogmenbildung', *Zeitschrift fur Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archeologie* 26.1 (1912) 175-195.

throughout the early ‘Abbasid era almost unanimously regarded Christian doctrines as deficient and inferior to their own”, and that the sources suggest “that relations between theological practitioners were never cooperative and possibly never cordial”.[7] Or, to take an example from the other end of the spectrum: was the process “influence” mainly conscious cross-fertilization, as Seppo Rissanen has it: “ […] a productive reciprocal action in which both sides have developed new models for interpreteting their religious characteristics”.[8] In the same vein, speaking about the way forward in present day Christian-Muslim relations, Mar Bawai Soro, bishop of the Church of the East in California (U.S.), referred to the *Apology* of Timothy I (r. 780-823): “ […] for Timothy dialogue is also witnessing, namely, while he stayed true to the pearl of his faith he also honored the language and culture of the people he dialogued with”.[9]

Relevant Questions in the Early Abbasid Period

As these examples suggest, there is relevance in an examination of the nature and causes of interactions becoming “influences”. Furthermore, the early Abbasid era is eminently suitable to situate in such examination. The ascent of the Abbasid rule (750 CE onward) shaped and accelerated several

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6 Sarah Stroumsa, ‘The Signs of Prophesy: The Emergence and Early Development of a Theme in Arabic Theological Literature’, *Harvard Theological Review* 78 (1985) 101-114.

7 David Thomas, ‘Early Muslim Responses to Christianity’, in idem (ed.), *Christians at the Heart of Islamic Rule: Church Life and Scholarship in ‘Abbasid Iraq* (Leiden 2003), 253-272.

8 Seipo Rissanen, *Theological Encounter of Oriental Christians with Islam During Early Abbasid Rule* (Åbo, 1993), 18.

9 Mar Bawai Soro, ‘The Contribution of Mesopotamian Christianity During the Abbasid Period’, in Dietmar W. Winkler (ed.), *Syriac Churches Encountering Islam: Past Experiences and Future Perspectives* (Piscataway 2010), 108.

processes.[10] It created a new capital, Baghdad; it transformed the Sassinidian court culture into a a distinctive, strong and important typical Abbasid court culture; it tapped from the Persian culture, Sassanidian political and administratative practices and societal hierarchization in its embarking on centralization and unification; it made Arabic the lingua franca of the Near and Middle East; it gave further impetus and content to the process of Islamization; it employed elite patronage of professional talent, irrespective of its religious or ethnical allegiance, in particular from Persian Khurasan and Transoxania- (amongst whom many Christian professionals) and its early Caliphs (in particular: al-Mansur (745-775), al-Mahdi (775-785), Harun al-Rashid (786-809) and al-Mamun (813-833)) were in, amongst others, intellectual and religious respect ambitious.[11] All in all, it gave rise to an era of intellectual (theological, philosophical, scientific and legal) flourishment.[12] Hoyland coined these particular processes as: "[...] a kind of enlightment [...], (that) made Iraq of the ninth and tenth centuries a centre of lively alcerations amongst Jews, Christians, Muslims, Zoroastrians, Manichaeans and pagan philosophers over the nature of truth and knowledge ".[13] What applies to the philosophers, applies to their theological branch equally. Religiously and intellectually, there was a thriving intellectual and scientific climate and it was a highly competitive world.

A competitiveness and intellectual appetite that were equally fuelled, as we shall see below, by processes of religious/tribal "sectarianism" within

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10 Robert G. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs: From the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam* (London 2001), 246.

11 Robert G. Hoyland, *In God's Path: The Arab Conquests and the Creation of an Islamic Empire* (Oxford 2015), 247.

12 David Thomas, 'A Mu'tazili Response to Christianity: Abu 'Ali al-Jubba'i's Attack on the Trinity and Incarnation', in R.Y. Ebied and H. Teule (eds.), *Studies on the Christian Arabic Heritage*. *FS Samir Khalil Samir S.I.* (Leuven 2004), 279-313.

13 Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 13; Princeton 1997), 457.

each separate community and between certain communities. Though in differing measure of intensity, there was no community that was not beset by internal intellectual or theological controversies. Inextricably intertwined as these “secular” tribal developments were with the peripherous frontier-locality, close to the rival empires of Byzantium (for instance: Caucasus) or China (for instance: Transoxania and Turkestan), they gave further dynamics to the center-periphery relations and tensions and were engendering waves of religious and clergical fervour and disputes as well. For instance, according to a study of the contemporary encounters between such “secessionist” communities and the secular and religious centers, the Abbasid-Byzantine frontier zone was “[…] a confluence of intellectual ideas and dualist beliefs”.[14] These tensions posed challenges to the clerical leaders of the churches or umma concerned as to the secular rulers, i.e. the Caliphal elite, as we will see below. Interestingly, concomitant with these tensions the East Syrians, the Church and many of its monasteries, were renowned for their missionary zeal; it brought its missionaries along the many silk roads beyond the boundaries of the Abbsid caliphate into the heart of imperial China in the first place, but also into Egypt and Syria. In our era, the secular and clergical-ecclesiastical power relations and the disputational, identity-enhancing and identiy-mobilizing potential of “religion” were inseparable. And the elites needed it badly, was it alone because the spectre of further conversion of the common people hung menacing above them.

Since the focus of my paper is on Christian-Muslim relation, it is crucial to note that the processes of community bonding and of fracticiousness were not confined to these two large communities. Jewish tribal and urban communities, Manichean-Persian communities, Gnostic communities, Bardainasites, Mandeans, Sabeans, Paulicians and Messalians, amongst others, each had its own interest, depending on the circumstances, to employ religious teaching to mobilize, and distinct the identity of, its own community. Likewise, Caliphal concern with tribal fracticiousness in frontier

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14 Abed el-Rahman Tayyara, ‘Muslim-Paulician Encounters and Early Islamic Anti-Christian Polemical Writings’, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 27 (2016), 471-489.

areas fuelled, from time to time, the religious Muslim discourse on the perils of *Zandiqa*, i.e. all those religious beliefs that (in the eyes of the Muslim *umma*) had a dualist worldview or cosmology in denial of the all important Qur'anic teaching of the oneness and otherness of God (*tahwid*), as they saw it.

Intellectual Tradition, Transmission and Transformation in and Between Distinct (Religious) Communities

Within each religious community, the Christian and Muslim communities amongst others, the engagements with intellectual-religious issues were pursued intensely and actively and they figured high on the societal and ecclesiastical agenda of their respective elites. This effloresence manifested itself in writings along a wide variety of literary *genres*: apologies and polemics, summae theologicae, catenea, martyriologies, apocalypses, doctrinal treatises amongst others.[15] Each community had its own, particular, different tradition of scriptural exegesis, theological and intellectual methodologies and different ways and institutions of *intra*-community transmission.[16] At the same time, however, for all the "indigeousness" of these processes and their ïnterconnectedness within the cultural fabric of the respective communities, of the traditions and ways of life, in important respects the respective engagement with religious issues, the respective employment of philosophical or analytical methods, the respective exegetical uses of scriptural and other sources, and of style and tone of voice appeared to show all the grey colours of intellectual processes, varying from *paralell* developments to intellectual *interaction* and, eventually, "*influence*" of each other. Is it plausible that Wisnovsky *et al.*'s

15 Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton 2008), 75ff.

16 Robert Wisnovsky, Faith Wallis, Jamie C. Fumo and Carlos Fraenkel, 'Vehicles of Transmission, and Transformation in Medieval Textual Culture', in eidem (eds.), *Vehicles of Transmission, Translation, and Transformations in Medieval Textual Culture* (Cursor Mundi 4; Turnhout 2011), 14.

description of the Middle Ages apply simarlily to the early Abbasid era: “Jewish, Christian and Islamic communities in the Middle Ages all engaged in broadly similar processes of selecting particular texts, ideas, information, and literary forms and content from antiquity, translating these materials (directly, or through an intermediary language), and transforming them into something useful and meaningful to their particular cultural contexts.”[17]

What kind of engagements, interaction and “influences’ can we detect when examining two apologetical writings from the East Syrian community and compare our findings with two contemporary Islamic polemical writings in the early ‘Abbasid era (780-850)?

The Primary Sources

First, the examination will focus on the East Syrian authors:

(1) the Apology and certain letters of Catholicos Timothy I (r. 780-823),[18] and

(2) *Kitab al-Burhan*, the Book of Proof, of ‘Ammar al-Basri[19] (probably d. c. 860).

These two authors represent the teaching of the East Syrian tradition in the apologetical genre.

As for the Islamic traditions, I will make use of the following Islamic apologetic writings:

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17 Wisnovsky, *Transmission*, 2.

18 Martin Heimgartner (ed.), *Timotheos I., ostsyrischer Patriarch: Disputation mit dem Kalifen al-Mahdi* (CSCO 631-632; Leuven 2011); Martin Heimgartner (ed.), *Die Briefe 42-58 des ostsyrischen Patriarchen Timotheos I.* (CSCO 644-645; Leuven 2012).

19 Michael Hayek, *‘Ammar al-Basri, apologie et controverses* (Beyrouth 1977), not consulted; Wageeh Y.F. Mikhail, ‘*Ammar al-Basri’s* Kitab al-Burhan*: A Topical and Theological Analysis of Arabic Theology in the Ninth Century* (diss. University of Birmingham 2013), Appendix III: Translation *Kitab al-Burhan*.

(3) al-Qasim ibn Ibrahim al-Rassi (d. 860), *Radd 'ala al-thalath firaq min al-Nasara*;[20]
(4) Abu Yusuf al-Kindi (d., *Radd 'ala al-thalath firaq min al-Nasara.*[21]

The selection of these Islamic apologetics is guided by the individuality of each of these apologists. To begin with, in al-Qasim we have a Shi'ite, Zaydi thinker, the other being proto-Sunnite. Al-Kindi is, primarily, highly renowned as the first philosopher of the Islamic world, a field that was closely connected to early Islamic theology, as we shall see in the discussion below. Both represent a certain individuality. In the examination of their writings I will relate my findings with apologetics of the contemporary theologian Abu 'Isa al-Warraq.

The Research Questions

The examination of the sources concern two related issues of the Christian-Islamic debate: (i) the oneness of God *(tahwid*) in the light of the Qur'anic references to attributes of God (amongst others, sura 4.171), wherein God is speaking, hearing etc.; and (ii) the Christian doctrine of the Trinity: God is of one substance or essence and three hypostases (God, Word and Spirit) and (ii) the criteria for prophethood/Muhammed and the divine-human nature of Jesus in their interrelation.

The examination of apologetic writings will address two aspects of such writings: (i) doctrinal content, and (ii) exegetical or argumentative methods .[22]

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20 Thomas, 'Early Muslim Responses', 231; David Thomas, *Anti-Christian Polemic in Early Islam: Abu 'Isa al-Warraq's "Against the Trinity"* (University of Cambridge Oriental Publications 45; Cambridge 1992), with extensive description of al-Qasim's *Radd.*

21 Extensive quotations from translation into French in: A. Périer, 'Un traité de Yahya ben Adi: Défense du dogme de la Trinité contre les objections d'al-Kindi', *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien* 22 (1920-21) 3-21.

22 Ernestine van der Wall, 'Ways of Polemicizing: The Power of Tradition in Christian Polemics', in T.L. Hettema and A. van der Kooij (eds.), *Religious*

The eventual purpose of these exercises is to examine the accuracy of two scholarly claims. First, the claim that in the development of the early Abbasid East Syrian apologetic and theological literature traces of "influence" from Islamic theology to the East Syrian theological discourse can be determined.[23] Second, the claim that early Abbasid Islamic doctrines and argumentative strategies were shaped independently and only within the Muslim tradition.[24]

Polemics in Context (Assen 2004), 401-414.

23 Amongst others, Sara Leila Husseini, *Early Christian Explanations of the Trinity in Arabic in the Context of Muslim Theology* (diss. University of Birmingham 2011), 401.

24 Thomas, 'Early Muslim Responses', 253.

Chapter 2

Methodological Issues

The Methodology of Comparison

An significant issue of "method" emanates from the very nature of this *comparative* inquiry. It makes it necessary to compare intellectual/theological concepts and methods of argumentation from the one community with those of the other community. While "comparison" is the bread-and-butter of historical inquiries, particularly in the field of religious studies (historical or anthropological) it has become charged with various scholarly controversies on methodology over the last few decades.[25] The controversies concern, amongst others, the threatening flaws in overemphasizing similarities and the neglect of the meanings of a religious phenemenon within the context of its own, original world.[26] The controversies were fuelled by accusation of Orientialism in Western scholarship, in particular in relation to Christian-Islam comparisons.

Clearly, the kind of examination of this paper makes my examination susceptible to such reproaches. In particular, the last two steps of the three steps of my my examination – is there a novelty to the tradition, is this novelty an instance of interaction and, if so, is it attributable to "influence" from the other – needs *conscious* comparison.

In important aspects, the issues of this scholarly controversy impinges directly on my inquiry. First, to look, in regard of the doctrine of the Trinity and the attributes of God, for novelties in their doctrinal developments and influences between Islamic and East Syrian intellectuals runs serious risks of abstractions which would favour the inclination to overemphasize

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25 See (for instance) Claude Campare and Bruce Lincoln (eds.), *Comparer en histoire des religions antiques: Controverses et propositions* (Liège 2012).

26 David M. Friedenreich, 'Comparisons Compared: A Methodological Survey of Comparisons of Religion From "A Magic Dwells" to *A Magic Still Dwells*', *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 16 (2004) 80-101.

similarities; such at the expense of the respective intellectual contexts in their original world. Chapter 3 on [..] is an attempt to address this risk. Second, comparing intellectual concepts and modes of argumentation tends to become timeless; I will be attentetive for the impacts of the passage of time. Third, “influence” is a multi-faceted, if not slippery concept. What we will find in our examination is engagement and interaction with ideas of the other. These interaction may amount to an *effect* on the other. Then the examination has several foci. At first, how are the processes of awareness formation? Then, how is the traject from (the context of) the one “ donating” the idea to that of the other “receiving” it; and, is the reception defensive only or appropriative as well; and, although the apologist has an audience in mind, in addition to the reception by that audience, has the “donation” an unintended effect, in substance or audience?[27] These foci wil return at the appropiate time in the course of my examination below. Finally, for all these reasons, Friedenrech’s advise to compare “[..] *multiple religious traditions only after examining them in their original context”* (Friedenreich’s italics) is to the point.[28] It is what I set out to do.

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27 David Frankfurter, ‘Comparison and the Study of Religions of Late Antiquity’, in Campare and Lincoln (eds.), *Comparer en histoire des religions antiques*, 87; James E. Montgomery, ‘Islamic Crosspollinations’, in Anna Akosoy *et.al*. (eds.), *Islamic Crosspollinations: Interactions in the Medieval Middle East* (Exeter 2007), 173-175.

28 Friedenreich, ‘Comparisons Compared’, 80-101.

Chapter 3

Distinctive Trajectories: The Intellectual Roads to Abbasid Baghdad's Theological/Philosophical Arenas

Introduction

Along which trajectories got the intellectual elite of East Syrian community and the Muslim intellectual elites into interaction? We need a closer look at the (intellectual-)historical trajectories that brought each of them up to the start of the early Abbasid era (from c. 780-860). What shaped their intellectual-religious discourse and traditions along their respective roads? The purpose of this exercise is not to present a comprehensive intellectual and cultural historiography. This chapter is concerned with those features of their trajectories that, in my opinion, were formative for their religious-intellectual outlook, discourse and the ways they projected and percieved their identities, amongst others by engaging themselves with the other's religious-theological tenets.

First, the first (common) feature is the importance they attributed to "religion". *Second*, this chapter discusses the difference in "seniority" of the Christian faith compared to the Islamic faith. Whenever the beginnings of what was to become the Qur'anic faith must be dated, it is safe to say that the roots of the Christian belief dates longer back. *Third,* it focusses on certain peculiarities of the Christian trajectories. Once the proto- and early Christian communities, in different forms of doctrine and worshipping practices, were put to the task to interpret fully the meaning of the introduction of a threefold God (God, Word and the Spirit) and the double nature (divine and human) of Jesus. *Fourth*, this chapter outlines the christological controversies which caused, amongst others, the "sectarization" of the Christian church and, eventually, the emergence of the Church of the East as a separate community. *Fifth,* it delineates, the efflorescence of Islamic beliefs and intellectual pursuits, of philosophical and theological teachings and, of the vibrancy and controversialistc nature of the

cultural and scientific climate in the later Umayyad (626- 750) and the earliest Abbasid era. The coda of this chapter is the relevancy for, and the impacts on the the shapes and frames of the inter-faith intellectual interaction.

The Importance of Religion

For both the Muslim and the Christian communities the sphere of religion and theology was of paramount and overriding importance. As for the Muslim Caliphate: its religion, as they saw it, was the ultimate faith, destined to supersede each predecessing Christian faiths, its scripture, the Qur'án, the final word of God and its Caliphal rulers claimed comprehensive political and religious supremacy over all of its inhabitants. In contrast to this claim, however, the Islamic faith was, on average and in most regions, a minority religion for a long time.[29] As for the Christians: once from the first half of the fourth century onward Christianity became *the* religion of the East-Roman empire (Byzantium) Christians reckoned their Christianity to be God's own faith, superior to other (in their eyes) "pagan" beliefs. As Christianity, eventually, became the state religion of the Byzantine empire, it was, in the eyes of the imperial and clerical leaders, the "victorious", universal faith by the grace of God. This primacy of "religion" got a different, but special importance for those Christian communities that as Miaphysite community (i.e. Syrian Orthodox in Syria, Egypt and North Mesopotamia) and as Dyophysite community (i.e. Church of the East in Persia and Mesopotamia) branched off from the Byzantine Greek Orthodoxy church (as the Byzantines saw it). For those communities, it was not the rule of a secular prince, but the rule of their Christian denominational church and its ecclesiastical and secular (Christian) elites that forged the community bonds and shaped the community's identity. The conquest by, and the ascent of new rulers, the Arab Umayyads (from 625-750) and, subsequently, the Arab Abbasids (from

29 Hoyland, *In God's Path*, 35.

750 onward) and the emergence of Islam as new monotheistic religious competitor, professing to worship the same God and claiming their teachings to prevail over all predecessing beliefs, not only created serious risk of apostasy, but posed an imminent threat to communal identity as well.

East Syrian "Seniority" and Islamic "Infancy" in Theological Affairs

Christian communities shared (with some differences) with the Jewish communities the scriptures, which the Jews called the Torah and the Christians the Old Testament. Accordingly, as embedded in these scriptures, both faith communities considered the monotheistic (Abrahamic) concept of the oneness and otherness of God as one of their defining characteristics.[30] Scripturally, it was the God of the Torah about Whom was spoken in such terms for the first time. Each faith community, in its own ways, used this concept, amongst others, to distinguish itself, (in its own opinion:) fundamentally, from (in their own eyes:) "sects" or "heresies" like Zorastrianism, Manicheaism, Gnostic-type beliefs and Marcionism, amongst others. The Jewish community employed it against the Christian communities, once these (originally Jewish) communities shaped their religious identity more and more along the teachings of the Christian New Testament Importantly, the precise meaning of this concept varied; it varied in the fulness of time, used as it was by different faith communities in different circumstances with distinctive objectives, and it varied in the measure of absoluteness or exclusivity attributed to the meaning of "oneness" of God. Nevertheless, this monotheistic tenor was to drive and colour the discussions of the Christian theologians and their overlords. As for the early Christian communities, their intellectual elites became embroiled in complex controversies, ensuing from the teachings of the Gospels, as they were used and reworked by theological treatises on the relations (within one divinity) between God in his oneness and otherness, Jesus Christ as the Word

30 Michael Philip Penn, *Envisioning Islam: Syriac Christians and the Early Muslim World* (Philadelphia 2015), 95.

and the Son of God and the Spirit, espousing these teachings over humanity; controversies, which, in addition, were marred by concomitant ecclesiastical issues between the bishopric sees of Antiochia, Alexandria, Constantinopel and Rome. Many an ecclesiastical council, beginning with the council of Nicea (325) and culminating in the council of Chalcedon (456), and numerous apologetic treatises were the *fora* and *rostra* upon which the intra-Christian debates were staged. Invariably, the tensions between the concept of "oneness" of God, the teaching of three aspects of one divinity within one Godhead and the doctrine of divinity of Christ were the issue. Emanating from these controversies, inextricably intertwined as they became with the military and political clashes between Byzantium and the Sassanid empire, the eastern Christian churches ended up in splitting up themselves in antigonistic, if not sectarian communities, defined by their respective theological position in these controversies, the Christological in particular. The point is not to discuss these processes thoroughly. The point is to appreciate that the Christian communities had centuries of religious acrinomious controversies and institutional fragmentation behind themselves, once, in the Arabian parts of the Middle East, a new religious community was emerging to become Islam. Dimitri Gutas writes, "The Christians and Jews, though from a legal perspective they had an unambiguous social standing and thus presented no political threat, were nevertheless formidable intellectual opponents with centuries of experience in inter-faith debate".[31]

Umayyad and Earliest Abbasid Religio-Intellectual Developments

Where the Christian world could rely on long-standing established fundament, the Islam had challenges in front of itself. As Sabine Schmidtke and Gregor Schwarb put it: "[…] Islam had to come up with its own coherent account of religious beliefs in order to consolidate its aspiration and to

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31 Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early 'Abassid Society (2nd-4th/8th-10th centuries)* (London 1998), 61-69.

secure its cognitive appeal". Arab rulers and Muslim elites embarked on the formation of substantative and argumentative underpinnings of their religious tenets as set they interpreted them from the Qur'an, amongst others, to uphold these at par with its non-muslim communities. As, for instance, David Thomas points out: "[…] we repeatedly find writings against Jews, Zoroastrians, Christians and others, either responses to attacks or arguments to provoke in their turn. This fact alone demonstrates the close involvement of Muslims with the religious ideas of others, and suggests that they sought to defend the integrity of their own faith by exposing the inadequacy of others."[32]

Importantly, though they were undisputedly the political and societal masters, the Muslim elites did not confine themselves to underscore the unacceptability of the Christian faiths (and others), they argued vigorously to demonstrate the logical and philosophical superiority of Islam.[33] In the succinct phrasing of David Thomas: "This is polemical argument in the service of theological exposition rather than (though not necessarily in contradiction to) devaluation of rival religions ".[34] The Muslim elites were determined, not only to *profess* the superiority of Islam, but to develop and appropiate by themselves the necessary *doctrinal and exegetical underpinning and argumentative skills* and strategies to back up that claim and to uphold it against refutations by other religious communities, Christian in the first place, as well.[35] What was it that brought about these new balance?

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32 David Thomas, 'Dialogue with Other Faiths as an Aspect of Islamic Theology', in T.L. Hettema and A. van der Kooij (eds.), *Religious Polemics in Context* (Assen 2004), 93-109, on 94-95.

33 Thomas, 'Dialogue', 98; see also: Abdelmajid Charfi, 'La fonction historique de la polémique islamochrétienne à l'époque abbaside', in Samir Khalil Samir and Jørgen S. Nielsen (eds.), *Christian Arabic Apologetics during the Abbasid Period (750-1258)* (Leiden 1984), 44-56.

34 Thomas, 'Dialogue', 98.

35 Gutas, *Greek Thought*, 61.

It was the Umayyad Caliph, ‘Abd al-Malik (r. 685-705), who accellerated and intensified the policies of Arabization and Islamization, that, put simply, tranformed the scattered plethora of many and diverse regions under Umayyad military control into an empire with a higher degree of civil and administrative central control. As Hoyland puts it:” A crucial aspect of this transformation was the conversion of the conquered population to Islam. Thus, Islam acted as a medium whereby non-Arabs could join the conquest elite and consequently play a role in shaping its culture and ideology.”[36] To be sure, this process of conversion, in the first place, was certainly not confined to Christian, let alone, East Syrian communities. It affected evenly Zoroastrian-Persian communities, and, less, Jewish communities. Second, though the conversion process comprised many non-Muslims on a large scale, in several aspects it was an ambigious process. Ambigious in the motivations, which varied from social advancement, release from the special poll-tax (*jiyhaz*) owed by non-muslim Jewish and Christian communities as “protected” people of the Book and genuine attraction of the faith of the Muslims. Ambigious as well, as will be discussed below, because in important social relations (family, marriage) converts held open the possibility of reconversion.[37]

New Religious Dimensions in Later Umayyad and Earliest Abbasid Intellectual Endeavours

Concomitant and entwined with the late Umayyadian inception of Islamization and centralization and their consolidation and intensification in the earlier days of the Abbasid rule, these processes of the Abbasid empire and society showed themselves in the religious-intellectual sphere as well. First, in different ways, the early Abbasid Caliphs pursued and upheld the

36 Hoyland, *In God’s Path*, 158.

37 Christian C. Sahner, ‘Swimming against the Current: Muslim Conversion to Christianity in the Early Islamic Period’, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 136 (2016) 265-284.

religious aspirations of the Caliphate. For instance, Caliph al-Mahdi's *jihad* against "*zandiqi's*", targeting all kinds of "dualist" beliefs, Zoroastrian communities in the first place and others. Caliph al-Mamun, as another example intervened in the debates between the *mutakallimun* (the *kalam* dialectical theologians, see below) and the *muhaddithun* (the traditionist theologians, denying that reason can offer solutions in questions pertaining to the nature and knowledge of God) on the issue of the created or revelatory nature of the *Qur'an*. Political Caliphal rule and Caliphal Muslim-religious aspirations were inseparably intertwined.

In addition, the further development of '*ilm al kalam,* the Islamic theology that employed the dialectical (i.e. in question-and answer or dilemmical format), rational-speculative (as opposed to the theologies of purely revelatory teachings) theology created breeding grounds for theological refinement and maturation; a development that institutionalized itself, amongst others, in the appearance of dialectical *mu'tazili* "schools" of theology. Though their habitual disputational characteristic firmly seem to suggest that this (first known) branch of Islamic theology originated in disputing other beliefs (i.e. the unbeliever), in present day scholarly debate is showing, its origins are seriously disputed. According to Joseph van Ess, the kalam-style Islamic theology had a purely *intra*-Islamic origin.[38] Since then, various scholars, amongst them Micheal Cook and Jack Tannous, have argued that the early Muslim theologians derived their kalam-style of reasoning from certain Miaphysite christianized Arab tribes in the Iraqi Kufa region in the late seventh and early eight centuries. Their tentative conclusion is that, plausibly, these Miaphysite Arabs may have functioned as a conduit of the transmission of the kalam-style in Islamic Arab milieu.[39] If

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38 Josef van Ess, 'The Beginnings of Islamic Theology', in: J.E. Murdoch and E.D. Sylla (eds.), *The Cultural Context of Medieval Learning* (Dordrecht 1975), 87-111, on 101, as cited in: Alexander Treiger, 'Origins of Kalam', in Sabine Schmidtke (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology* (Oxford 2016), 27-43, on 28.

39 Treiger, 'Origins', 31.

further corroborated, it would constitute an interesting example of intercommunal “influence” and “appropiation”.

However, to take this kalam-style Islamic theology as *the* representation of the early Abbasid religio-theological picture would be erroneous. For one, Mu’tazili theology, both in origin as in content, had as much to do with early Islamic debates on free will versus determinism as with the kalam-style techniques. Further, *kalam* style-theological discourse may have been dominant in the intellectual hotspots of Baghdad, Basra and Kufa in certain phases of the early Abbasid era, but in no phase it enjoyed an intellectual monopoly. It had staunch adversaries in the various branches of the A’shari theological schools. Their traditionalist view held the unique revalatory character if the Qur’an as word of God that cannot be corrupted by human interference. Further, its dominance was significantly more modest, if not absent, in the various non-Sunni branches of Islam that flourished in parts of the empire. To the Shi’ite communities, each with its distinctive religious or theological colours, in South Iraq, Upper Egypt or Yemen, the appeal of the dialectical-rational traits of the mu’tazili schools was not that strong. The same goes for the Karaite branches. Add the various schools of law, and it is clear that diversity, rivalry and controversy *intra* Islam was, likely, the most distinguishing feature of the religio-theological discourses in Islam. So, while there are important commonalities between Christian question-and- answer style apologies and Islamic kalam-style theological apologies, it is prudent to keep awareness of the relativity of the position of the Muta’zili school and not to arrive too easily and unconditionally to the conclusion that this kind of Christian-Muslim discourse is representative for *the* kind of intellectual interaction and their suggested commonality of method as *dialogue*.[40] This does not diminish that the kalam-style theology strongly contributed to the development and maturation of the apologetical writings by Islamic theologians and other Muslim professionals. Given the same state of affairs in the East Syrian communities, they both came well-armoured to the Abbasid arena!

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40 See for instance: Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow*, 96.

The Trinitarian and Christological Controversies and the Emergence of the Church of the East

Having charted some important features of the Muslim trajectories along which their theological elites progressed in their way to the “arena” of the early Abbasid interfaith interactions, what features were characteristic for the East Syrian communities on their trajectory?

Though embedded in, and fostered by various ecclesiastical and political power rivalries, it were the uses of doctrinal controversies that gave the development of the Christian church the push into a salient feature, i.e. its doctrinal and institutional disintegration. In the second to fourth century, they culminated in the controversy how to reconcile the doctrine of the Trinity and the monotheistic tenet of the oneness and otherness of God. It was resolved in the compromise, doctored under the pressure of emperor Constantine at the council of Nicea (325), that God, the Word and the Holy Spirit were, as three aspects, of one substance. This compromise was ill-fated. It gave rise to centuries-long controversies on the “nature” of the figure of Jesus, as projected in the New Testament, in particular in the Gospel of John. Put short: was he of two natures in that his divinity and humanness were merged in one person (“Chalcedonian” position of the Greek-Byzantine and Melkite communities); or that in those natures the divinity fundamentally absorbed, and prevailed over his humanness (the Miaphysite position of the Syrian Orthodox Church and the Egyptian Church); or that his two natures were not mixed or mingled in his person until his ascension (the Dyophysite position of the Church of the East); or that he was mere human with a special relation with God (the position of the Qur’an). Intertwined with these intellectual discussions were political (Byzantine-Sassanidian rivalries), regional (autonomy from Byzantium in Egypt and Syria) and cultural (Greek philosophical influences) factors and developments. These processes and developments produced deep intellectual, theological and ecclesiastical divisions and rivalries in the Middle Eastern Christian world. By the time of the onset of the Arab conquest, the Christian world consisted of several,

different church communities: Byzantine or Greek-Orthodox (Byzantium), the Syrian-Orthodox (present-day Syria and Mesopotamia), Melkite (Levant) and the Church of the East (present-day West Iran and Iraq (including Mesopotamia). It took schisms, excommunications, expulsions and many ecclesiastical councils before this outcome took shape at the council of Chalcedon (451). And the frissures were unabatedly deep and the denominational mistrust remained very much alive between the various Christian communities, also once the larger part of the Christian world was under Arab rule. For instance, in the second part and first quarter of the seventh centuries, it happened that the Syrian Orthodox made headway in the Mosul region, well into the East Syrian heartland. Characteristically, it ignited rivalries in many respects, in particular in vying for the patronage of the Sassanian Shah. Their traditional liason with the Sasanian in jeopardy, to win back the favour of the Shahanian court the Church of the East ecclesiastical elites were not shy willing to contemplate to abandon the traditional, defining East Syrian christological tenet of the principal division of the human and divine nature of Jesus Christ.[41]

In a way, this political adroitness of the East Syrian elite manifested itself in several other aspects as well. Following the policies of his immediate predecessors, Timotheus I was succesfully active in missionary expeditions, in particular eastward along the silk roads. The church of the East grew importantly in dioceses and bishopries. The East Syrians benefitted from the large resevoir of monks that lived and practised in the monateries. Despite Sassanian and Arabian overlords, in the seventh and eight centuries the many monasteries were founded, in particular along the southern Persian Gulf regions. Its intellectuals, phycisians or translators, not only stood in high repute, several of them were evenly adroit as political influence peddlers of high calibre. Its communities were certainly not in decline at the time that the early Abbasid era saw the intellectual Christian-Muslim interactions to unfold themselves.

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41 Marijke Metselaar, *Defining Christ: The Church of the East and the Nascent Islam* (diss. Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam 2016), 377.

The Syrian Culture and Language as Vehicle for Transmission of Ideas and Knowledge

In contrast to the above emphasis on divisiveness in the Christian world of the Near and Middle East, the Syrian culture and language performed in the period from early Christianity until the Arabian conquest and important integrative services to the Christian communities and the Eastern Christian communities in particular. Situated at the intersection of the Semitic and the Greek world, it played a significant part in the transmission of ideas and knowledge over the boundaries of these worlds.[42] For the purposes of this paper I would like to point to the following aspects.

First, as a dialect of the Eastern Aramaic language family, spreaded from Edessa across Northern Syria and Mesopotamia, Syriac took the role of *lingua franca* of the larger parts of the Near and Middle Eastern region in the era from c. 200 up to 650. It was spoken across the Roman-Sassanidian border well into Persia. It became the carrier of translations of the Old and New Testament, which were widely utilized. Its authors produced influential compilations, commentaries and other scientific treatises. In the wake of the spreading of Christianity over these regions many monasteries were instituted. They were not only centers of ascetic contemplation, they were providing elementary education to the Christian youth and advanced training in biblical exegesis as well. In addition, several of these monasteries became hotspots of learning in a broad range of fields. Famously, the school of Nisibis was the “university” of the Syrian world. It is in Syriac that poets like Ephrem of Nisibis created the traditions of hymns and songs in the Eastern Syrian Churches. As common language Syriac was and remained an important bridge between the Miaphysite and Dyophysite communities after their split-up. As we will encounter him below, Catholicos Timothy I of the Church of the East requested the support of a fellow-bishop to get hold of certain manuscripts of a monastery of the rival Syrian Orthodox Church in

42 Lucas van Rompay, ‘The East (3): Syria and Mesopotamia’, in: Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies* (Oxford 2008), 365.

Takrit.[43] It was under the guidance of this Timotheus and his predecessor, Henayno, that the use of Syriac spreaded eastward along the silk roads into imperial China.

Second, the Syrian monasteries were actively pursuing the transmission of, and training in the various Greek sciences, varying from medicine, grammar and philosophy. As Hidemi Takahashi points out, highlighting this integrating role of the Syriac language and its culture, that this achievement of the Syrian language and culture is attributable to the receptivity of the Syrians of Greek language and sciences, both when under Byzantine rule and, subsequently, upon their establishing of autonomous churches independent from that same imperial Church.[44]

As the Syrian Christian world was oriented on, and connected with the classical Greek culture, its professionals in several fields as astronomy, astrology, medicine and administrative bureaucracy, were sought after by the Caliphal elites. For generations, certain Eastern Syrian Christian families served as the personal physicians of the Caliphal family and its courtiers. For centuries, the school of medicine of Gondeshapur (East Persia) was the breeding place of phycisians in the Sassanidian and, later on, the world of the Umayyads and Abbasids. Small wonder that Syrian professionals were to play an important in the so called translation movement: at the instigation of the Abbasid Caliphal court and elite virtually all of the ancient Greek philosophers (Aristoteles in the first place) and scientists (mathematics, historiography, geography, medicine, amongst others) got translated, often via a Syriac version, into Arabic.[45]

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43 Heimgartner, *Die Briefe*, 27-35.

44 Hidemi Takahashi, 'Syriac as Vehicle for Transmission of Knowledge across Borders of Empires', *Horizons* 5 (2014), 29-52.

45 Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom* (London [2]2005), 317.

The Ancient Roots of Disputation and the Birth of Christian-Islamic Apologetics

Controversialistic-apologetic practices have a long history in the Near and Middle East. As Patricia Crone puts it: "[...] disputation, a competitive sport of enormous popularity on both sides of the Euphrates both before and after the rise of Islam".[46] As for the Christian communities, the anti-Jewish polemic could be taken as the first in a long series of polemical letters, tratises, poetry and other writings. Arguably, this practice of putting it in disputational mode, i.e. in question-and-answer style, may have its roots in Greek classical literature.[47] At any rate, both the West as the East Syrian tradition ware well-versed in applying this disputational style.[48] The Christian disputational writings were directed against the Jewish community and faith in the first place, but also against Zoroasters, Manicheans and "pagan" beliefs.

The Christian elite was used to defend their religion before its non-Christian rulers, like the Persian-Sasanian Shahs.[49] Part and parcel of these well-honed argumentative techniques and tradition-shaped substantative tenets was to position the own denomination (Melkite, Syrian Orthodox or East Syrian) favourably against, and over the rivalling Christian denominations.[50] In the Sasanian era interference by the ruling Sasanian

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46 P. Crone, 'Excursus II: Ungodly Cosmologies', in Sabine Schmidtke (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology* (Oxford 2016),106.

47 Bas ter Haar Romeny, 'Question-and-Answer Collections in Syriac Literature', in Annelie Volgers and Claudio Zamagni (eds.), *Eratapokriseis: Early Christian Question-and-Answer Literature in Context* (Leuven 2004), 145-164.

48 Romeny, 'Question-and-Answer', 154.

49 Joel Walker, 'From Nisibis to Xi'an: The Church of the East in Late Antiqe Eurasia', in Scott Fitzgerald Johnson (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity* (Oxford 2012).

50 Walker, 'From Nisibis'.

elite with Christian eccesiastical affairs was frequent and strong, in the early Abbasid world with its courtly culture of patronage this was not different.[51] But in matters of substantative belief and its practices the Abbasid caliphate, like its Sasanian predecessor, kept distance, provided the Christian (and Jewish) communities paid, on top of other taxes, a special poll tax, and behaved with proper social and political deference towards the Muslim rulers and population (dhimmi status). With all their disputational experience, educational traditions and elaborated exegesis of the Christian Bible, in the early Abbasid era the Christian communities faced new challenges. As language Arabic replaced Greek and Syriac, the Abbasid intellectual ambitions thwarted the virtual monopoly of Christian educational efforts and structures. The Caliphal religious aspirations posed important and new challenges, particularly when the Baghdadian and Basrian intellectal efflorescence raised the intellectual calibre of religious and theological apologetics.

Not only the intellectual challenges rose, the communal and social stakes were high as well. Although the ecclesiastical leaders of the various Christian denominations lacked political power, it was the common religious tenets with long traditions that bound the community together and shaped its distinctive identity, in its own eyes and in the eyes of others. In addition, under the Abbasid dhimmi system, practically all important aspects of the lives of the common people were administered and adjudicated by them. In addition, as conversion (in various forms and guises) became socially and financially attractive, the ecclesiastical elites had increasing interest in keeping the ranks closed.

Class Distinctions: High and Low Culture

Those who examine, as I attempt to do in this paper, the contemporary meaning and use of written opinions and argumentations in the field of religion in the early Abbasid era face treacherous perils. The peril is not only

51 Michael G. Morony, *Iraq After the Muslim Conquest* (Princeton1984).

to disregard that these literary products were designed by intellectual members of the societal elites or that these literary products percolated down to the common people in credal statements, hymns and other "cultic" practices, it is in the first place having a blind eye to the prospensity of ecclesiastical and religious intellectual elites to thinking and writing along sharp , abstract and conceptual lines. On the ground, however, these boundaries were often blurred.[52]

To begin with, it is wrong to conceptualize *the* theology of "Islam" versus *the* theology of "East Syrian Christianity". Within the Islam communities, as we have seen, several important religious and power-related divisions and distinctions took shape. As for the East Syrian side, for instance, even regarding a crucial doctrine as the nature of Christ Nestorian theologians had divided opinions.[53] The intellectual scenes of the Middle East were fragmented, poly- centred and fluid. And the worlds of worshipping practices of the common believer were not different in this regard.

As a second example of blurring bounds, "secular" power relations were intertwined with religion. Abbasid Caliphs were projecting themselves as the God-sent guardians of the proper Muslim faith; not rarely in confrontation with those other guardians, the *ulema,* or the theologians of the *Mu'zalite* or *As'ari* doctrines or the *Shi'ite* preachers in some regions of the Caliphate. In the Christian Church of the East ecclesiastical relations this was not different. Both towards the lower clergy (and its parochies of the common beleievers), towards the lay elites and masses as towards the caliphal court, the relations were governed by a mix of religious-doctrinal and ecclesiastical- hierchical ingredients, while the objectives were a similar

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52 Albert F. de Jong, 'Zoroastrian Religious Polemics and Their Contexts: Interconfessional Relations in the Sasanian Empire', in T.L Hettema and A. van der Kooij (eds.), *Religious Polemics in Context* (Assen 2004), 48-63, on 51.

53 Metselaar, *Defining Christ*, 211.

mix of wordly (for instance: tax collection) and otherwordly (for instance: true religion) facets.[54]

As a third example of blurring bounds, we have to account for several "zones of contact" or "zones of conflict", where Nestorian Christians and Muslims mingled and interacted. In addition to the quotidian places of encounter, like the marketplace, at travel, in the courts and houses of caliphal elites, in the translation workshops, in the hospitals and the like. Take, for instance, the East Syrian monasteries. They were to Muslims not only suitable places for lodging when on travel, in the literary imagination of the Muslim elites, they were places in beautiful surroundings, were these elites liked to come to relax, drink wine and enjoy the company of young Christians.[55] Though allowance will have to be made for literary hyperbole, there very well may have been a kernel of truth in such descriptions. Furthermore, there were monasteries were Muslims worshipped along Christians. Sometimes to seek the services of monks to find treatment of physical ills, sometimes even to venerate the icon of a Christian saint.

Another, important "zone of contact" were family relations and conversions. Not only marriages between Muslims and Christians occurred, conversion of Christians to Islam was on the rise. Regularly, however, the convert kept the family ties with the rest of the Christian family. In some cases, the children in the mixed family reverted to the belief of the Church of the East. This important sphere of religious opaqueness and blurring find another illustration in the phenomenon of Umayyad and early Abbasid eras that Muslim families in Muslim minority regions (North Libanon, Upper Egypt and North Mesopotamia, amongst others) converted, openly or covertly to Christian faith, dominant in their region.[56]

It is against the backdrop of this estuary of partly concurring, partly opposing intellectual and societal currents that this paper adresses the issue

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54 Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar W. Winkel, *The Church of the East: A Concise History* (London 2003), 59.

55 Penn, *Envisioning Islam*, 36.

56 Sahner, 'Swimming against the current'.

of religious and intellectual interactions between the Abbasid Muslim world of elite intellectuals and their communities and the East Syrian clergy, its intellectuals and theologians, and their community: Was there anyone listening? The first step to listening is: awareness of the other’s opinions, followed by knowledge.

Chapter 4
The Formation of Awareness and Knowledge

I Introduction

The Formation of Awareness and of Knowledge of the Other's Teachings and Practices

As we have seen in chapter 3, at the inception of our period of examination (c. 780-860) both the East Syrian as the Islamic theologians wrote and taught in communities that were not completely compartimentalized. On the contrary, in several parts of the empire, rural in particular, where the level of lay catechesis was low and of illiteracy high, the bounderies between the communities were blurry. As Christian Sahner puts it: "[…] it was not always clear where the practice of one faith ended and the other one began. Theological uncertainty was compounded, in turn, by deep social and cultural similarities between the two populations, especially as the ranks of the Muslim community swelled with converts from non-Arab, non-Muslim backgrounds".[57] For instance, in several parts of Persian Mesopotamia the East Christian common populace believed in Jesus, not so much as (Son of) God, but as an important prophet and messenger from God.[58] As mentioned hereinabove, there were several other "zones of contact" as well. Furthermore, there is the linguistic homogenization amongst the various peoples of the caliphate, wherein, next or in replacement of the "native" language of each ethnic-linguistic community Arabic the dominant (but certainly not exclusive) unitary language (first half of the ninth century). It enhanced ideas and writings to pass ethnic-linguistic boundaries more freely. Thirdly, the increase in availibility of compilations of scriptures, sayings and

57 Sahner, 'Swimming against the Current', 266; note that the above quotation refers to the process of conversion from Christianity to Islam.

58 Jack B. Tannous, *Syria between Byzantium and Islam: Making Incommensurables Speak* (diss. Princeton University 2010), 435.

commentaries, of catalogues of writings within each community may have contributed to lowering the threshold to taking note of the other's opinions in Arabic.[59] Finally, within Islamic second-century Abbasid Baghdad and other urban societies, politically, scientifically, theologically and socially, there was a high level of intense strive and discourse. As Chase Robinson puts it: " In sum, what is characteristic of the "formative" period is of Islam is its very contentiousness, its controversies and unsettled questions. What constituted individual belief? How was one to know God's law? Where were the limits of community to be drawn? Who was to rule and by what qualifications? These and other questions were frequently asked, and although answers were given, they did not command broad agreement."[60] This multi-faceted and multi-issue Islamic Abbasid hotbed in itself propelled many Muslim intellectuals and others into higher states of discourse and writing; a process that in its effects reverberated over and beyond the boundaries of Muslim communities proper.[61] In sum, how each of these developments may have differed from one another, in combination they were conducive to create increasinly the permeability of community boundaries. Given this permeability, what, then, drove the level of *awareness and knowledge* of the other *specifically*?

In addition to the ubiquitous quotidian contacts in the streets and markets, it is two zones of contact that enhanced, in my opinion, the potentialities of higher and more precise awareness of the other's opinions and of its writings in particular. The first is conversion and the various forms conversionary processes took. The other is the essentially urban world of Christian professionals, dealing with their non-Christian colleagues and

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59 David Bertaina, 'The Development of Testimony Collections in early Christian Apologetics with Islam', in David Thomas (ed.), *The Bible in Arab Christianity* (The History of Christian-Muslim Relations 6; Leiden 2007), 151-174.

60 Chase Robinson, 'Conclusion: From Formative Islam to Classical Islam', in idem (ed.), *New Cambridge History of Islam*, volume 1 (Cambridge 2011), 683-695.

61 Thomas, *Anti-Christian polemic*, 32.

principals in the chancelleries and offices, in the hospitals, in the translation workshops, in the *majils* of the caliphal court and its courtiers etc.

Conversion was a multi-faceted process: it varied from region to region, from faith community to faith community, from social layer to social layer, from motive to motive and from period to period, in varying paces. The process, importantly, was spurred by the ideology of the Abbasid regime. As its fundamental claim was to create a commonwealth of Muslim citizens (as opposed to the Umayyad emphasis on Arabness) with equal rights and priviliges, it had to embark on policies to proselytizing Islam in order to underpin the Abbasid claim there was mass following of the Abbasid dynasty.[62] Hence "[…] the stage was set for confrontation between what the Abbasid establishment defined Islam and its opponents, as well as between Islam and the other religions […]."[63] According to Gutas, it prompted the Abbasid regime in exercising "social pressure" on the others to convert to Islam.[64]

For the large majority of conversions, particularly in the first century, in light of the blurred and low boundaries between Christian *worship* and early Muslim *worship* the step may have been not that revolutionary. As Tannous, writing with his focus on the first Arab century, puts it: "It was precisely because such a religious change was not so radical that it was easy and that conversion became increasingly common. Viewed from a (later) doctrinal perspective, a conversion to Islam may have represented quite a drastic step. One denied such central Christian beliefs as the Trinity and the divinity of Christ and one embraced a new prophet and a new scripture. If, however, we accept a model where being Muslim did not necessarily entail a large number of strong theological commitments and at the same time we jettison a view of what it meant to be a Christian in this period [..] and instead see Christianity as a commitment to certain shared symbols and

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62 Gutas, *Greek Thought*, 62.

63 Gutas, *Greek Thought*, 64.

64 Gutas, *Greek Thought*, 65.

rituals, the broad chasm people were crossing in their journey from Islam to Christianity begins to seem more like a slender crack in the earth. […] ”.[65] There is little reason to assume that in the second century this was seriously different, in particular, in the non-urban, peasant worlds. .

What, then, had conversion to do with “awareness” enhancement? Whatever form the particular conversion to Islam took, particularly when it concerned mixed-marriage, there remained certain family relations of the converted spouse and her children that entailed the involvement or applicability of Christian rules or customs (inheritance, orphanage, reconversion by children etc.). The realities on the ground of overlapping and opposing jurisdictions and customs on real life issues may well have impinged on the minds of Muslims and Christians alike; likely stronger than the customary doctrinal expositions.

But in general as well, the threat and the reality of the conversionary processes left strong impressions on the Christian clergy and the Islamic religious authorities. As for the Islamic side : the initial, Umayyadian indifference made place for the Abbasidian fostering of conversion and of Muslim patronage of converts to Islam. The Qur’anic imposition of the death penalty on apostacy from Islam underscored the policy of the Islamic religious elite to dishearten its believers from apostacy. To make the boundary fences as unimpregnable as possible And yet, despite the threat of this penalty (though not invariably executed), in the early centuries there are ample reports of reconversion or Muslims apostate to Christianity.[66]

It were the Christian communities, however, which were threatened to “suffer” the strongest from apostacy. For the purposes of this paragraph on the enhancing of “awareness” and knowledge of the other’s teachings and practices, it suffices to point to the rise of Christian martyrilogies, hagiographies and chronicles dealing with conversions.[67] For instance, the late eighth century, anonimous Chronicle of Zuqnin openly deplores the

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65 Tannous, *Syria*, 438.

66 Sahner, ‘Swimming against the Current’.

67 Penn, *Envisioning Islam*, 170.

pace and motives of conversion.[68] Taking its decriptions of the process at face value, in particular, the express renunciation of the key practices and tenets , show intimate knowledge of the others' belief and practices at a high level of awareness. Even allowing for clergical overemphasis on the doctrinal aspects, its level of knowledge is high.

In rural and city-dwellers classes, the conversion- driver was, particulary, the avoidance of the poll tax, the *jihyaz*, which was collected by the Muslim authorities additionally from Christians and other people of the Book, at the level of the higher class of the elite professional, it was the perspective of prestigious promotion into the higher echelons of Muslim society, that prompted them to apostatate. Here, the effect on enhancing of "awareness" and knowledge of the other was even more immediate: their Muslim counterparts got the opportunity to learn of Christianity's core practices and faith tenets from first hand witnesses.

At this professional level and in these elite circles in early Abbasid times there were ample opportunities for intellectual discourse and getting further and intimately acquainted with the other's teachings. Many East Syrian professionals were employed in Abbasid service as bureaucrat, as translator or in other intellectual occupations. In addition, at the higher levels of the East Syrian clergy and monks the administrative contacts with Abbasid officials were frequent. They participated in the "conferences" (*majils*) that, according to ancient traditions in Persia, the Abbasid caliphs and courtly elites organized to have scholars discuss intellectual, religious and scientific issues with, and in front of the courtly entourage.

In all these respects, there must have been , in a wide variety of formats and venues, ample opportunities in Christian-Muslim relations to get awareness and knowledge of the other's teachings and practices. At the level of rural areas, with their local clergy, the emphasis may have rested on aspects of worshipping and rituals. In the urban worlds, the oppurtunities were enhanced in the increase of written reports of inter- and intra –confessional disputations and comparable writings. As Gutas puts it: "A concrete indication of the significance of inter-faith disputation is provided

68 Penn, *Envisioning Islam*, 172.

by the disproportionately high number of apologetic and polemic treatises written in Arabic […]: the complete list of *known* (italics by Gutas, awk) Muslim and Christian polemical works written in Arabic alone, covering the period from […], prepared by R. Caspar and his colleagues runs for twenty-seven pages […].[69] To put this in perspective: not included are disputation reports in other languages, nor those pertaining to other religions than Islam and Christianity, as Manicheans. In sum, the awareness, likely, was fully present. Knowledge was a different matter. The kind of knowledge, which resulted from these awarenesses, were dependent on the disparate ways, along which awareness arose and transformed (or not) or got appropiated in (some sort of) knowledge. Oral versus written; unilateral treatise versus dialogical or dialectical debate. In our examination of our primary sources, I attempt to do justice, to the extent feasible, to these distinctions in the ways knowledge of the other was come about.

II. Timothy I's Apologetic Writings on the Trinity and the Attributes of God

Introduction

To examine whether, and if so, in which regard, in the period from Timothy's catholisate (780) until a century later, the East Syrian and Islamic theological intellectuals introduced change(s) to their respective doctrinal opinions and modes of argumentation, and whether, and if so, in which regard, these changes can be attributed to interaction that amounts to "influence" on the one from the other, we have to start with Timothy. First I will set out the East Syrian traditions on the Trinity. Next, I will introduce, briefly, the life and works of Timothy I.

I then turn to the apologetic writings of Timothy, outlining his two most important apologetic writings and their different nature. The heart of the next section attempts to flesh out which changes these writings of Timothy

69 Robert Caspar , 'Catalogue du dialogue islamo-chretien', *Islamo-Christiana* 1 (1975), 143-169.

doctrinal or argumentative, arguably, introduced. This exercise includes considerations to which audiences or readerships and with which purposes he may have designed the writings under examinations.

Further it is discussed with which objectives, arguably, Timothy contemplated as fitting a pure rational and philosophical underpinning, and whether this, alleged, innovation is the result of Islamic “influence”. My contention will be that, rather than borrowing or appropriating, these innovative developments are better understood as resulting from the independent concern to come to grips with the new importance of the consequences of monotheism.

The Tradition of the Church of the East until Timothy I’s Catholicosate

In contrast to the highly divisive Christological doctrines, the doctrine of the Trinity in the East Syrian tradition was not only consisting of an unbroken and non-controversial prevalence for centuries, it was shared amongst the various denominations of the Middle East. Once the Gospels became part of the Christian biblical canon (100-250), the early Christian church had to reconcile the doctrine of the oneness and wholeness of God, as taught in the Torah and in the Old Testament, on the one hand, with, on the other hand, the introduction in the Gospels, in particular in John, of (in addition to God) the Word, i.e. God dwelling in the human Jesus as Son of God, and the Holy Spirit, espousing the message over the world. It engendered controversies. Rendered these three divine functions the doctrine of oneness undone? What was the relation between God, Jesus as Son of God and the Holy Spirit; were they of the same (divine) nature or three seperate entities? How to reconcile the human and divine nature of Jesus? To mention only a few of the issues.

Controversies about the relation between the three functions came to a head in the early decades of the fourth century. It was in particular the teaching of an Alexandrian presbyter, Arius, that ignited acrimonous debate. According to Arius’ teaching, it followed from the (Platonic) unknowability and undivisibility of God, that Christ must be dissimilar from God and

subordinated to God. As this teaching gained traction amongst bishops, it met with furious opposition from the Alexandrian bishop, Alexander. He defended the divine unity of the three functions. Under pressure of the emperor Constantine, recently converted to Christianity, a compromise was brokered at a special council of bishops in 325 at Nicea: the three "functions" are of the same substance (*homoousia*) and this same substance or essence has three natures (*hypostaseis*). Soon, however, became clear that this compromise did not quell the flowering of all kinds of, what opponents saw as Arianism. The Nicean compromise found staunch defenders in the a influential second-half-fourth century Greek theologians, known as the Cappadocian Fathers, Basil of Ceasarea, Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa. Eventually, the Nicene doctrine found reaffirmation in the council of Constantinople of 381. As such, from then on the Trinity doctrine continued to fare relatively uncontroversial; that is, until Islam appeared in the Middle East.

Interestingly, in a letter to the student-monks of Mar Maron monastery Timothy pays tribute to the Greek Fathers as important contributors to the formation of the tradition of the Church of the East.[70] It illuminates that Timothy considered the roots of East Syrian theology are not confined to the fourth-century founding fathers of the so-called Antiochene school, "our fathers", as Timothy referred to them,[71] (Diodore of Tarsus, Theodore of Mopsuestia, "the Blessed Interpreter", and Nestorius), but included the Greek "Cappadocian" theologians as well.[72]

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70 Robert Bidawid, *Les Lettres du patriarche nestorien Timothée I: Étude critique avec en appendice la lettre de Timothée I aux moines du Couvent de Mar Maron* (Studi e Testi 187; Vatican City 1956), 120.

71 Lucas van Rompay, 'Past and Present Perceptions of Syriac Literary Traditions', *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 3.1 (2000) 71-103, on 82.

72 Bas ter Haar Romeny, 'Biblical Studies in the Church of the East: The Case of Catholicos Timothy I' (Studia Patristica 34; Leuven [2001]), 503-510, on 507.

Life of Timothy I: An Ecclesiastical-Intellectual Career

Born in the province of Adiabene in 727 or 728 in a noble family, his education was under the guidance of his uncle George, bishop of Bayt Bagas. He studied under Mar Abraham bar Dasandad of Basos. Though no particulars are known of his education, given the reputation of the East Syrian educational system, it is safe to say that Timothy got the customary education in biblical exegesis, theology, philosophy and the sciences.[73] He succeeded his uncle George as bishop of Bayt Bagas in about 760. Interestingly, this succession had the whiff of nepotism, probably not unusual in this era.[74] He got the patronage and support from a well placed Arabian civil servant, Abu Nuh al-Anbari, secretary to the governor of Mosul, Musa Ibn Musa'ab. It is with the latter that, alledegely, Timothy managed to get tax exemption for his monastery.[75]

Though the junior candidate, Timothy succeeded in winning the succession in the East Syrian Patriarchate in 870. Around this election allegations of simony were abound.[76] His eventual election, allegedly, had fingerprints on it of the interventions of caliphal authorities, amongst whom Abu Nuh and Musa, but also of the influential East Syrian physicians of the caliph and the court elite. At any rate, his election met with fierce opposition from some of his rivals (amongst others, the bishop Is'o bar Nun, later to become Timothy's successor) and from the metropolitans of Merv, Elam and Fars. In keeping with a long standing tradition of independence from the ecclesiastical center, they convened a specialcouncil to depose Timothy- to no avail. There were also attempts to excommunicate Timothy.[77]

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73 Vittorio Berti, *Vita e Studia di Timiteo I Patriarca Christiano di Baghdad* (Paris 2009), 135; consulted with language difficulties.

74 Berti, *Vita e Studia,* 140-148.

75 Berti, *Vita e Studia*, 142.

76 Berti, *Vita e Studia*, 152-170.

77 Berti, *Vita e Studia*, 279-285.

The Apologetical Works of Timothy I

Timothy, reputedly, was a polymath. According to Hans Putnam, it would follow from "[...] les donnees fournies par Mgr. R. Bidawid [...]", i.e. in Bidawid's "Les Lettres du patriarch Timotee I", (Rome 1956), 6-11, that Timothy was the author of works in the fields of astronomy, law, theology, liturgy and philosophy.[78] About two hundred letters are ascribed to Timothy, of which fifty-nine have survived.[79]

The letters cover different subjects. According to Thomas Hurst, who made a theological and historical study of the Syriac letters of Timothy, in addition to letter 59 (the Apology proper), the letters 40, 32, 35 and 36 have apologetical content.[80] Though there is some arbitrareness in his classification, Hurst's classification of the subject-matter of all the letters makes clear that next to the category of, as Hurst calls them, "private" letters, the "pastoral" letters (i.e. letters pertaining to "the life and the governance of the Church") is the second largest category.[81] It underscores the importance Timothy attributed to internal order in his church; an order that was severely threatened during the early years of his Patriarchate. To the extent the apologetic letters carry arguments in relation to the Trinitarian doctrine, we will encounter them below. In terms of apologetical theological argumentation, according to Sidney Griffith, letter 40 is the most important.[82] That letter, together with the Apology itself will be at the heart of our discussion. Importantly, though of apologetical content, distinction

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78 Hans Putnam, *L'Église et l'islam sous Timothée I (720-823): Étude sur l'église nestorienne du temps des premiers ʿAbbāsides, avec nouv. éd. et trad. du dialogue entre Timothée et al-Mahdi* (Beyrouth 1975), 20-23.

79 Putnam, *L'Église*, 24.

80 Thomas Richard Hurst, *The Syriac Letters of Timothy I (727-823): A Study in Christian-Muslim Controversy* (Washington 1985).

81 Hurst, *Letters*, 30.

must be observed. The Apology, allegedly, obtained popularity and, later on also in an Arabic recension (see below), was widely disseminated. In keeping with its predominantly philosophical content, the audience, both intended as effective, of letter 40 was, likely, more restricted.

Dating the letters

For the purposes of our examination it is important, to the extent possible, to date the apologetic letters. The chronology of the letters has been reexamined in Berti's study on the life and works of Timothy I. He proposes a "nuovo ipotesi chronologica". According to Berti, the letters 40 and 59 are from 782-785; the letters 35 and 36 from 782-790.[83] In the (older) dating of Bidawid, the Apology (letter 59) and letter 40 would date back to 780.[84] Not unimportantly, whatever the precise dates, this period of 780-785 coincided with the period that the ecclesiastical turbulences, emanating from Timothy's election, were at their most vitriolic. In the same period the East Syrian missionary efforts along the silk roads, as they were initiated by Timothy's predecessor, appeared sucesfully expanding the Church of the East's sway into imperial Tang China.

The Trinity and the Attributes of God in Timothy's Letters 40 and 59: (1) The New Importance of the Theme

In Timothy's account of his debate with caliph al-Mahdi, it is the caliph who introduced our theme rather abruptly: "Glaubst du an den Vater und an den

82 Sidney H. Griffith, 'The Syriac Letters of Patriarch Timoty I and the Birth of Christian *Kalam* in the Mu'tazilite Milieu of Baghdad and Basrah in Early Islamic Times', in W.J. van Bekkum, J.W. Drijvers and A.C. Klugkist (eds.), *Syriac Polemics. Studies in Honour of Gerrit Jan Reinink* (Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 170; Leuven 2007), 103-133.

83 Berti, *Vita e Studia*, 61.

84 Hurst, *Letters*, 32.

Sohn und an den Heiligen Geist?”[85] (Do you believe in the Father and in the Son and in the Holy Spirit, translation awk). In a way, this blunt introduction is symbolic for the way the theme of the oneness of God and the doctrine of the Trinity got renewed topicality with the ascent of Islam. For, it was after centuries of tranquil endurance as fundamental Christian faith tenet that the emerging Qur’anic and Islamic critique moved this theme and doctrine into the limelight again. The stage was set for this theme to become standard fare of the intellectual Christian-Muslim apologetics. The Christian intellectual elite world saw itself compelled to come up with defences. In the process, it developed standard defenses against the Islamic critique. Once the Qur’anic allusions to God as seeing, speaking etc. were come clear, the Christian apolegetics embarked on counterquestions whether Islam itself stood unequivocally firm by its own concept of the oneness of God.[86] This issue of the comptability of the Islamic doctrine of the oneness of God and the Qur’anic attribution to God of (separate) properties like speaking etc. was to occupy Muslim theologians, as we will see below.

Thus, in disputing the Islamic arguments Timothy was certainly not the first Christian apologist. From the onset of the Arabian conquest and the emergence of Islam, Christian intellectuals engaged with the religious and political newcomer. This engagement showed various forms, and, though not necessarily as apology or polemic proper, each of those writings carried certain apologetic traits. Whether it took the form of apocalypse (probably the earliest form of engagement), the form of *summae theologicae*, the form of testimony collections (biblical citations or references per topic) or doctrinal treatises, they shared with the dialectical forms of the apologetics proper the purpose of upholding the superiority of Christian faith against that of Islam. At the time of Timothy’s Apology, to the Christian defence of the Trinity, the Melkite philosopher John of Damascus and the anonymous author of “On the Triune Nature of God” had already contributed importantly.

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85 Heimgartner, *Disputation*, 14.

86 Griffith, ‘The Syriac Letters’, 172.

Though not the first Christian apologist, he was the first East Syrian apologist. It raises the question whether he derived his arguments, selection of Islamic critique, and his modes of argumentation from the general Eastern Christian tradition. To put this in terms of my research question: what were his (counter)arguments, did he develop new doctrinal elements; were there in Timothy's mode of argumentation novelties or specific East Syrian traits, and, if so, were these attributable to "influence"?

The Trinity and the Attributes of God in Timothy's Letters 40 and 59: (2) "Islamic" Questions in the Mouth of Timothy's "Caliph"

Since Timothy, as author of his writings, had the privilege of formulating himself the critical questions of his Islamic interlocutor "al-Mahdi", the examination starts with finding out whether the letters represented the customary Muslim critique. Here we encounter a limitation to the examination. We know that there have been several contemporary Muslim authors engaged in anti-Christian apologetics at the time of Timothy's writing of the letters 40 and 59. However, none of these Muslim writings survived.[87] According to David Thomas, the earliest surviving writings date from the second quarter of the ninth century.[88] As Thomas points out, this does not preclude us from reconstructing what critical questions were put by these Muslim authors at the time of Timothy's writing.[89] Given the way in which early Abbasid scholars educated their pupils and transmitted knowledge to them, i.e. in informal" class-like settings with oral teaching and note taking, it is safe enough to assume that successive scholars, whose anti-christian writings are preserved, were conversant with their predecessors' critique. It follows that it is safe to treat the later Muslim

87 Thomas, *Anti-Christian Polemic*, 29.

88 Thomas, *Anti-Christian Polemic*, 32.

89 Thomas, *Anti-Christian Polemic*, 30.

apologist's writings as fairly representing and setting forth the contemporary Muslim critique at the time of Timothy's writing.

As can be deducted from the content of the letters, Timothy's account identified the following areas of Islamic critique in relation to the Trinity: (i) *tahwid*: the trinitarian concept of the Godhead consisting of God, Jesus the Word and the Holy Spirit is fundamentally at odds with the Qur'anic doctrine of the oneness and transcedence of God; (ii) the Trinitarian concept of God, the Father and Jesus, the Son of God, makes either God human who has fathered a son or Jesus a god next to God; (iii) the Trinitarian distinction between the unity of the essence or nature - *ousia* (Greek) or *kyana* (Syriac) – and multiplicity of the properties or attributes of God (God is speaking, seeing etc.) – *hypostaseis* (Greek) or *aquanim* (Syriac) – attributes seperate divine properties to other entities than God and is logically untenable; and (iv) the introduction of the Word and the Holy Spirit next to God violates the principle of the createdness of all other than the one God. In addition to these core objections: reason nor scriptures support the doctrine of the Trinity. What were Timothy's answers?

While Timothy, naturally, was master of his own answers, the caliph was not master of his questions. Timothy's answers are extensive and elaborate; the caliph is, from time to time, reduced to putting crisp and short questions and, even when Timothy's answers are patently uncomprehensible or in need of clarification, Timothy's "caliph" is kept silent. At the same time, however, Timothy's picture of al-Mahdi is respectful; he is Timothy's sovereign after all; al-Mahdi's guardianship of Timothy's church is indispensable. As we will see, he pictures al-Mahdi also as a knowledgeable platonist and aristotelian.[90]

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90 Martin Heimgartner, 'Der ostsyrische Patriarch Timotheos I (780-823) und der Aristotelismus: Die aristotelische Logik und Dialektik als Verstandigungsbasis zwischen den Relgionen', in Martin Tamcke (ed.) *Orientalische Christen und Europa: Kulturbegegnung zwischen Interferenz, Partizipation und Antizipation* (Wiesbaden 2012), 11-22, on 17-19.

The Trinity and the Attributes of God: (3) Timothy's Rebuttals of the Islamic Critique

Timothy's defence of the Trinity was detailed in its philosophical and theological rebuttals. It was partly similar to the traditional Christian apologetics and partly not traditional in its philosophical approach and Aristotelian framing of the defence. It was not for long, or the Syriac text found an Arabic translation.[91]

The larger part of Timothy's rebuttal is made up by the traditional arguments. In this tradition, the arguments from the Old and New Testament were central. Using several specific references to biblical texts and their exegesis, Timothy concluded that the doctrine of the Trinity must be correct. Not unusual in Christian apologetics, he also pointed to Qur'anic texts, which, as he argued, spoke of God in three functions.[92] Circulation of florilegia and compendia of citations from the Qur'an, fitting to be employed in apologetics, may have supported Timothy in citing appropiate quotatians. Though not surviving, mention is made of such compendium, compiled by Abu Nuh al-Anbari, secretary to the Abbasid governor of the Mosul province and patron of Timothy.[93]

Also in keeping with the Syrian tradition was to argue, as Timothy did, that the Trinity was not-selfcontradictory (the distinction of essence-hypostaseis). He argued for its reasonableness by adducing several analogies to non-eternal ("created") phenomena, where threeness of aspects did not bar oneness of essence . The most famous was the analogy with the sun and his attributes, the light and the heat: was anyone claiming that the sun was three suns?

His defense of the trinitarian doctrine was, at the same time, the first East Syrian defense that deployed structurally Aristotelian philosophical

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91 Putnam, *L'Église*, 171-180.

92 Hurst, *Letters.*

93 David Thomas and Barbara Roggema (eds.), *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Biographical History*, vol.1 (600-900) (Leiden 2009), s.v. Abu Nuh al-Anbari.

underpinnings. What were these philosophical arguments? And: how, if at all, were they become part of the Syriac theological- philosophical tradition?

Timothy's Aristotelian Reasoning in Defence of the Trinity

Timothy put the Trinitarian controversy, also, in the frame of whether humans can get knowledge of God. Timothy postulated that human knowledge of God's nature and essence can only attained by using descriptions of God in terms of plurality, compositeness and bodyliness; a mode of reasoning that, ultimately, is incompatible with the very infiniteness, transcendenceness and unity that make out God. When the Bible and the Qur'an (Timothy referred to sura iv *an-Nisa* and others) affirm that, amongst others, God can see, hear etc., there is a seer (Subject) and there is a relation to what is seen (Object). Where the Scriptures and the Qur'an stipulate his capacity to see, which presumes an Object, how can he, in his absolute wholeness, see an Object but himself; without this seeing of an Object resulting in a seperateness between the Subject and the Object? As Timothy argued, the only way, logically, to safeguard the oneness and wholeness of God while God as Subject sees an Object, lies in the Trinitarian God. As Heimgartner puts it:" Der Trinitarische Gott kann durch die *generatio* und der *processio*, sich selbst als Objekt ewigen Seh- und Erkenntnisfahigkeit gegenubertreten und zugleich eine "einfache Entitat bleiben".[94] As Timothy saw it, nor *generatio* or *procession* seperates the Word or the Sprit from God in his essence.

For our discussion, the point is not whether, theologically, this defence of the Trinity is convincing. Nor is the point whether Timothy's logical reasoning is purely rational and logically compelling. The point is *that* Timothy appears to rely on logic of Aristotelian cut. Heimartner points, indeed, to certain sections of the Categories.[95]

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94 Heimgartner, *Disputation*, 89.

95 Heimgartner, *Disputation*, 90.

There is reason to believe that Timothy (the writer) himself considered it a significant section in his account of the (alleged) debate. These philosophical arguments appear twice in Timothy's account of the discussion; each encompasses a large portion of the whole debate of the first and the second day (Section 4 and Section 19 respectively). Strikingly, the philosophical portion of the second day is couched in an, almost dialemmically crafted question-and-answer format, wherein –by exception- Timothy is the interlocutor as well. What were the sources of his Aristotelian reasoning? And was there an East Syrian tradition?

The Syro-Greek connections

In many respects and in regard of various fields of intellectual endavour, the Greek and the Syrian worlds were connected. Briefly, Syriac involvement with Greek philosophy and science took serious form in the fifth and sixth century with, amongst others, Sergius of Resh'ayna and Probus. In a manner of speaking, this may be called the first wave of a translation movement of sorts.[96] There is controversy amongst present-day scholars what the aim was of these early interests in translating , and curricular teaching of Greek philosophy. Were these treatises written "[…] with a clear apologetic aim stemming from religious fervor to and […] were designed to prove that a particular interpretation of God's oneness was the correct one.", as Damien Janos holds.[97] Or, as Daniel King argues, was it aim much the same fot Near Eastern Syriacs as it was for "pagan" Greek practitioners.[98] Below we will

96 John W. Watt, 'The Syriac Aristotelian Tradition and the Syro-Arabic Baghdad Philosophers', in Damien Janos (ed.), *Ideas in Motion in Baghdad and Beyond: Philosophical and Theological Exchanges between Christians and Muslims in trhe Third/Ninth and Fourth/Tenth Centuries* (Leiden 2016), 7-43, on 35.

97 Damien Janos, 'Introduction', in idem (ed.), *Ideas in Motion,* 1-6, on 2.

98 Daniel King, 'Logic in the Service of Ancient Eastern Christianity: An Exploration of Motives', *Archiv fur Geschichte der Philosophie* 79.1 (2015), 1-33.

encounter this issue more extensively. In any event, the Syrian interests in Greek philosophy shaped a Syriac philosophical tradition that effectively was a Graeco-Syriac tradition. But this tradition was particularly prevalent in the Western Syrian world of Palestine and Syria. Those were the regions where the Melkites and Syrian Orthodox lived and taught. The above mentioned and the other Syrian authors and translators are from these communities.

Though, likely, the East Syrian curriculum showed interest in Greek learning, there is little evidence that Greek/Aristotelian philosophy and logic had the specific interest of East Syrian intellectuals.[99] As can derived from Timothy's letters this was to change with him. He showed himself keen in purchasing or borrowing Aristotelian texts; even from the nearby Syrian Orthodox monastery of Mar Mattai, near Takrit.[100] In another letter, he gave an account of a debate with an unnamed courtier, with deep interest in Aristoteles.[101] It must have been his reputation, that made caliph al-Mahdi to commission Timothy to translate the *Topica* of Aristoteles.The letters, that are the primary sources for this paper, testify extensively of the change Timothy brought.

Though it may be exaggarated to contend that it was him who introduced singlehandedly the Greeks to the East Syrian intellectual community, what was novel, however, in my opinion, was Timothy's unalloyed and ostentatious reliance on logical reasoning to defend the Trinity. Certainly, his aim was apologetical, one, significant part of his reasonings to underpin the Trinity was philosophical- logical in its entirety. To conclude this in the frame of the questions of this paper: Timothy introduced a novel approach. Clearly, not in respect of doctrinal substance, but certainly in mode of argumentation.

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99 Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow*, 113.

100 Letter 42.

101 Letter 43 and 48.

Greek Philosophy and Theological Reasoning

While, undoubtedly, Timothy deployed Aristotalian logical philosophical arguments, it is equally clear that he did not abandon theological arguments altogether. At the time of Timothy, it was unusual to draw a sharp divide between philosophy and theology.[102] In the East Syrian educational (monastic) institutions and practice, Greek philosophy had a certain place in the curricula, albeit in disparate forms, lacunously, at uneven levels of expertise and strongly interwoven with biblical exegesis.[103] In the early days of the Islamic intellectual appropiation of the qur'anic and hadithal teachings in the middle quarters of the eighth century, the prime concern, likely, was not to delineate what exactly was the correct distinction between those fields of intellectual pursuits. However, not for long the process of "specialization" and philosophically specialized professionals (*falsafisa*) was taking off. *Falsafa*, Arabic philosophy, became an intellectual pursuit in its own right. Importantly, eventually, it became considered as overarching knowledge, capable to bridge or decide religious or theological disputes.[104] As Damien Janos puts it: "*Falsafa* bridged these two faiths, above and beyond the various denominations they comprised, and represented a priviliged means of discussion on a wide variety of issues, political, theological, logical and educational".[105] As for the Christian intellectuals, in Timothy's period and later on, in particular for the East Syrians, the connection between philosophy, theology and apologetics changed, but was, as we shall see below, never abandoned completely.[106] In the words of Janos:

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102 Watt, 'Syriac Aristotelian Tradition', 12.

103 Watt, 'Syriac Aristotelian Tradition', 13.

104 Olga Lizzini, 'What Does *Tawhid* Mean? Yahya ibn 'Adi's *Treatise on the Affirmation of the Unity of God* between Philosophy and Theology', in Janos (ed.), *Ideas in Motion*, 253-280, on 254.

105 Janos, 'Introduction', in idem, *Ideas in Motion*, 2.

106 Gerhard Endress, 'Theology as a Rational Science: Aristotalian Philosophy, the Christian Trinity and Islamic Monotheism in the Thought of

”While often highly philosophical in content and form and relying more or less heavily on the Greek sources, these treatises were written with a clear apologetic aim stemming from religious fervor and were designed to prove that a particular interpretation of God’s oneness or nature was the correct one”.[107] What then set Timothy on his *novel* course of defending the trinity on logical grounds? What might have been his objectives under the conditions of his time? And to which readerships (audiences) might he have directed himself in his writings?

Timothy’s Intended Audience

Was it, as the present-day scholarly opinion has it, that Timothy’s prominent introduction of Aristotalian logic was prompted by the emergence of Islamic *kalam*-style *Mu’zalite* theologians, where rationality of religious belief was an important scholarly criterion?[108] Was it to ingratiate himself with the caliphal elite circle, as both letters here discussed, picture him as debating in hignhly deferential style with the caliph himself (the Apology) and a courtier (letter 40)? Or was he aiming at making an impression on Muslim professionals or even to convince Muslims? Was it to intensify the clerical control on deploying apologetics by preempting the secular appliance of Greek logic?

And: what was Timothy’s intended audience? Was it, primarily, his own people, that he provided with ready-made answers in their discussions with their Muslim interlocuters in an attempt to make them less vulnerable to apostacy?

Why and with a View to Which Readership Wrote Timothy his Apology and His Letters 40 and 34?

Yayha ibn ‘Adi’, in Janos (ed.), *Ideas in Motion,* 221-252, on 221-225.

107 Janos, ‘Introduction’, in idem, *Ideas in Motion*.

108 Griffith, ‘The Syriac Letters’, 103-133.

To answer the questions whether Timothy aimed at the employment of philosophy bridging the inter-religious debate and, more generally, how and to which ends he appropiated and deployed his Aristotelian expertise in his apologetics, it is necessary to examine in general the intended readership and purposes of his apologetic letters, and to assess whether it is correct to conclude, as the general present-day scholarly opinion is, that the intended readership was his own East Syrian flock and his purpose to stem the tide of conversion.[109]

The Apology (letter 59) and letter 40 (the philosophical letter) had both Sergius, Timothy's co-student, friend and (later on) metropolitan of the Church of the East at Elam (South Iraq), as adressee. Both were written in Syriac; a language few Muslims could read. According to Griffith, there was a strong popular demand for the Apology.[110] Abridged versions in Syriac, and, eventually, an Arabic translation came in circulation.[111] Whether or not it was his intended readership, his community of East Syrians in the caliphate showed interest. To a certain extent this may surprise. Much of the Apology presented intellectual discussions of a high level of abstraction on dogmatic issues. Though the broad range of practical issues touched upon in the Apology (circumscision, direction of prayer etc.) that might have attracted a larger readership, its popularity may also signal, belatedly, the need, for to having spelled out how to deal as a East Syrian Christian with the challenges the Islam as religion posed. The question-and-answer format, one could add, may have contributed in that regard. Also the rate and pace of conversion may have played its part. Though his analysis has proven to be not uncontroversial, Richard Bulliet's analysis of the statistical pace of conversion in our period remains an important source. Regarding the period

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109 Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow,* 45-48.

110 Putnam, *L'Église*, 172.

111 Clint Hackenberg, *An Arabic-to-English Translation of the Religious Debate between the Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I and the 'Abbasid Caliph al-Mahdi* (Master Thesis Ohio State University 2009).

of 791-888, Bulliet's estimation is is that 34% of the non-muslim population (Christian and non-Christian) may have converted to Islam in a "bandwagon effect".[112]

All these considerations and objectives may have been on the mind of Timothy or the clerical elite, when the Arabic version was published. After all, as a clerical mind he may have lingered in thinking that issues as the Trinity and the nature(s) of Christ were in the forefront of the concerns of his common flock. As pointed out above, on the ground of every-day religious practice, the idea that Jesus, like Muhammed, was a prophet was widespread.[113] Whether the clerical elite was aware of such deviances (and other), the lower clergy must have been. Whatever the case in this regard, I would like to advocate that it is worthwile considering a few other options. Whatever the rate and pace of East Syrian apostacy, it was on the ground, that is in the dioceses and local communities, that the consequences were felt in the first place. Accordingly, it was the lower clergy and monks that had to take the heat of argument and saw their financial resources dwindle as the *ji'zha* brought less into the caliphal coffers. Likely, to keep and bolster the loyalty of his clergy, Timothy wanted to demonstrate the excellence and intellectual equality of his relations with the highest levels of Abbasid society. As Christians of each denomination in the Islamic Middle East appreciated, these relations were crucial in the interdenominational competition, in the financial funding of the non-Muslim communities and the political goodwill and caliphal protection. At both fronts, Timothy, likely, attempted to strengthen the position of his lower clergy. At the marketplace of conversion, by adducing the necessary arguments; at the political front, by putting his easy access to the Abbasid elite in the limelight. Watt has argued that the objective of the Apology was not to ingratiate himself with

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112 Richard Bulliet, as cited in Sidney H. Griffith, 'The first Christian Summa Theologiae in Arabic: Christian Kalām in Ninth-Century Palestine', in Averil Cameron and Robert Hoyland (eds.), *Doctrine and Debate in the East Christian World, 300-1500* (Farnham 2011), 361-378, on 372.

113 Tannous, *Syria between Byzantium and Islam.*

the Abbasid elite;[114] he tried, I argue, to ingratiate himself with his clergy. Possibly, he had an addirtional incentive to restore those relations as they were got strained severely as a result of the controversies around and following his election.

Connected with these considerations, Timothy may have had other reasons as well to show himself a strong and effective leader to his clergy and monks. The clergical revolt that ensued from his election manifested itself in particular in the far away fringes of the patriarchate. One particular fringe, Azerbeyzan Persia, was not only stage of doctrinal controversies that the Church elite habitually condemned as heresy, its geographical proximity to the Byzantine empire in the Caucasus raised the additional suspicious attention of caliph al-Mahdi. Of all fringes, it was there that under the leadership of an influential East Syrian abbott- monk, John of Dalyatha, a doctrinal controversy developed, as Timothy saw it. At issue was John's opinion that Christians following all the steps of mystical ascetism could get a view into the divine; doctrinally, that the human Christ could see the divine Christ, a doctrine, in direct breach of the East Syrian fundamental tenet of Christology of the separation of the two natures and non-theopachismus. Timothy launched a vehement anti- campaign, resulting, eventually, in the condemnation of John and his heretical doctrine at a official council of the Church of the East in 796. According to Alexander Treiger, it were ecclesiastical concerns about monastic superiority and fear of peripherous mass apostacy by the regional followers of John in the first place which Timothy motivated: " In all this he strove to strengthen the Church of the East both internally as in relation to the Muslim rulers, whose support, as he well understood, was crucial to its prosperity and indeed its very survival".[115] To impress his clergy as an leader of strength and influence

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114 Watt, 'The Syriac Aristotelian Tradition', 22.

115 Alexander Treiger, 'Could Christ's Humanity See his Divinity? An Eighth-Century Controversy between John of Dalyatha and Timothy I, Catholicos of the Church of the East', *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 9 (2009), 3-21.

may very well have been in Timothy's mind when writing the Apology and other letters.

To mobilize his lower clergy by his letters, rather than his common members, may also have had yet another important background. The processes of conversion, likely, were not always clean-cut. It is on the local ground that the the argumentative battle is conducted. It is there that the financial lure and benefit of becoming a muslim shone most brightly. May be apologetic arsenals of arguments stood little chance against this motivation. But, as argued, amongst others, by Christian Sahner and Sidney Griffith, there were many cases of "in-between" conversions or "covert" reconversions; the conditionality of these conversions , likely, made them a ready subject for clerical attention on the ground. Indirectly, Timothy's exhortations may also have (formal) Muslims as his intended readership.[116]

Conclusions

The conclusion is that Timothy's intended readership was indirectly his common flock, but this must not obscure the relevance of the other objectives he, likely, may have had in mind; the lower clergy in the first place, but also Muslims "in-between"; and other reasons than stemming the tide of conversion only. He wanted to show himself, and wanted to be seen as, an effective leader. By all historiographical accounts, in the middle and later part of his catholisacate he was an very able ecclesiastical administrator. He reorganised his dioceses, separating the "inner" dioceses (Syria, Mesopotamy and Persia) from the "outer" dioceses (eastern Persia, Central Asia, Tibet and China). Though in significant respects the result of the initiatives of his immediete predecessors, it was Timothy who reaped the results of the missionary efforts of the Church of the East, in Cental Asia in the first place, but also in Syria and Egypt.[117]

III. 'Ammar al-Basri

116 Sahner, 'Swimming against the Current'.

117 Baum and Winkler, *The Church of the East*, 46.

Introduction

Though the writings, attributed to him, testify of a diligent mind, historically, ‘Ammar al-Basri is an somewhat elusive person. As we shall see, hardly anything is known about him, other than that, probably, he is the author of two Christian apologetical theological works. One is *Kitab al-Burhan* (Book of Proof) and the other is: *Kitab al-Masa’il wa al-ajwibah* (Questions and Answers). When he wrote them exactly, whether he was the author of other works and what his occupations have been, it is unknown. The two known works are found in a tenth century Coptic manuscript.[118] Georg Graf mentions ‘Ammar in his *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur,* estimating ‘Ammar to have been living living between the tenth and thirteenth centuries.[119] Compared with the state of research at the time of Graf, the present day state shows extensive scholarship on ‘Ammar and the estimation of his lifetime. Therefore, opening our examination with a brief survey of the present state of research is a good starting point. Then the focus is on “life and works” of ‘Ammar. Next I give a brief overview of the contents and place in his works of the *Burhan.* The next two paragraphs set forth the heart of my examination: the defence of the Trinity, and in how far that defence is “novel” in comparison with Timothy’s defence. Finally, it is discussed if, and to what extent novelties (doctrinal or argumentative mode) are attributable to “influence”. My argument will be that, in contrast to, amongst others, Sidney Griffith’s opinion that ‘Ammars reasoning is an example of Christian *kalam*, the Trinity doctrine and its defence of ‘Ammar show no significant difference from Timothy’s doctrine and defence.

The Present State of Research

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118 See Michael Hayek, *‘Ammar al-Basri*; not consulted by me, AWK.

119 Georg Graf, *Geschichte der Christlichen arabischen Literatur* (Vatican 1947), 210-211.

Since Graf's brief commentary, starting with Hayek's *Apologies et Controverses*, 'Ammar found increasing schalarly attention. Hayek's work is an edition of the *Kitab al- Burhan* and the *Kitab al-masa'il wa al-ajwiba*. It is not a translation. The translation I use is from Wageeh Y.F. Mikhail in his dissertation, '*Ammar al-Basri's* Kitab al-Burhan*: A Topical and Theological Analysis of Arabic Theology in the Ninth Century*.[120] Mikhail's study examines the *Burhan* from "[...] Islamic perspective as it is found in anti-Christian polemical texts [...]" and from "[...] the Christian perspective, through a comparison of 'Ammar's treatise with the work of Arab Christian theologians of his day."[121] Though Mikhail's work is predominantly theological, his extensive examination of the religious and cultural context and his comparisons with Timothy are useful for the purposes of this paper.

With the doctrine of the Trinity as focus, there is another monograph, wherein 'Ammar's work is extensively examined: Thomas W. Ricks, *Developing the Doctrine of the Trinity in an Islamic Milieu. Early Arabic Contributions to Trinitarian Theology*.[122] Interestingly, Ricks contextualizes his theology with three general themes. First, brought the shift to Arabic bring conceptual change? Second, the ascendancy, as he coins it, of Aristotelian and Greek philosophy within the early Abbasid intellectual world (the so called translation movement) that, as he sees it, was used by Christian Arabic authers in their apologetics. Three, the intra Arabic debate on how to reconcile the qur'anic absolute oneness of God and the quránic "attibutes" of God, through which God is knowable to humankind. Ricks examines four apologetic works of Christrian Arabic authors (the anonymous autor of the triune nature of God (mid-eighth century), Theodore Abu Qurrah (c. 750- c. 820), Habib Ibn Hidman Abu Ra'itah (c. 770-c. 835) and our 'Ammar al- Basri.

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120 Diss. University of Birmingham 2013, supervisor David Thomas.

121 Mikhail, *Burhan*, i.

122 Diss. The Catholic University of America 2012, supervisor Sidney Griffith.

A similar comparative approach over the three Middle Eastern denominations, (Melkite, Church of the East and Syrian Orthodox) is employed in Sara Leila Husseini, *The Trinity in the Context of Muslim Theology.*[123] Whether Christian borrowing of Islamic concepts, as she sees it, brought these Christian Arabic authors to developing new features to their Trinitarian doctrines?

The present-day scholarly popularity of ‘Ammar’s work is refected in many aricles. In general, their approach and subject-matter are similar to those of the above dissertations, as we shall see below. Interestingly, ‘Ammar’s popularity has only recently come to fruition. M.Allard reckoned to belong to the Big Three of ninth century Christian theology: Theodore Abu Qurra, Abu Ra’itah and Timothy I, without ever mentioning ‘Ammar.[124]

Life and Works of ‘Ammar in His Times

Though still shrouded in several clouds of uncertainty, compared to Graf’s estimation of the lifetime of ‘Ammar as somewhere between the ninth and thirteenth centuries, the present state of scholarship has more to offer. He is estimated to have lived in the first half of the ninth century. A possible evidence is found in The “*Fihrist*” of Ibn al-Nadim (d.c. 995). This is a catalogue of Islamic writings up to Nadim’s days, as they were known to him.. Amongst these is a work attributed to Abu al-Hudayl al-Allaf (d.c. 840), with the title “Against ‘Ammar the Christian in Refutation of the Christians”. Besides this, a small piece of evidence may be found in ‘Ammar’s own work. He refers to “a king of our time who left his kingdom with all of his soldiers for the Roman lands in pursuit of a woman in a citadel”. Hayek,[125] followed by Griffith,[126] believes that it concerns the expedition by caliph al-Mu’tasim

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123 Diss. University of Birminham 2011, supervisor David Thomas.

124 M. Allard, ‘Les Chrétiens a Bagdad’, *Arabica* 9 (1962), 375-388, on 383.

125 Hayek, *Apologie*.

(r. 833-842) in 838. Accordingly, Hayek and Griffith situate ‘Ammar’ writings in the later decades of the first half of the ninth century.

Proceeding on this estimation, ‘Ammar, possibly, lived to see the reigns of the caliphs Harun al-Rashid (786-809), l-Mahdi (780-786), al-Mamun (813-833) and al-Mutawakkil (833-). As his surname seem to suggest, he was from Basra, at the time an important intellectual center, as we shall see. It is unknown in which profession and/or capacity ‘Ammar was active. Taking it from his writings, as we shall see, he must have been active in an intellectual environment.

Working in Times of Significant Transitions

In several respects, ‘Ammar lived and worked in times of significant transitions and developments. To mention the most important of these transitions and developments: the maturation and expansion of the translation movement; a new phase in the development of the Christian apologetics, embodied in the important works of Theodore Abu Qurra, Abu Ra’ihta and himself; a further blossoming of Islamic theologizing; and the political-religious gestations that led, eventually, to caliph al-Mamun’s interference in the debate on the “createdness” of the Qur’an and the imposition of *Mut’azilite* doctrine as “state”doctrine.

‘Ammar worked in the heydays of the so called translation movement. This process had as objective the translation of classical Greek works into Arabic. Ultimately, it encompassed the translation of almost all of the scientific, philosophical and medical Greek works of the classical era. Importantly, in its inception, ideology and objectives. it was an ‘Abbasid, Islamic project. Without the initiative, financial and organisational sponsorship and the sustained intellectual support of the successive caliphs from Harun al-Rasid onward and their entourage, there would never have been a translation movement. Equally important, the full blossoming of Arabic science, philosophy, theology, etc. in the ninth and subsequent

126 Griffith.

centuries is certainly not excusively attributable to the appropiation of the Greek classics. As Gutas puts it: “[…] translations are seen from the very beginning as part of research processes stemming from intellectual currents in Baghdad and as such creative responses to the rapidly developing Arabic scientific and philosophical tradition”.[127]

His was the era, wherein competing “law schools” came to fruition, promulgating and teaching the proper rules of Islamic behaviour, business management and govermental administration; wherein “schools” of theologizing designed different religious proper answers on the perennial questions of the meaning of the oneness of God and his attributes, the very possibility of, or the limits to the human knowledge of God and the relation between God’s realm and this world; wherein *falafsa* (philosophy) became a scientific discipline, albeit often in relation to religious and theological issues; and wherein many prominent leading professionals in their diciplines wrote books and disputed extensively. To name a few: the scholar and founder of the Ḥanbalī school of law (*fiqh*) Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal (780-855), the philosopher Abū Yūsuf al-Kindī (c.800- 870) and the Basrian Mu’tazilite theologian Abu al-Hudayl al-‘Allaf (d. 840).[128]

Abbasid Patrons and East Syrian Translators

As the patrons and sponsors were Muslim elites, it were, in the first place, Syraic-speaking Christians, who were the translators. Likely, as they were imbued in the Arabizing world of late Umayyad and early ‘Abbasid eras, they combined the knowledge of Arabic with their tradition of the Greek language. Not only did they pursue a “translation movement” of sorts from Greek into Syriac in the fifth and sixth centuries, their theological traditional Fathers and many of their liturgical practices were in Greek.

The translators, often translator families, were mostly not exclusively, East Syrians. The East Syrian famous translator and phycisian, Hunayn ibn

127 Gutas, *Greek thought*, 150.

128 See Amira K. Bennison, *The Great Caliphs* (London 2009), 158-203

Ishaq (809-873) embodied the double *renommee* of the East Syrian Christians amongst the early Abbasid elites. They were sought after, in the first place, for their knowledge of the Greek and Arabic language and for their medical expertise as they were taught in their famous teaching hospital in Gundushapur (Khuzistan).

The Uses of (Translated) Theology and Philosophy

In 'Ammar's days (first half ninth century) the translation movement was in full gear.[129] Of all the disciplines, covered by translations, the disciplines of theology and philosophy were well served. It was the complex, multi-facetted and high-stake intra-Islamic philosophical and theological debates that fostered the demand for the Greeks in the first place.[130] Theology came to the fore because, amongst others, the caliphal ruling elite felt the needed of religious-philosophical legitimation for its policies of Arabisation and Islamization amongst each of its peoples, irrespective of its ethnicity or religion. These policies brought them in sharper opposition to the *zandaqa,* i.e. all dualist beliefs, including Zoroasters, Marcionists, Bardainisites, Manicheaens, but also to the Jews and Christians. From these developments ensued, besides outright persecution, sharper and more frequent intellectual and religious controversies. The 'Abbasid elites wanted more ammunition; ammunition to conduct debates and disputes. Hence, the strong interest in Aristotelian logic and disputational techniques- the *Topica* was three times translated-; in cosmology and metaphysical philosophy, but also the incentive for the emergence of *ilm al-kalam*, the dialectical approach to rational-speculative theologizing. Soon, opposing theological and philosophical "schools" got intertwined in intra-Islamic controversies. Hence also, the emergence of inter faith dicussion and literary accounts of inter- faith controversies, wherein Christian intellectuals took up the challenge to defend their beliefs against the Islamic intellectual encroachment and acumen. Significantly, their involvement and prominence

129 Gutas, *Greek Thought*, 116-120.

130 Gutas, *Greek Thought*.

in the translation movement, but also their intellectual defences of Christian faith, their missionary endavours along the silk roads well into China and the intellectual prominence of their Patriarchs', as demonstrated in apologies and newly drafted law books bear witness of the vitality amongst and within the East Syrian community at the time of 'Ammar writing his theological treatises.

The General Features of 'Ammar's Theology

Before examining the *Burhan* on the Trinity, it is worthwile to highlight some of the general features of the work of 'Ammar. As indicated before, comparitive work on 'Ammar, Ra'itha and Qurra is popular in present-day scholarship. In these studies, many similarities between these, more or less contemporary, theologians of different Christian denomination are found. Though, the apologetics of 'Ammar should, according to these scholars, stand out in respect of the extensiveness and profoundness of his use of Aristotelian metaphysics and logics. David Thomas reckons 'Ammar to be "one of the most creative Arab Christian authors […]".[131] According to Thomas, 'Ammar was fully conversant with the terms of the internal Islamic theological techniques and conceptual frameworks.[132] If the reference to Abu al-Hudayl al-Allaf's (lost) work "In refutation of the Christians", mentioned in ibn al-Nadim's *Fihrist* is accurate, it underscores closeness of 'Ammar to the the Basrian world of the Mu'tazila theology. For Sidney Griffith 'Ammar was a *Christian* representative of the *mutakallimun,* the *Muslim* theologians of the "school" of the Mu'zalites.

The Burhan *on Trinity and the Attributes of God: The Opening and the Coda of 'Ammar's* Burhan *on the Trinity*

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131 David Thomas (ed. and tr.), *Early Muslim Polemic against Christianity: Abu Isa al-Warraq's 'Against the Incarnation'* (Cambridge 2002), 53.

132 Thomas, *Early Muslim Polemic*, 13.

In my opinion, there is no better way to get a general “feel” our ‘Ammar than to start with having a closer look at his opening of his argumentation and the final *coda* to it. As they set forth, each from an opposite viewpoint, the Aristotelian-logical and the traditional Christian defence of the superiority of the Christian doctrines on the Trinity, they embody the ambivalence of ‘Ammars treatise, and, possibly, of any and each Christian defence in the early ‘Abbasid era. It shows a curious blend of loyalty to doctrinal continuity and invigorating appetite for argumentative experiment.

Usually, each section of the *Burhan* starts with an elaborated set of preliminary considerations and referrals to previous sections, without coming to the point. Not so ‘Ammar’s opening on the Trinity; ‘Ammar comes right to the point, in an assertive question-and-answer format: “We begin by asking them about the ‘One’ who is easy for their tongues to confess, and they proclaim Him without verifying the real meaning of His knowledge. Because there is contradiction between the apparent meaning of their words and their representation of the Creator as inanimate, without ‘life,’and ‘word’ yet calling him ‘alive’ and ‘speaking,”.” As we will examine below, the reasoning behind, and the meaning of these opening senteces in detail, it is safe to say that they are an opening salvo and hit of some bravoura.

With the sound of this salvo still resonating, the coda sounds differently: “Therefore God may His praise be magnified since we also know by conjecturethat He is One, exists in three meanings. It is best that in this we do not assume that He has any partitions or divisions, which are applicable only to bodies, and He has no body. But we find this in some of His creatures, without them having to be divided or partitioned, and this isaccepted on the basis of what He announced to us in His Book which He authenticated to us by its appearing with overwhelming miracles. We believe that He is one substance known inthree hypostases; that He surrounds the heavens and the earth, without being limited; thatHe is invisible, eternal, and unceasing; and that He lasts forever and ever.”[133]

133 Mikhael, *Burhan*, 386.

'Ammar's Counterattack: No Attributes, No Living *God*

As follows from the above citation of Ámmar's opening statement of his discussion of the Trinity, he takes his polemical cue from disputing the Islamic claim of the oneness of God. He is referring to a long-running, fundamental discussion amongst Muslim theologians. As fundamental to Islam the oneness of God may be, at the same time there are sections in the Qur'an referring to God as "speaking" etc. (sura 4.171). The issue was: if these capacities of God are "attributes" i.e. not completely one with God, how to safeguard the very oneness of God and uphold his wholeness? It appears that this issue elicited many, and many different answers from contemporary Islamic theologians. As argued by several present-day scholars, 'Ammar, aware of, or involved in the Basrian school of early Mu'tazilite theology, took that thinking as his framework for rebutting their opinions and arguments.[134] Put briefly, according to their most influential Basrian thinker, Abu al-Hudhayl (d. c. 841), God was knowing, powerful, and living not by virtue of having knowledge, power or life as attribute, but because it is He Himself. As Richard Frank put it, al-Hudhayl's purpose is "[...] to describe God as absolutely one in the perfect unity of His being so that, although we speak of the perfections or attributes of His being and predicate them of Him as truly belonging to Him, what is signified by the perfections or attributes is precisely God Himself in the perfection of His being [...]".[135] For all its phraseology, it enabled, as they saw it, to attribute to God "knowing" etc. without diminishing his unique wholeness and otherness. That it gave rise to all kind of questions and refutations, also in subsequent Islamic theology is one thing, it was exactly that which 'Ammar seized upon.

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134 Husseini, *The Trinity*, 64; Dave Bennett, 'The Mutazilite Movement (I)', in Schmidtke, *Islamic Theology*, 145; Sidney H. Griffith, 'Excursus I: Christian Theological Thought', in Schmidtke, *Islamic Theology*, 97.

135 Richard M. Frank, 'The Divine Attributes According to the Teaching of Abu al-Hudhayl al-'Allaf', in idem, *Early Islamic Theology: The Mu'tazilites and al-Ashari. Texts ans Studies on the Development and History of Kalam*, vol. 2, ed. Dimitri Gutas (London 2007), 459.

‘Ammar points to, as he sees it, an inherent contradiction and concludes that the Trinity doctrine is there to overcome this contradiction. If, ‘Ammar reasons, the only way to safeguard God’s eternal oneness is to deny him that he has knowledge, power etc. (the attributes expressedly named by the Qur’an), one cannot say at the same time, that he is living, speaking etc. As he puts this in the *Burhan*:”It has become clear that he (the Muslim interlocutor, awk) does not call Him “living” since he does not affirm that He has “life” and “word” – just as we have previously explained, he deprives his God of “life” and makes Him inanimate”.[136] In addition, as ‘Ammar points out, would Islam heed the Qur’anic attribution of speaking etc., but deny God Life and Speech, out of fear that such verbal nouns signify distinct attributes of God and would compromise God’s oneness, would render also such God as not a living, speaking God. This line of argument underscores ‘Ámmar’s intimate knowledge of the Islamic intra-faith controversies on the attributes of God. To many Islamic scholars of the time, these “names”, as knowing, knowledge, are related to verbal nouns and, grammatically, mean the *act* of knowledge. As such, it belonged to the world of accidents or actions, and could not qualify the eternal essence, God, without demeaning God.[137]

In bringing his argument another step further, ‘Ammar attempts to equate the conclusion of his reasoning, i.e. God must be living and speaking, with the Trinitatian concepts. Thus, “speaking” is: the Son is His Word and “living” is His Spirit. Thus, ‘Ámmar comes close to equating the Qur’anic “attributes “ to the Christian “hypostases”.

As David Thomas points out, it is at this point that ‘Ammar is confronted with the question: if attributes equates hypostases, why are there only three hypostases, and not more or less. According to ‘Ammar’s answer, the two hypostases of “Word” and “Life” are at the basis of other attributes like wisdom, mercy etc.[138]

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136 Mikhail, *Burhan*, 373.

137 Frank, ‘Attributes’, 453.

As it is general acknowledged in present-day scholarship, it is ‘Ammar, who was the boldest amongst his co-apologists to draw the traditional apologeticatory underpinnings of the Trinity to uncharted waters. He is effective in employing his intimate knowledge and mastery of the Islamic theological developments and controversies to horizons that are novel in comparison to his preceding and contemporary apologetists. Swanson has coined this type of argumentation as the “Attribute-apology”.[139] Before we draw the conclusion that, indeed, ‘Ammar appears to have developed a novel addition to the doctrine of the Trinity or to the modes of argumentation, the question is whether he abandoned the traditional underpinnings altogether?

‘Ammar’s Traditional Defences

In the *Burhan* ‘Ammar uses the more traditional arguments extensively. Let us briefly review them.

First, in the defence of the Trinity ‘Ammar employs the analogies, including the famous sun-ray-warmth analogy. Interestingly, though he must have been aware of the Muslim disdain for this type of argument, he develops some new ones. May be, it is that awareness that prompted him to introduce an analogy to illustrate the limitations of the use of analogies as argument for the doctrine of the Trinity (it will never resemble fully) and underscore the importance of acknowledging that, fundamentally, there cannot be full resemblance between the eternal essence of God and the examples of the created world.[140]

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138 Thomas, *Early Muslim Polemic*.

139 M. Swanson, ‘Are Hypostases Attributes? An Investigation into the Modern Egyptian Christian Appropiation of the Medieval Apologetic Heritage’, *Parole de L’Orient* 15 (1990-1991), 239-250, on 242.

140 Husseini, *The Trinity*, 285.

Second, ‘Ammar employs biblical proofs as well. Interestingly, probably in an attempt to avoiding the Islamic reproach of corruption of the scriptures, he uses only proof texts from the Old Testament.

Third, ‘Ammar also unfolds the Aristotelian arsenal in defending the Trinity. Ammār does not refer directly to the unity of species in the fifth chapter of the *Burhān*, probably due to the fact that the chapter is largely based on his “attribute- apology”. In his *Masā’il*, however, ‘Ammār puts the unity of species in more technical and Christian terms , by referring to one general comprehensive substance alongside specific substances or hypostases in some detail, particularly towards the end of the section on the Trinity. ‘Ammār explains: “We could say that the Father is a perfect God, I mean that He is an eternal, specific, perfect substance. And the Son is a perfect God, I mean that He is an eternal, specific, perfect substance. Then all of this in totality is one perfect God, i.e. one eternal general comprehensive substance.”[141]

Though ‘Ammar is not explicit in this regard, it is likely that he drew on the well-known distinction in the Categories of Aristotele. Aristotle distinguished between primary and secondary substances, though the primary referred to the particular and individual whilst the secondary referred to the universal and generic.

The Audience of ‘Ammar’s writing

Finally, what audience was ‘Ammar directing himself to? To answer this question we have to rely on the text itself and some other external evidence.

As we have seen, ‘Ammar is addressing himself in the question-and-answer mode of the *Burhan* to a person “who believes in the one”, meaning: a Muslim. Of course, this in itself does not mean that he was writing with a Muslim audience in mind. In general, present-day scholars argue that the writings of Christian apologists are destined, in the first place, to the Christian community in order to provide arguments in their discussions with

141 The Holy Spirit is not mentioned.

the Muslim community.[142] Yet, as to the *Burhan*, it cannot denied that ‘Ammar is profoundly engaging himself with Islamic theologizing, in particular that of the *Mu’tazilite* movement. In addition, ‘Ammar is openly questioning the intellectual credibility of certain Mu’tazilic concepts, and, even, arguing that the Trinity, in ‘Ammar’s version, is superior to their concepts. While it is generally presumed that ‘Ammar belonged to the intellectual milieu of Basra, it is reasonable to assume that he had an Muslim audience in mind. For instance this is the opinion of Sarah Leila Husseini in her work on the Trinity. In her comparison of ‘Ammar’s work with the apologies of AbuQurra (Melkite) and Abu Ra’itha (Syrian Orthodox) she concludes that he was not only better equipped, but also “[..] simply more concerned to engage with Islamic thought, primarly through being in Basra, at the cutting edge of Islamic thinking”,[143] If ‘Ammar had this audience in mind, however, he could, impossibly, believe that he would be able to convince Muslims. After all, for all his cutting edge analysis of Mu’tazilite thinking, he employs also all the traditional defences extensively; defences, of which he knew, of course, that they were unpalatable for Muslims. That he might have thought to convince Muslims is the unlikelier, once one appreciates that ‘Ammar’s analysis brought him to the accusatory, if not blasphemous conclusion that the *Mu’tazilite* thinking on the attributes of God renders God inanimate, dead.

‘Ammar’s attacks suggest a political and intellectual climate that was tolerant. Where, likely, ‘Ammar wrote during the reign of caliph al-Mamun (__), the latter’s religious opinions on the createdness of the qur’an and his support for the thinking of the Mu’tazilite movement makes one wonder why ‘Ammar felt unrestrained to attack, in Arabic, that thinking. It makes, in any case, fully understandable that ‘Ammar consistently underscored the complete otherness of God as opposed to the createdness of this world. In philosophical terms: the ontological fundamental divide between God and his creation; it is the very existence of this divide, however, that, at the

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142 Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow*, 89.

143 Husseini, *The Trinity*, 388.

same time, made possible that the same named attribute may refer to related, but different realities in God and human beings. Though stopping at the point that Islamic attributes and Christian hypostases are similar, the emphasis on the eternal oneness of God and acknowledgement of three “names” of God (God, Word and Life) may have pleased and inspired his Christian audience.

Conclusion

The *Burhan* bears testimony of ‘Ammar intimate knowledge of the theological and philosophical developments in the Muslim world of his days. With daunting frankness, he presented his case of the contradictory nature of Mu’tazilite thinking on the attributes of God and of the trinity as God, Word and Life as three aspects of one essence.

Thus, he was the staunch, albeit original, defender of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. With one exception, he brought no change in the doctrine itself. At some points of his Burhan, he added to the concept “Word” and “Life/Spirit” the adjective “His”. Though he is not elaborating on it, apparently he would like to downplay as much as possible the independent separation between the essence and the hypostases.

Clearly, his mode of argumentation is original and novel, in comparison to his predecessors. This give risre to the question whether ‘Ammar was “influenced”, and if so, to what extent and in which manners. That question is the subject of the next chapter, wherein I attempt to weave together, in comparison, the threads of the examination of the works of Timothy I and ‘Ammar on the Trinity and the attributes of God, and of their contemporary Islamic intellectuals, al- Qasim and al-Kindi.

IV. Early Islamic Theologians on the Trinity

As is demonstrated in Timoth’s writings, there was already in his days extensive Islamic theologizing. However, nothing of it in contemporary

writing has survived. As to the decades following Timothy's times until the first decades of the ninth century the situation is not changed in this regard. According to David Thomas, it appears from later catalogues or compilations, however, that, numerous Islamic anti-Christian polemicists must have been active.[144] To the (partly or commpletely) surviving writings belong those of our Zaydi Imam al-Qasim and our philosopher al-Kindi.

'Ammar's Contemporary Scholar: Abu Muhammad al-Qasim Ibn Ibrahim al Hasani al-Rassi

Al-Qasim was a shi'ite Zaydi imam. Presumably, he died around 860.[145]According to Madelung, he was, in his youger years, active in Egypt and moved on to Medina.[146] The Zaydi homeground was Yemen. Madelung and Thomas attribute al-Qasim's *Radd 'ala al-Nasara* to his Egyptian years; Thomas estimates its writing may date from about 825.[147]He reckons it "[..] the earliest known sustained Muslim refutation of Christianity".[148]

The scholarship on al-Qasim, and the Zaydi community is extensive. In the last decades, a multitude of primary sources came to light. In particular, those from the Yeminite libraries and Cairo Genizah collections are intensely edited and translated. It appears that they contribute much to understanding early Islam in its Mu'zalite and Zaydi beliefs and theologies.[149] Earlier, Wilfried Madelung's monograph on al-Qasim put the latter and his

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144 Thomas, *Anti-Christian Polemic*, 32.

145 W. Madelung*, Der Imam al-Qasim Ibn Ibrahim und die Glaubenslehre der Zaiditen* (Berlin 1965), 91-96.

146 Madelung, *al-Qasim*. As referred to by Thomas, *Anti-Christian Polemic*

147 Madelung*, al-Qasim*; Thomas, *Anti-Christian Polemic*, 33.

148 David Thomas, 'Christian Theologians and New Questions', in Emmanouela Grypeou *et al*. (eds.), *The Encounter of Eastern Christianiy with Early Islam* (Leiden 2006), 257-276, on 261.

community in the scholarly limelight.[150] As appears from this paper, David Thomas' contributions are important. This is acknowledged by Ryan Schaffner in his dissertation, *The Bible through a Qur'anic Filter: Scripture Falsification (*Tahrif*) in 8th- and 9th-Century Muslim Disputional Literature*, in which al-Qaim's *Radd* is the primary material to test his theories on the Islamic claims of corruption of the Bible.[151]

Where a French translation is not available in Dutch libraries and I am unable to read Arabic (or, for that matter: Italian, in which it is translated by di Matteo[152]), I had to rely on secondary sources.

Though the *Radd* only briefly discusses the Trinity proper, its particular argumentation in refuting Christianity is of such nature that its argumentation touches upon the Trinity indirectly.

For the purpose of our examination, two lines of argumentation in the *Radd* can be distinguished. The first is the fundamental proposition of the absolute uniqueness and otherness of God. It is on the premise of this proposition that al-Qasim asserts that Islam has reason/rationality on its side, and Christianity is in itself contradictory and illogical. The Christian claim that Jesus is the Son of God leads, in the reasoning of al-Qasim, to insuperable contradictions. Either, since a child resembles its parents, were God the origin of Jesus, it would mean that there are two divinities, or, since God is in a relationship with a contingent being the unique oneness of God is compromised.[153]

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149 Sabine Schmidtke, 'Introduction', in Schmidtke, *Islamic Theology*, 6.

150 Madelung, *al-Qasim.*as referred to by Thomas, *Anti-Christian Polemic,* 33

151 Roy Schaffner, *The Bible through a Qur'anic Filter: Scripture Falsification* (Tahrif) *in 8th- and 9th-century Muslim Disputational Literature* (diss. Ohio State University 2016).

152 Ignazio di Matteo, 'Confutazione contro i Christiani dello zaydita al-Qasim b. Ibrahim', *Rivista degli Studi Orientali* 9 (1922), 301-364.

153 Thomas, *Anti-Christian Polemic,* 35.

The second line has two sections. The first is an elaborated exposition of the Christian beliefs, including the Trinity, which demonstrates profound knowledge of the Bible and Christian theology. His expose pays detailed attention to the hypostatic nature of the distinctions within the Trinity and to the customary analogies used in Christian writing to underpin the "self-evidence" of the Trinity. Instead of aiming his attack on these features, in the second section, the proper refutation, 'Ammar takes his critical cue from the the titles "Father" and "Son". Basing himself on qur'anic teaching that God took a son, he argues that the titles Father and Son "[..] cannot denote the essence of an entity because they arise from an action and relationship which are by definition contingent and temporal".[154] As such, they are neccesarily improper to denote the essence.

Clearly, since this treatise is written within the Zaydi community of Egypt in the first place, the conclusion that is was widely, or even without that particular community, cannot not be drawn. In using this treatise nevertheless, my point is not that, likely, our 'Ammar may have taken notice of it, nor that, for instance, through contemporary compilations or citations it was spreaded beyond the Zaydi community. What it does illustrate, however, is how detailed Muslim knowledge of the Christian beliefs and theology already in the early ninth century apparently was and had reached this Shi'ite Zaydi Imam in Egypt. Given this level of intimate knowledge, it is likely that such knowledge existed in scholarly circles of other Muslim movements. Equally likely is that the Christian counterparts of these scholars, and more in general the Christians in all those "zones of contact and controversy" were aware of the various variegated Muslim approaches to the Christian belief. In particular, there must have been a growing awareness that the Muslim counterparts strongly argued with the use of rationality only; that is without referring to Qur'anic citations as underpinning.

Al-Qasim's *Radd* deserves attention for yet another reason. As David Thomas noted, despite all the detailed and intimate knowledge, al-Qasim chose to found his refutation of the Trinity on traditional Qur'anic arguments.

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154 Thomas, *The Encounter,* 264.

Why? Was it with a view to his intended audience? Was it because the growing intellectual Islamic confidence, the need to argue all and each aspect had become less pressing? Or, was it a manifestation of a fundamental disregard, or even a general disdain for the argumentation of the Christians to defend their beliefs?

'Ammar's second contemporary Muslim scholar: Abu Yussuf Ya'qub ibn Ishaq al-Kindi (d. c. 864)

In several ways, al-Kindi had interesting features. He descended from a former royal family from Kindi; his forebears, reputedly, belonged to the first companions of Muhammad. He had good contacts with caliph al-Mamun and caliph al-Mutasim. Importantly, as ardent supporters of the translation movement, al-Mamun and al-Mutasim engendered civil war (*mihna*) to make the teachings of the Mu'tazilite schools state religion. Al-Kindi employed several translators. They produced translations of Greek philosophers, in particular of important protagonists of the neo-platonic schools, as Plotinus, Proclus and John Philoponus. Al-Kindi was a philosopher in the first place. His most famous surviving work is *On First Philosophy*.[155] Though not a philosopher in our terms, al-Kindi's characterization as first arabic philosopher stemmed from his novel combination of methodological rigourness (in this sense opposed to the theological methods of the Mu'tazilite theologians) and his uses of a vast array of (translated) scientific knowledge to find solutions for the philosophical and theological issues of his times.[156] He was, in fact, a polymath. His subjects ranged from mathematics,

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155 See Gerhard Endress, 'The Circle of Kindi', in G.Endress and R. Kruk (eds.), *The Ancient Tradition in Christian and Islamic Hellenism* (Leiden 1997), 43-76 (not consulted); Gutas, *Greek Thought*, 119-120.

156 Gutas, *Greek Thought*, 120.

optics, geometry and astronomy to pihlosophy, according Ibn al-Nadim in his tenth century catalogue *Fihrist*.

The present-day scholarly discussion of al-Kindi's work is extensive. Different angles highlight the various interests of al-Kindi: metaphysical,[157] scientifical,[158] and philosophical-methodologically.[159] In many of his writings, God, and theology in general, were not far away. They concerned, amongst others, the unknownability of God's essence in its relation to the (causal) createdness of the world, and the question where multiplicity comes from. According to our al-Nadim al-Kindi was the author of some 300 works, many of which on these two subjects.

Though most certainly not his prime occupation, al-Kindi seems to be the author of a polemical treatise on the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. We know of it from a work, that in its turn refuted al-Kindi's attack on the Trinity. Its author is Yahya Ibn 'Adi, a West Syrian theologian of a later generation. In this refutation Yahya quoted the main parts of al-Kindi's resoning. It is from this quotations that we know of the lines of attack on the Trinity.[160] What, then, are these lines of attack?

Common to the different lines of attack is the description that al-Kindi gave of the doctrine. In his understanding, the doctrine would hold that each hypostasis (*aquanim*) has its own distinctive properties, while being identical as a substance (*jahwar*, that is reality (*ma'ana*). His first line of attack is the argument is that each hypostasis is composed of the one substance, the eternal essence and of distinctive property. Al-Kindi concluded that what is composed is caused and cannot at the same time be eternal.[161] Secondly, in

157 A. Ivry, *Al-Kindi's Metaphysics* (Albany 1974), not consulted.

158 C. D'Ancona, *Recherches sur le Liber Causis* (Paris 1995), not consulted.

159 P. Adamson, *Al-Kindi* (New York 2007).

160 A. Périer, *Yahya ben 'Adi: un philosophe arabe-chrétien du X siecle* (Paris 1920).

161 Thomas, *Anti-Christian Polemic*, 35; Périer, 'Un Traité', 14-15.

impersonating each of the hypostasis by calling each “person”, al-Kindi had a foundation to show the impossibility of the Trinitarian claim of each hypostasis carrying eternal substance.[162] In this line of argument he invoked a work of the neo-platonist Porphyry, *Isagoge*, an introduction to philosophy In his third line of attack al-Kindi refuted that, logically, three can be one and one three. Al-Kindi referred to the *Topica* of Aristoteles.

The Audience(s) of al-Qasim and al-Kindi: Conclusions

Three aspects of these, disparate, refutations deserve mentioning. First, as Thomas observes, the description of the Trinity they gave as startingpoint is incomplete (al-Qasim) and partly incorrect (al-Qasim and al-Kindi).[163]Yahya, a few decades later, lamented time on time in his refutation of al-Kindi’s *Radd* that the latter described the doctrine incorrectly.[164] Second, both take the Trinitarian concepts literally and realistically (the implications of getting and having a son) and hypostases as “persons”. They treat the concepts as “factual” propositions as correlating to reality and to be analyzed according to the strictness of grammar and logic. Third, the prominence of the Islamic doctrine of God’s otherness is an impediment for our polemicists to have an eye for the Christians’ allowance to use the phenomena of the created world in order to get a begin of understanding of the eternal world. Such metaphorical description, one may surmise, tresspasses the bounds of God’s otherness.[165]

In addition, it must be recognized that giving answers to the issue of novelty and influence, the early Islamic “tradition” is absent. As noted, there

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162 Périer, ‘Un Traité’, 16.

163 Thomas, *Anti-Christian Polemic*, 62.

164 Périer, ‘Un Traité’, 16, 17, and 18, for instance.

165 Thomas, *Anti-Christian Polemic*, 64.

were earlier Islamic apologists, contemporaries of Timothy, but nothing of their works survived.

Care is called for to make generalizations too easily. These apects of first half ninth century Islamic polemics do not disappear in later polemics. For instance, writing about the polemics of Abu ‘Isa al-Warraq (he was Christian nor Muslim) David Thomas, an outspoken admirer of al-Warraq’s intellectual abilities, charactrized al-Warraq’s descriptions of Christian doctrines as “a caricature”.[166] An interesting issue for my Conclusions in the final chapter.

166 Thomas, *Anti-Christian Polemic*, 62.

Chapter 5
Conclusions

Limitations

This paper is marred by several imitations. I want them make clear at the outset. For one, the choice of the authors and of their writings, ultimately, is selective. As I attempted to argue, I believe this selection is not arbitrary. A second limitation is that I left practically all codicological and linguistical issues of different versions, different recensions and provenance to the experts. I did rely on certain translations.

Third, an important limitation is that my paper's focus is on the apologetics in regard only the issue of the Trinity and the Qur'anic discussion of the attributes of God. With all the comparative ambitions of my paper, this focus bars a very interesting comparative view, once other apologetical issues would have been taken in the equation. A similar restriction of insights emanates from the limiting of the *comparanda* to the East Syrian Christian community and the Arab-Muslim community. In view of the Trinitarian focus, after all largely a *pan-Christian* doctrine, a wider set of *comparanda* would have been equally legitimate.

Finally, I have experienced during my research that the examinations of my paper require several professional expertises I do not have. My paper would have won were I have been educated in philosophy, theology and Middle Eastern languages and area studies!

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Comparing Islamic theological and Christian/East Syrian intellectuals

Aiming at figuring out whether my authors and, if so, whether that resulted from a form of influence, this comparison was at the heart of my research plan. Many a present-day scholar moulds this comparison in terms of (similarities and differences of) the Islamic theologians and the Christian theologians. Carrying out my research plan I discovered that, for various and disparate reasons, this is a perilious approach.

To begin with, in our period, within the formative early Abbasid society there was a plethora of opposing and rivalling branches and sectarian movenents within Islamic philosophy and theology. In contrast to the established world of long-held traditions of the East Syrian ecclesiastical and intellectual community, this early Abbasid world, though at an abstract level "Islamic", was in the first place characterized by various, loosely organized private "schools". Each espoused and taught, in variable degrees of doctrinal differences, its specific

learnings on the proper “hadithal” sayings and chains, on the legal rules of proper Muslim behaviour, on the proper roles of *falafsa* and on religious or theological issues, varying from the Qur’an’s eternal or greated status to the rules governing the succession within the caliphate. Most of these “schools” and movements were organized around, and named after a certain leading figure. Certainly, some developed “tradition” and followers in the next generations (often: family) and got a *renommee* as such in the elite society in regard of their teachings. This phenomenon and its development with the passage of time in the period of our examination informed my examination in several respects.

First, comparing the writings of our Christian authors, embedded within an established and coherent church organization, like the Church of the East and the writings of Islamic intellectuals, which are to be taken in the context of the controversialistic culture of early Abbasid society is difficult. As the distinctiveness of the trajectories of both communities that brought each of them in the Abbasid era (Chapter 3) suggests, there were strong differences. In itself that calls for comparative caution, the fact that we have simply no sources from the earliest phase of Islamic apologistic makes internal comparison in terms of novelty virtually impossible. And yet, despite these controversies and fracticiousness, the Islamic intellectuals I examined appeared remarkably unison in their polemical arguing against the East Syrian writing on the Trinity. Increasingly over time as it seems, these, and other apologists took resort to standard and basic, albeit highly structured, arguments, when they rebutted directly Christian doctrines and practices. Given the internal complexities and controversies in the Islamic intellectual world, this external uniformity is remarkable. My hypothetical “explanation” of this feature of Islamic polemicizing is that, initially, the avoidance of overintellectual exposes may have been tactical expediency vis a vis a seasoned intellectual opponent to simplify the anti-Christian writings; with the passage of time, I would argue, they felt less need to flex their intellectual muscles extensively anymore. I would suggest that several developments brought this about. At the intellectual level, once the translation movemrnt on its highpoint, Islamic theologians were self confident and robust in their conviction that Christian doctrines

logically, philosophical and rational deficient and inferior to Islam. True religion ought to be discerned by logic and reason only, not by scriptural proofs and analogies. At the social level, it had become clear that Islam was unstoppable in its advance over other faiths.

Second, the East Syrian theological world may have appeared to have, and have kept ecclesiastical and doctrinal coherence, I found in my examination that the early Abbasid era, the East Syrian community was, in several respects, "in formation" as well. At the times of 'Ammar the world of the times of Timothy was no longer completely intact. Politically, the threat of Byzantine resurgence was eclipsed. The process of Islamization had transformed the empire into a centralized bureaucracy, with a uniform judiciary and (fiscal) administration. Socially-intellectually, partly as a result of the translation movement, the Abbasid intellectual world could boast of scientific achievements in its own right and encompassing much more than philosophy and theology; processes also fostered by the fierce competition between the various "schools". Though it is impossible to measure its precise progression, in its various manifestations and the variety of causes and reasons, (Christian) conversion took its course. The intra-Muslim controversy between the "traditionalists" and other religious movements (primarily the Mu'tazili movement in its various forms) on the absoluteness of God's otherness and transparancy had become a matter of political concern. Caliph al-Mamun enforced the Mu'zalite opinion (for instance on the createdness of the Qur'an) as the state religion in a civil war (*mihna).* Though little is known of the effects on the East Syrian community, all these developments must have been "formative" for them as well. It is symbolic for these processes that, while in Timothy's days it was the ecclesiastical top, that represented a coherent intellectual doctrine, some decades later it was an "intellectual" as 'Ammar who is documented as delivering the teachings of his religious community vis a vis the Islamic opponent. From the few surviving writings, it seems that the balance of the the church elite between the concern for true religion and governing the community was shifting to less intellectual and more political concerns.

Were there novelties in the East Syrian and Islamic writings?

During the 50 years of early Abbasid apologetics on the issue of the Trinity and the attributes of God, within each of these communities as in their interactions we can discern continuities and changes. Let us examine the most important of these developments.

Timothy adhered to the doctrine of the Trinity. In addition to the classical underpinnings of this doctrine, he introduced a novel mode of argumentation. He used Aristotelian logic to explain that the Islamic concept of the oneness and wholeness of God ran counter with the Qur'anic acknowledgement of God's attributes. While Timothy did not draw the conclusion of his reasoning that Islam denied God Life and Speech, 'Ammar, some fifty years later, started his polemical *Burhan* with exactly this conclusion. In the next paragraph I will discuss the way this mode of argumentation from Timothy's times to those of 'Ammar took.

As for the Muslim side: many a theologian strove for words and concepts to reconcile the Qur'anic aknowledgement of God living and speaking with the absoluteness of God's oneness. It was a quest that was exclusively driven by intra-islam considerations and modes of argument within a myriadic spiderweb of schools and movements. However, it have not been internal considerations entirely that moved the thelogical debates within the Abbasid elite. In the early eighties of the eight century caliph al-Mahdi commissioned Timothy I to provide a translation of the *Topica* of Aristotle. Where this work is the most practical oriented dialectal discussion guide of the related works on logic and dialectics of Aristotle, it appears to indicate that al-Mahdi felt need to study or have studied the Aristotelian modes of argumentation. It is reasonable to surmise that this was prompted as a result of East Syrian uses of Aristotle in debates; in any case, it was a novelty.

On the doctrinal front, the Abbasid theologians showed "internally" much intellectual prowess, but very rare was the theologian who came to recognize a kind of existence of "attributes" , though connected with, the essence of God. In fact, it has been only 'Abdallah b. Sa'id Ibn Kullab (d. c. 854), who advocated this. In his reasoning the *Creator* God

must by definition be living and speaking, and thus by implication have the attributes the Son and the Spirit. Hence, he concluded, the characteristics of God originated from these attributes, which are neither identical nordistinct from his essence (Thomas 1992).

Ibn Kullab is an exception; and a exception of sorts, as, ultimately, also he postulates a kind of unity. In general, the Abbasid apologists addressed Christian arguments selectively. Later on in the Abbasid era, they moulded these arguments to almost caricatures. In their apologetics, the challenge of that reconciliation was treated as an affirmation of the superiority of the Islamic doctrine of oneness and otherness of God.

It became rather customary for Christian apologists in our period, for instance Timothy and Ammar, to refer, though not systematically, to the three in the Godhead as God, *His* Word and *His* Spirit. In comparison with the Greek Fathers and the pre-Timothy-theologians of the Church of the East, this is a change. It is assumed that the "classic" reference to the three as separate entities was too provocative.

The Trinitarian-Attribute controversies and Aristotle

The role of Aristotelian logic and dialectics in Christian-Muslim apologetics is amongst present-day scholars controversial. My examination of the sources of this paper, together with the secondary literature, has not brought fully conclusive answers. As I have come to see it, there are following issues. First, what motivated East Syrians and Abbasid intellectuals to appropiate Aristotelian logic and philosophy: in its own right or to assist in intra- and interfaith polemics? Second: along what ways came Aristotle to the East Syrians and to the Abbasid intellectuals, at what point of time? Third: was in our period at one or at both sides the perception or aim that philosophy should be employed as providing the common "language" to discuss and overcome inter-faith controversies?

As I see it, the question what motivated interest in Aristotle, the answer cannot be unequivocal. In present scholarship, the emphasis has come to

rest on the assertion that the interest was to study and use it in its own right (King 2015; Watt 2016). Earlier Daiber held the opposite opinion (Daiber 1995). Looking at my primary sources at the Christian side, there is little doubt that from Timothy onward the interest was broader than purely motivated for polemical ends (which remained an objective throughout our period). The East Syrian educational tradition, the letters of Timothy and the dialectical reasoning of ‘Ammar appear to support this. However, in contrast to King and Watt, I believe that other motives could have been very well present. As to Timothy, as leader of his community good relations with the caliphal court were crucial. It would have been not uncommon for any patriarch to seize any opportunity to ingratiate himself. Translating the Topica and showing himself an “Aristotelian”, it could contribute to Timothy’s standing. Though Ámmar was in another position, likely, a comparable motive may have played its part: as a Christian apologist in Arabic, showing that intellectually your intellectual armour to comprise of Greek philosophy and logic could contribute to, and ensure the social standing in the leading Abbasid intellectual elite. As for the latter: reaping the fruits of translations, at the times of ‘Ammar the Abbasid interest in Aristotle was on the rise; an interest, that reached much further than apologetic purposes. In fact: the Abbasid apologists of our period used, genarally speaking, common sense logic rather than aristotelian concepts and methods. (Thomas).

Undoubtedly, halfway the eighth century the East Syrins intellectual elite knew dertain parts of Aristotle’s works. How profound and how broad is not clear. The general scholarly opinion appears to be that the Syrian Orthodox were oriented more strongly on Greek philosophy. The Abbasids became conversant with Aristotle (and many other Greek writers), primarily, through the translations which were made in the first half ninth century and were appropriated by Abbasid philosophers, astronomers, physicians, mathemeticians and theologians. It peaked in the Abbasid golden era of the tenth century with the philosopher al-Farabi as its champion.

Was there an intention to bridge inter-faith controversies by employing Aristotelian logic and dialectics? In particular, Martin Heimgartner has

toyed with this idea of “ein Verstandigungsbasis”. Unmistakenbly, Timothy introduced the novelty of employment of Aristotelian logic to liaise conceptually the trinitarian doctrine with the Abbasid discussions on the attributes of God. ‘Ammar, as I argued, brought this line of reasoning a step further. But, at the same time, both argued using the classical scriptural and analogical considerations extensively. Given their audience of their own community, it seems plausible that they did not want to abandon those classical arguments altogether. Also at the abstract dialectical level, it seems not plausible that the East Syrians have had such bridge function in mind. While to them the Word and the Spirit are ontological entities, for the Muslim intellectual these are just metaphors for Jesus (Heimgartner 2012).

Novelties and “influences”

Doctrinally, in our period little has been changed. The East Syrians adhered to the Trinitarian doctrine with its unity in essence and threeness in hypostatc aspect. I found that Christian writers tended, though not invariably, to refer to the three as God, *His* Word and *His* Spirit. Theologically, as it seems to imply a subordination, it is a novelty, compared to Persons. Clearly, as we have seen, in terms of mode of argumentation both Timothy and ‘Ammar brought significant novelties.

To detect novelties in the writings of al-Qasim and al-Kindi is a fundamentally different exercise. There is no “church” doctrine, there are only competing schools and movements (hadithal chains; *falafsa* schools; theological schools and sectarian movements); each of them developing and employing its own concepts. Consequently, polemicizing with the Trinity was conducted predominantly from these own concepts. But what they had in common was that each polemicist operated from the premise that, however argued, it was irreconcilable with God’s oneness to give him names or attributes that had an ontological status. Hence, for these reasons, there is no point in searching for “novelties” in order to find out if the Abbasid apologist’s were influenced by Christian concepts. My research approach was

Christian-biased! Nevertheless, what did I found out in my examination of my Abbasid apologists (in our period) on “influence” from their Christian opponents? Of course, *three* insights. First, at the intellectual level: ontologically and grammatically to name God with attributes diminishes his oneness. Second, their apologies were fundamentally polemics, wherein Christian doctrines, as they formulated them, were attacked with ever greater finesse and assertiveness without defence of their own doctrines. Third, in our period we have one single indication that they took East Syrian doctrines and writers seriously: according to al-Nadim’s catalogue of writings of the period he mentioned a (lost) work by al-Hudayl that after its title should have contained a rebuttal of ‘Ammar’s writings. It may be taken as “influence” that prompted counter attack.

Zones of contact and “influences”

The East Syrian and Abbasid community shared several zones of contact. From daily dealings in the marketplace to participating in the elite circles of the translation movement; from family relations to covert apostacy. It cannot have been otherwise than that these zones of contact heightened the awareness of the other’s opinions and arguments. It is impossible to reconstruct in how far it was from these heightened awareness or otherwise that novelties, as I have identified them, arose . It is not stretchting the limits of reason too far, however, to assume that major issues of apologetic controversy in certain zones of contact were systematic subject of interaction and discussion. Even, it is not difficult to imagine that, in the intellectual hotspots of Baghdad and Basra, at both sides, certain opinions and arguments were “buzzing” around. These awareness heightening occurrences were, of course, further stimulated and sharpend by the fact that the one side read those opinions and arguments in the writings (now predominantly in Arabic as *lingua franca*) of the other side, as they circulated. It must have been a social climate conducive to the flow of ideas over boundaries, to borrowing or appropiating ideas or modes of argumentation. In short: “influence” occurred.

Certainly, in the sense that it might have given rise to new defensive retorts; or to improvement of, or introducing (counter)arguments. At the front of the doctrinal content, it is difficult to assess whether that has in fact been the case. As for the Abbasid theological side, the general picture is that they were strongly driven by internal debates, that in their apologetic writings they standardized and schematized the other's opinions and arguments and that they were employing common sense logical instruments, rather than mature Greek logic. Interestingly, their internal dicussions were richer, more creative and more diverse. What can this difference explain? I would argue: the changes in the non-theological conditions. As explained above more extensively, external and internal threats for the Abbasid regime subsided in our period considerably. The number of (formally) adherents of Islam was growing importantly. Economy and agriculture benefitted from the larger common market. The translation movement was an intellectual appropriation movement at the same time, fostering over an even broader front of diciplines an efflorescense of intellectual achievement. The resulting self confidence, combined with the genuine religious conviction that their Islam was the superior faith, explained the (changing) nature of their anti-Christian apologetics.

This contention finds, in my opinion, corroboration in the exception I found in my examination of the sources. Famously, caliph al-Mahdi commissioned Timothy with the translation of a work of Aristotle. This occurred at a point of time when these conditions were not yet there. Absent that later self confidence, the apparent prowess of the East Syrians in using Aristotle influenced the caliph and his entourage to an unprecedented novel step. David Thomas may be correct in his judgment that the course of Abbasid apologetics was determined by their own agenda and independent, *internal* dynamics, for the very early period I would disagree with him. It was an external influence that brought them to demand new intellectual ammunition for debate.

This is not to say that they did not produce such writings anymore. With a view to which audience did they produce their writings? I find it difficult to assess what audience their intended audience was. My hypothesis would be: the Christian elite and their flock. Their preference

for common sense logic and directness of standardized arguments may have made their writings, in their own view, suitable for a Christian audience in the first place.

In regard of the East Syrian side, our examination of the sources produced several instances of novelties. The most important was the Aristotelian input Timothy gave to his apologetical writing. This novelty was not the result of Islamic "influence" in strict sense. Though he made use of the internal Abbasid discussions on the attributes of God, it was not borrowing from Islamic teaching. One may feel tempted to dubb it an instance of felicitious cross-pollination, were it not that this term obscures more than make clear what factor(s) effected the "influence". In Timothy's case, it was, I would propose, the resolving of a dilemma. It must have been clear that the classical arguments with scriptural proof-texting and adducing analogies was not effective to influence the Muslim intellectuals. Abandoning entirely, however, these classical arguments would not have been understood by his own flock and their local priests. his intended audience.

Was this different in regard of 'Ammars *Burhan*? As I have argued, Ammar brings Timothy's argument a step further. Paraphrasing Sidney Griffith, his *Burhan* should be Islamic theological reasoning in a Christian dress. According to Griffith, 'Ammar bended to Islamic reasoning in a way that makes indistinguishable from an Muslim author. I cannot agree with Griffith. The *Burhan* is a clever use of Islamic reasoning and concepts, but on all accounts a Christian writing. It is Christian writing in an Islamic dress. Though in nascent form already employed in the works of Timothy, later East Syrian authors developed the application of Aristotelian logic to high levels. It prompted their Muslim counterparts to similar endeavours. This appropriation of these Aristotelian teachings from the East Syrian theologians by Muslim theologians is a refutation of David Thomas' claim of indigenousness of Islamic theologizing. In their turn, it influenced the East Syrian theologians in their argumentative mode of defence of the Trinity, confirming, in this particular regard, the claim of, amongst others, Griffith that the East Syrian theologians tended to bend their argumentation to the intellectual appetites of the Islamic intellectuals.

Boundary policing and audience

It remains a vexed question which audiences our apologists had in mind. While boundary policing certainly was a significant consideration for writing apologetic literature, it is too simple to conclude that these writings had only one's own flock as intended audience. Once Arabic had become the common unitary language of the Abbasid empire, both sides became more aware of the impact of this. In some respects, it brought change to the tone of voice and the purpose of their writings. As for the East Christian side, these changes may have given to the employment of Aristotelian-like approaches a further incentive. Where this type of reasoning got stronger hold, it supposedly universal validity may be seen as a compensation for the appreciation of the declining force of the usual arguments laong analogical and scriptural lines. It may have played out differently at the Abbasid side. They may very well have seen the Christian population as an audience as well. It any rate, their common sense type of argumentation provided their own flock with ready-made arguments in the inter-faith encounters, and may be, more fit to make Christians think about their own doctrines.

With all these fascinating intellectual achievements, it remains the question whether they meant much when it concerned the common believer on the ground. Both the Islamic Abbasid as the East Syrian community were class societies. Put simply, but not unfairly: the urban elite and the peasantry. While this character of class society was common to both communities, it played out differently. On the ground, in the rural dioceses of the Church of the East, it was the lower clergy and the local monasteries that had to police the communal boundaries. These priests and deaconds achieved little with high-minded theological musings on the Trinity. Christian faith was practice, in credal formulars, in hymns, in healing and other cultic rituals. Practices, wherein denominational and even faith boundaries were vague and blurry for the common believer. It played also out differenly, when comparing ʻÁmmar and Timothy. The Patriarch had authority and competences that

counted for the clergy; ‘Ammar not. Ironically, his Islamic dress was, in a way, the emperors’clothes for the rural common believer.

Further research

This examnation leaves much to be desired. My initial research question turned out to be partly based on a bias that a Christian type of lens would do for the Abbasid world of apologetics. In addition, the limitations I set forth at the begiining of these conclusions testify to the resricted meaning of the outcomes of my examination. Leaving these deficiences for what they are, in two respects my examination points to areas of further research.

First, the topic of interreligious interaction and influence in this period needs expansion to the total of all interactions, i.e. Manicheans, Gnostics, and, in particular Judaism. The restriction to the Christian-Islamic interaction is not only artificial, it renders comparison a perilous business in the world of Middle Eastern communities in their myriad of disparate interactions and permeable boundaries. In addition, methodologically comparison wuld improve when conducted on three phenomena at least. Second, it may be worthwhile to examine whether the habitual restricting of interreligious comparison to Christianity and Islam as comparanda may, partly, be determined by present-day religious agendas. In addition, this narrowness of our research lenses may very well make us blind for the important other aspects of these interactions to the extent that they lie in liturgical, worshipping, poetical, creedal and similar practices on the ground

Comparing Islamic Theological and Christian/East Syrian Intellectuals

Aiming at figuring out whether my authors and, if so, whether that resulted from a form of influence, this comparison was at the heart of my research plan. Many a present-day scholar moulds this comparison in terms of (similarities and differences of) the Islamic theologians and the Christian theologians. Carrying out my research plan I discovered that, for various and disparate reasons, this is a perilious approach.

To begin with, in our period, within the formative early Abbasid society there was a plethora of opposing and rivalling branches and sectarian movenents within Islamic philosophy and theology. In contrast to the established world of long-held traditions of the East Syrian ecclesiastical and intellectual community, this early Abbasid world, though at an abstract level "Islamic", was in the first place characterized by various, loosely organized private "schools". Each espoused and taught, in variable degrees of doctrinal differences, its specific learnings on the proper "hadithal" sayings and chains, on the legal rules of proper Muslim behaviour, on the proper roles of *falafsa* and on religious or theological issues, varying from the Qur'an's eternal or greated status to the rules governing the succession within the caliphate. Most of these "schools" and movements were organized around, and named after a certain leading figure. Certainly, some developed "tradition" and followers in the next generations (often: family) and got a *renommee* as such in the elite society in regard of their teachings. This phenomenon and its development with the passage of time in the period of our examination informed my examination in several respects.

First, comparing the writings of our Christian authors, embedded within an established and coherent church organization, like the Church of the East and the writings of Islamic intellectuals, which are to be taken in the context of the controversialistic culture of early Abbasid society is difficult. As the distinctiveness of the trajectories of both communities that brought each of them in the Abbasid era (Chapter 3) suggests, there were strong

differences. In itself that calls for comparative caution, the fact that we have simply no sources from the earliest phase of Islamic apologistic makes internal comparison in terms of novelty virtually impossible. And yet, despite these controversies and fracticiousness, the Islamic intellectuals I examined appeared remarkably unison in their polemical arguing against the East Syrian writing on the Trinity. Increasingly over time as it seems, these, and other apologists took resort to standard and basic, albeit highly structured, arguments, when they rebutted directly Christian doctrines and practices. Given the internal complexities and controversies in the Islamic intellectual world, this external uniformity is remarkable. My hypothetical "explanation" of this feature of Islamic polemicizing is that, initially, the avoidance of overintellectual exposes may have been tactical expediency vis a vis a seasoned intellectual opponent to simplify the anti-Christian writings; with the passage of time, I would argue, they felt less need to flex their intellectual muscles extensively anymore. I would suggest that several developments brought this about. At the intellectual level, once the translation movemrnt on its highpoint, Islamic theologians were self confident and robust in their conviction that Christian doctrines logically, philosophical and rational deficient and inferior to Islam. True religion ought to be discerned by logic and reason only, not by scriptural proofs and analogies. At the social level, it had become clear that Islam was unstoppable in its advance over other faiths.

Second, the East Syrian theological world may have appeared to have, and have kept ecclesiastical and doctrinal coherence, I found in my examination that the early Abbasid era, the East Syrian community was, in several respects, "in formation" as well. At the times of 'Ammar the world of the times of Timothy was no longer completely intact. Politically, the threat of Byzantine resurgence was eclipsed. The process of Islamization had transformed the empire into a centralized bureaucracy, with a uniform judiciary and (fiscal) administration. Socially-intellectually, partly as a result of the translation movement, the Abbasid intellectual world could boast of scientific achievements in its own right and encompassing much more than

philosophy and theology; processes also fostered by the fierce competition between the various “schools”. Though it is impossible to measure its precise progression, in its various manifestations and the variety of causes and reasons, (Christian) conversion took its course. The intra-Muslim controversy between the “traditionalists” and other religious movements (primarily the Mu’tazili movement in its various forms) on the absoluteness of God’s otherness and transparancy had become a matter of political concern. Caliph al-Mamun enforced the Mu’zalite opinion (for instance on the createdness of the Qur’an) as the state religion in a civil war (*mihna).* Though little is known of the effects on the East Syrian community, all these developments must have been “formative” for them as well. It is symbolic for these processes that, while in Timothy’s days it was the ecclesiastical top, that represented a coherent intellectual doctrine, some decades later it was an “intellectual” as ‘Ammar who is documented as delivering the teachings of his religious community vis a vis the Islamic opponent. From the few surviving writings, it seems that the balance of the the church elite between the concern for true religion and governing the community was shifting to less intellectual and more political concerns.

Were There Novelties in the East Syrian and Islamic Writings?

During the 50 years of early Abbasid apologetics on the issue of the Trinity and the attributes of God, within each of these communities as in their interactions we can discern continuities and changes. Let us examine the most important of these developments.

Timothy adhered to the doctrine of the Trinity. In addition to the classical underpinnings of this doctrine, he introduced a novel mode of argumentation. He used Aristotelian logic to explain that the Islamic concept of the oneness and wholeness of God ran counter with the Qur’anic acknowledgement of God’s attributes. While Timothy did not draw the conclusion of his reasoning that Islam denied God Life and Speech, ‘Ammar, some fifty years later, started his polemical *Burhan* with exactly this

conclusion. In the next paragraph I will discuss the way this mode of argumentation from Timothy's times to those of 'Ammar took.

As for the Muslim side: many a theologian strove for words and concepts to reconcile the Qur'anic aknowledgement of God living and speaking with the absoluteness of God's oneness. It was a quest that was exclusively driven by intra-islam considerations and modes of argument within a myriadic spiderweb of schools and movements. However, it have not been internal considerations entirely that moved the thelogical debates within the Abbasid elite. In the early eighties of the eight century caliph al-Mahdi commissioned Timothy I to provide a translation of the *Topica* of Aristotle. Where this work is the most practical oriented dialectal discussion guide of the related works on logic and dialectics of Aristotle, it appears to indicate that al-Mahdi felt need to study or have studied the Aristotelian modes of argumentation. It is reasonable to surmise that this was prompted as a result of East Syrian uses of Aristotle in debates; in any case, it was a novelty.

On the doctrinal front, the Abbasid theologians showed "internally" much intellectual prowess, but very rare was the theologian who came to recognize a kind of existence of "attributes" , though connected with, the essence of God. In fact, it has been only 'Abdallah b. Sa'id Ibn Kullab (d. c. 854), who advocated this. In his reasoning the *Creator* God must by definition be living and speaking, and thus by implication have the attributes the Son and the Spirit. Hence, he concluded, the characteristics of God originated from these attributes, which are neither identical nordistinct from his essence (Thomas 1992).

Ibn Kullab is an exception; and a exception of sorts, as, ultimately, also he postulates a kind of unity. In general, the Abbasid apologists addressed Christian arguments selectively. Later on in the Abbasid era, they moulded these arguments to almost caricatures. In their apologetics, the challenge of that reconciliation was treated as an affirmation of the superiority of the Islamic doctrine of oneness and otherness of God.

It became rather customary for Christian apologists in our period, for instance Timothy and Ammar, to refer, though not systematically, to the three in the Godhead as God, *His* Word and *His* Spirit. In comparison with the Greek Fathers and the pre-Timothy-theologians of the Church of the East, this is a change. It is assumed that the “classic” reference to the three as separate entities was too provocative.

The Trinitarian-Attribute Controversies and Aristotle

The role of Aristotelian logic and dialectics in Christian-Muslim apologetics is amongst present-day scholars controversial. My examination of the sources of this paper, together with the secondary literature, has not brought fully conclusive answers. As I have come to see it, there are following issues. First, what motivated East Syrians and Abbasid intellectuals to appropiate Aristotelian logic and philosophy: in its own right or to assist in intra- and interfaith polemics? Second: along what ways came Aristotle to the East Syrians and to the Abbasid intellectuals, at what point of time? Third: was in our period at one or at both sides the perception or aim that philosophy should be employed as providing the common “language” to discuss and overcome inter-faith controversies?

As I see it, the question what motivated interest in Aristotle, the answer cannot be unequivocal. In present scholarship, the emphasis has come to rest on the assertion that the interest was to study and use it in its own right (King 2015; Watt 2016). Earlier Daiber held the opposite opinion (Daiber 1995). Looking at my primary sources at the Christian side, there is little doubt that from Timothy onward the interest was broader than purely motivated for polemical ends (which remained an objective throughout our period). The East Syrian educational tradition, the letters of Timothy and the dialectical reasoning of ‘Ammar appear to support this. However, in contrast to King and Watt, I believe that other motives could have been very well present. As to Timothy, as leader of his community good relations with the caliphal court were crucial. It would have been not uncommon for any

patriarch to seize any opportunity to ingratiate himself. Translating the Topica and showing himself an “Aristotelian”, it could contribute to Timothy’s standing. Though Ámmar was in another position, likely, a comparable motive may have played its part: as a Christian apologist in Arabic, showing that intellectually your intellectual armour to comprise of Greek philosophy and logic could contribute to, and ensure the social standing in the leading Abbasid intellectual elite. As for the latter: reaping the fruits of translations, at the times of ‘Ammar the Abbasid interest in Aristotle was on the rise; an interest, that reached much further than apologetic purposes. In fact: the Abbasid apologists of our period used, genarally speaking, common sense logic rather than aristotelian concepts and methods. (Thomas).

Undoubtedly, halfway the eighth century the East Syrins intellectual elite knew dertain parts of Aristotle’s works. How profound and how broad is not clear. The general scholarly opinion appears to be that the Syrian Orthodox were oriented more strongly on Greek philosophy. The Abbasids became conversant with Aristotle (and many other Greek writers), primarily, through the translations which were made in the first half ninth century and were appropriated by Abbasid philosophers, astronomers, physicians, mathemeticians and theologians. It peaked in the Abbasid golden era of the tenth century with the philosopher al-Farabi as its champion.

Was there an intention to bridge inter-faith controversies by employing Aristotelian logic and dialectics? In particular, Martin Heimgartner has toyed with this idea of “ein Verstandigungsbasis”. Unmistakenbly, Timothy introduced the novelty of employment of Aristotelian logic to liaise conceptually the trinitarian doctrine with the Abbasid discussions on the attributes of God. ‘Ammar, as I argued, brought this line of reasoning a step further. But, at the same time, both argued using the classical scriptural and analogical considerations extensively. Given their audience of their own community, it seems plausible that they did not want to abandon those classical arguments altogether. Also at the abstract dialectical level, it seems not plausible that the East Syrians have had such bridge function in mind.

While to them the Word and the Spirit are ontological entities, for the Muslim intellectual these are just metaphors for Jesus (Heimgartner 2012).

Novelties and "Influences"

Doctrinally, in our period little has been changed. The East Syrians adhered to the Trinitarian doctrine with its unity in essence and threeness in hypostatc aspect. I found that Christian writers tended, though not invariably, to refer to the three as God, *His* Word and *His* Spirit. Theologically, as it seems to imply a subordination, it is a novelty, compared to Persons. Clearly, as we have seen, in terms of mode of argumentation both Timothy and 'Ammar brought significant novelties.

To detect novelties in the writings of al-Qasim and al-Kindi is a fundamentally different exercise. There is no "church" doctrine, there are only competing schools and movements (hadithal chains; *falafsa* schools; theological schools and sectarian movements); each of them developing and employing its own concepts. Consequently, polemicizing with the Trinity was conducted predominantly from these own concepts. But what they had in common was that each polemicist operated from the premise that, however argued, it was irreconcilable with God's oneness to give him names or attributes that had an ontological status. Hence, for these reasons, there is no point in searching for "novelties" in order to find out if the Abbasid apologist's were influenced by Christian concepts. My research approach was Christian-biased! Nevertheless, what did I found out in my examination of my Abbasid apologists (in our period) on "influence" from their Christian opponents? Of course, *three* insights. First, at the intellectual level: ontologically and grammatically to name God with attributes diminishes his oneness. Second, their apologies were fundamentally polemics, wherein Christian doctrines, as they formulated them, were attacked with ever greater finesse and assertiveness without defence of their own doctrines. Third, in our period we have one single indication that they took East Syrian doctrines and writers seriously: according to al-Nadim's catalogue of writings

of the period he mentioned a (lost) work by al-Hudayl that after its title should have contained a rebuttal of ‘Ammar’s writings. It may be taken as “influence” that prompted counter attack.

Zones of Contact and “Influences”

The East Syrian and Abbasid community shared several zones of contact. From daily dealings in the marketplace to participating in the elite circles of the translation movement; from family relations to covert apostacy. It cannot have been otherwise than that these zones of contact heightened the awareness of the other’s opinions and arguments. It is impossible to reconstruct in how far it was from these heightened awareness or otherwise that novelties, as I have identified them, arose . It is not stretchting the limits of reason too far, however, to assume that major issues of apologetic controversy in certain zones of contact were systematic subject of interaction and discussion. Even, it is not difficult to imagine that, in the intellectual hotspots of Baghdad and Basra, at both sides, certain opinions and arguments were “buzzing” around. These awareness heightening occurrences were, of course, further stimulated and sharpend by the fact that the one side read those opinions and arguments in the writings (now predominantly in Arabic as *lingua franca*) of the other side, as they circulated. It must have been a social climate conducive to the flow of ideas over boundaries, to borrowing or appropiating ideas or modes of argumentation. In short: “influence” occurred.

Certainly, in the sense that it might have given rise to new defensive retorts; or to improvement of, or introducing (counter)arguments. At the front of the doctrinal content, it is difficult to assess whether that has in fact been the case. As for the Abbasid theological side, the general picture is that they were strongly driven by internal debates, that in their apologetic writings they standardized and schematized the other’s opinions and arguments and that they were employing common sense logical instruments, rather than mature Greek logic. Interestingly, their internal

dicussions were richer, more creative and more diverse. What can this difference explain? I would argue: the changes in the non-theological conditions. As explained above more extensively, external and internal threats for the Abbasid regime subsided in our period considerably. The number of (formally) adherents of Islam was growing importantly. Economy and agriculture benefitted from the larger common market. The translation movement was an intellectual appropriation movement at the same time, fostering over an even broader front of diciplines an efflorescense of intellectual achievement. The resulting self confidence, combined with the genuine religious conviction that their Islam was the superior faith, explained the (changing) nature of their anti-Christian apologetics.

This contention finds, in my opinion, corroboration in the exception I found in my examination of the sources. Famously, caliph al-Mahdi commissioned Timothy with the translation of a work of Aristotle. This occurred at a point of time when these conditions were not yet there. Absent that later self confidence, the apparent prowess of the East Syrians in using Aristotle influenced the caliph and his entourage to an unprecedented novel step. David Thomas may be correct in his judgment that the course of Abbasid apologetics was determined by their own agenda and independent, *internal* dynamics, for the very early period I would disagree with him. It was an external influence that brought them to demand new intellectual ammunition for debate.

This is not to say that they did not produce such writings anymore. With a view to which audience did they produce their writings? I find it difficult to assess what audience their intended audience was. My hypothesis would be: the Christian elite and their flock. Their preference for common sense logic and directness of standardized arguments may have made their writings, in their own view, suitable for a Christian audience in the first place.

In regard of the East Syrian side, our examination of the sources produced several instances of novelties. The most important was the Aristotelian input Timothy gave to his apologetical writing. This novelty was

not the result of Islamic “influence” in strict sense. Though he made use of the internal Abbasid discussions on the attributes of God, it was not borrowing from Islamic teaching. One may feel tempted to dubb it an instance of felicitious cross-pollination, were it not that this term obscures more than make clear what factor(s) effected the “influence”. In Timothy’s case, it was, I would propose, the resolving of a dilemma. It must have been clear that the classical arguments with scriptural proof-texting and adducing analogies was not effective to influence the Muslim intellectuals. Abandoning entirely, however, these classical arguments would not have been understood by his own flock and their local priests. his intended audience.

Was this different in regard of ‘Ammars *Burhan*? As I have argued, Ammar brings Timothy’s argument a step further. Paraphrasing Sidney Griffith, his *Burhan* should be Islamic theological reasoning in a Christian dress. According to Griffith, ‘Ammar bended to Islamic reasoning in a way that makes indistinguishable from an Muslim author. I cannot agree with Griffith. The *Burhan* is a clever use of Islamic reasoning and concepts, but on all accounts a Christian writing. It is Christian writing in an Islamic dress. Though in nascent form already employed in the works of Timothy, later East Syrian authors developed the application of Aristotelian logic to high levels. It prompted their Muslim counterparts to similar endeavours. This appropriation of these Aristotelian teachings from the East Syrian theologians by Muslim theologians is a refutation of David Thomas’ claim of indigenousness of Islamic theologizing. In their turn, it influenced the East Syrian theologians in their argumentative mode of defence of the Trinity, confirming, in this particular regard, the claim of, amongst others, Griffith that the East Syrian theologians tended to bend their argumentation to the intellectual appetites of the Islamic intellectuals.

Boundary Policing and Audience

It remains a vexed question which audiences our apologists had in mind. While boundary policing certainly was a significant consideration for writing

apologetic literature, it is too simple to conclude that these writings had only one's own flock as intended audience. Once Arabic had become the common unitary language of the Abbasid empire, both sides became more aware of the impact of this. In some respects, it brought change to the tone of voice and the purpose of their writings. As for the East Christian side, these changes may have given to the employment of Aristotelian-like approaches a further incentive. Where this type of reasoning got stronger hold, it supposedely universal validity may be seen as a compensation for the appreciation of the declining force of the usual arguments laong analogical and scriptural lines. It may have played out differently at the Abbasid side. They may very well have seen the Christian population as an audience as well. It any rate, their common sense type of argumentation provided their own flock with ready-made arguments in the inter-faith encounters, and may be, more fit to make Christians think about their own doctrines.

With all these fascinating intellectual achievements, it remains the question whether they meant much when it concerned the common believer on the ground. Both the Islamic Abbasid as the East Syrian community were class societies. Put simply, but not unfairly: the urban elite and the peasantry. While this character of class society was common to both communities, it played out differently. On the ground, in the rural dioceses of the Church of the East, it was the lower clergy and the local monasteries that had to police the communal boundaries. These priests and deaconds achieved little with high-minded theological musings on the Trinity. Christian faith was practice, in credal formulars, in hymns, in healing and other cultic rituals. Practices, wherein denominational and even faith boundaries were vague and blurry for the common believer. It played also out differenly, when comparing 'Ámmar and Timothy. The Patriarch had authority and competences that counted for the clergy; 'Ammar not. Ironically, his Islamic dress was, in a way, the emperors'clothes for the rural common believer.

Further Research

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