Introduction

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Christians and Muslims in early Islamic society

Abū ʿĪsā Muḥammad b. Hārūn al-Warrāq, whose only surviving work is the subject of this book, lived at a time of unprecedented new developments in Islamic thought. He was a contemporary of some of the best-known theologians in Islamic history and, although he is barely remembered among them, he easily measures up as one of the most sophisticated, exciting and surprising minds of early Islam. More than almost any of his contemporaries, he was fascinated by the religions among which Muslims lived, and he subjected the claims they made to some of the most searching interrogations that have survived. We shall see in the next chapter, when we examine his life and thought, how his impartiality towards all religions, including his own, led to misunderstanding about his intentions, and maybe brought imprisonment and execution. But before we consider the surviving details about Abū ʿĪsā himself, we should attempt to say something about the world in which he lived.

The presence of Christians in the world of Islam

Abū ʿĪsā was active in the first half of the third/ninth century, and appears to have spent his whole life in Baghdad. At this time the capital of the Islamic empire was developing culturally and politically into one of the most important cities in the world. It drew immense revenues from an empire that extended from the western Mediterranean to India and the Sahara to Central Asia, a vast area that was more or less united under the rule of some of the most powerful Caliphs in the history of Islam. And from all parts it attracted the talented and ambitious with their different kinds of knowledge and accomplishments, who came in the hope of winning patronage from a noble or even the Caliph himself. It was a city as cosmopolitan as any before it, with a population comprising diverse cultures and religions. Among them none were more prominent than the Christians, who had lived and built their churches and monasteries in the area long before the city was built.

A glimpse of the religious atmosphere of Baghdad in the years that followed its founding in 145/762 is afforded in the report of a debate that supposedly took place in the mid second/eighth century between a Christian leader named Barīha and the Muslim theologian Hishām Ibn al-Ḥakam, who himself had

made his way from his native Baṣra to the new city as a market trader.[1] Hishām sets the scene of the encounter as follows:

> While I was seated in my shop at the Karkh gate with people around me reading out the Qur'an for me, suddenly there appeared a crowd of Christians, both priests and others, about a hundred men all in black with hooded cloaks, and among them was the chief Patriarch Barīha. They stopped around my shop, and my chair was offered to Barīha. He sat on it and the bishops and monks stood around leaning on their staffs, with their hooded cloaks over their heads.[2]

And the two proceed to debate their religious differences, with the Muslim finally getting the better of the Christian. Although the incident probably never took place,[3] this report is significant in showing that in the memory of the fourth-/tenth-century Muslim author who records it, Baghdad in the mid second/eighth century was a city in which Christian priests felt free to appear in public in great, even intimidating numbers, and that discussions about points of religious difference were held in the most public places. Even if the account has no historical basis, it suggests that in later Muslim minds Baghdad in its earliest years was a place of frequent and free encounters between Muslims and Christians.

We shall see in what follows that Christians and the ecclesiastical hierarchy were familiar parts of Baghdad life in the years around the turn of the third/ninth century, and that the churches and monasteries which had long predated the coming of the ʿAbbasids and even Islam to this area became places of gathering for Muslims as well as Christians. The Christian presence in and around Baghdad at this time could not be and was not ignored by the Muslim populace, and it produced an ambivalent response on their part.[4]

Evidence from elsewhere conveys a similar picture to this Muslim account of a religiously pluralist culture in the city and of members of the faiths mixing with comparative freedom. For example, the Patriarch Timothy I, who was leader of the Nestorian Church in the period 164/780–208/823, remarks casually in a letter to a fellow priest that as he was entering the Caliph's court one day, he was accosted by a person "who was well instructed in the thought of Aristotle" and asked to explain aspects of his faith,[5] and in a second, better known, letter to the same priest he describes at length how he managed to defend his faith before the Caliph al-Mahdī.[6] This second letter is an important source of evidence about the form of debates that took place in the years around 200/815, but it is equally significant for the light it casts upon relations between Christians and Muslims. The fact that the ruler of the Islamic empire saw fit to set aside two days to debate with a Christian points to the high value he attached to discussion of specifically religious matters, and also to the political capital he may have seen accruing from being known to treat the Patriarch with so much distinction.

The presence of the Patriarch and a philosopher at the Caliph's court well reflects something of the interest in matters of interfaith that is shown by the frequent debates that were arranged at this time for the Caliph between

leading representatives of religions and schools of thought. These were often very elaborate affairs in which a number of scholars and religious leaders took turns to put their case and defend it, while the Caliph and his court looked on. If the surviving examples are anything to go by, the disputants often brought into open discussion points of an extremely technical nature which, while they displayed the mental agility of their authors, must have taxed the minds and patience of any lay person who bothered to follow their finer details.[7] The *majlis* disputation later became such a familiar part of interreligious debate that it was often used by both Christian and Muslim authors as the conventional literary setting for arguments of this kind.[8]

A further detail that illustrates very well the ease with which senior Muslims and Christians mixed in the period of the early ʿAbbasid caliphate occurs in the letter attributed to a certain ʿAbdullah al-Hāshimī. This purports to be a brief invitation from a Muslim noble to his distinguished Christian friend ʿAbd al-Masīḥ al-Kindī to convert to Islam. It is set in the reign of the Caliph al-Maʾmūn (198/813–218/833), to whom the two characters are supposed to be known. There has long been doubt about the authenticity of the letters, and it is now accepted by many that they were both written by the same Christian author some time in the third/ninth century and probably come from a later date than the reign of al-Maʾmūn.[9] For our purposes what is important is that al-Hāshimī is made to say that he has learned a great deal about Christianity from visits to monasteries, hermitages and churches. There he has witnessed the prayers offered through the day, the spiritual exercises performed by the monks, and the extremes of deprivation they endured in their devotion. In addition, he says, he has held discussions with senior priests openly and equitably, without hypocrisy or arrogance but in search of truth,

> Allowing them full freedom to present their arguments and to say whatever they wanted, without wishing to vex them in any way, as do in their discussions the common people, the ignorant and insolent of our religion.[10]

The self-conscious apology at the end of this comment betrays its Christian authorship (or else a disarmingly candid Muslim), though it cannot have totally misrepresented actual situations without revealing the truth of its origins. And so we can take the remark as another indication of the presence of Christians in and around Baghdad, and of their continuing to worship in churches and monasteries as they had before the coming of Islam.

If these incidental references in literary remains from the time of Abū ʿĪsā help us to see that Christians, among followers of other religions, were very much in evidence in Baghdad, and were treated with a measure of respect arising from their piety and learning, other references show even more convincingly how involved the Caliph himself often was with Christians and their religious lives. For example, the fourth-/tenth-century Egyptian author Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī al-Shābushtī (d. 388/988) records not only that Muslim nobles were accustomed to visit monasteries on feast days, both to witness the

spectacle of the liturgy and enter into the less exalted pleasures of drinking wine and meeting women, but also how the Caliphs al-Maʾmūn and al-Mutawakkil spent enough time in monasteries for the former to become an admirer of the ceremonies performed there, and for the latter to fall in love with a monk's daughter.[11] In addition, the record of the career of the physician and polemicist ʿAlī b. Sahl Rabban al-Ṭabarī, who was a near contemporary of Abū ʿĪsā, shows that despite being a Christian he worked closely under the Caliphs al-Muʿtaṣim, al-Wāthiq and al-Mutawakkil between about 225/840 and 250/864, and retained his faith for most of that time. It was probably only under the persuasion of al-Mutawakkil, who had made him a table companion, that he eventually converted to Islam. Then, in his extreme old age he wrote the two anti-Christian works with which he is associated.[12]

The most instructive contemporary account of Christians living in early third-/ninth-century ʿAbbasid Baghdad and its surroundings is given by the rationalist theologian and *littérateur* Abū ʿUthmān al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255/869) in a letter which he wrote to some Muslims who had asked for his help against a group of Christians. He prefaces his reply with a wide-ranging exploration of the reasons why Christians are so popular in Islamic society, and offers some fascinating insights into the conduct of Christians under caliphal rule and the response of Muslims towards them.

At one point al-Jāḥiẓ corroborates the details mentioned above when he says that among the Christians "are secretaries to the government, attendants of kings, doctors to the nobility, sellers of perfume and financiers",[13] all positions of influence, intimacy and prestige. He may, in fact, have in mind such figures as ʿAlī b. Rabban al-Ṭabarī himself, or the Nestorian Christian secretaries employed from the monastery of Dayr Qunnā who appear to have influenced state policy in their own favour.[14] And he could hardly be ignorant of the physicians from the Christian Bukhtīshūʿ family who constituted a virtual dynasty of personal medical attendants upon a succession of Caliphs.[15] He might also have added to this list the Christian translators who at the behest of the ʿAbbasid rulers and leading Muslims provided Arabic versions of major philosophical and scientific works from the ancient world.[16] The careful translations of the leading expert in this activity, Ḥunayn Ibn Isḥāq (d. *c.* 265/877), a Nestorian Christian, were so highly prized that the Caliph was prepared to pay for them by weight in gold. According to one anecdote, Ḥunayn capitalised on this by writing in large letters on thick paper, though the Caliph is supposed to have retorted "He thinks he can fool me but I shall gain more than he",[17] as he reflected upon the immense weight of learning he was acquiring.

Uneasy relations between Muslims and Christians

The slight edge of inimicability revealed in this last anecdote echoes another observation in al-Jāḥiẓ's letter about the way in which Christians treat Muslims in debate:

> They choose contradictory statements in our Ḥadīths, our reports that have weak chains of transmitters, and the equivocal verses in our Book, and they take to one side our weak and common people and ask them questions about them. Despite the ideas they have learnt from the heretics and accursed atheists, they often appear innocent before our intellectuals and people of influence. Hence they stir up trouble among the powerful, and cause deception among the weak-minded. And the pity is that each and every Muslim thinks he is an expert in religious matters, and that no one is better at arguing with heretics than anyone else![18]

This depicts the Christians as completely unscrupulous in the way they confused ordinary Muslims by presenting spurious or difficult statements from Muslim scriptural sources, and confuted experts with arguments they innocently passed off as not their own. It is undoubtedly exaggerated, in the same way as the anti-Muslim remark in al-Hāshimī's letter quoted above. But it is important in that it reveals an atmosphere of antipathy between Muslims and Christians, and some hostility. It suggests that despite the frequent meetings and the mutual benefit that both sides might obtain, there was little real liking between the two and no constructive co-operation.

The same point is given acerbity by a complaint that appears slightly earlier in al-Jāḥiẓ's letter:

> [Our judges] take the view that if a Christian accuses the mother of the Prophet (may God bless him and give him peace) of sinning, he should only be reprimanded and chastised. Moreover, they argue that they can say this because the mother of the Prophet (may God bless him and give him peace) was not a Muslim.[19]

The Christians are evidently well informed that whereas they would be severely punished for insulting a Muslim or the Prophet himself, they are legally immune here on the technicality that the Prophet's mother was outside Islam. They are playing games, and preferring to please themselves with a clever manipulation of the law rather than acting responsibly before their Muslim neighbours.

This attitude and its underlying reasons are illustrated at some length in this letter with alarming clarity, as al-Jāḥiẓ describes how Christians ignore the rules that apply to them:

> We know that they ride highly bred horses and camels, play polo . . . wear fashionable silk garments, and have attendants to serve them. They call themselves Ḥasan, Ḥusayn, ʿAbbās, Faḍl and ʿAlī, and also employ these as forenames. They have only now to call themselves Muḥammad, and employ the forename Abū al-Qāsim. And the Muslims adore them!
>
> Many of them have stopped wearing their belts, *zunnār*, while others wear them beneath their clothes. Many of the powerful people among them refrain from paying the poll tax, *jizya*, and although they have the means refuse to give it. They insult those who insult them, and hit those who hit them. And why should they not do this or even more, when our judges, or the majority, consider the blood of a patriarch, metropolitan or bishop to be equivalent to the blood of Jaʿfar, ʿAli, ʿAbbās or Ḥamza?[20]

The first paragraph suggests that many Christians ape Muslim customs of dress and pastimes, but it also intimates that in employing Muslim names and forenames they not only seek to copy their rulers but also to hide the differences between them. This haughty indifference towards conventions is even more evident in the second paragraph, where they are portrayed flouting the laws that pertain to their non-Muslim status.

The place of Christians and others in ʿAbbasid society at this time was in theory governed by the regulations attaching to their client status as *Ahl al-Dhimma* or *Dhimmīs*. These were established upon early precedents that derived from the relations of the Prophet and his immediate successors with non-Muslims who came under their rule. In particular, they were based upon agreements made by the second Caliph ʿUmar Ibn al-Khaṭṭāb and his generals with the representatives of conquered cities. For this reason they were known collectively as the "Covenant of ʿUmar".

It is not clear exactly when this body of regulations reached its full form, and the earliest version which is near complete is given as late as the sixth/twelfth century by Abū Bakr al-Ṭurṭūshī.[21] This compilation is revealing, however, since among its many stipulations, to which the Christians who originally assented to it are supposed to have agreed, are the following:

> We shall show deference to the Muslims and shall rise from our seats when they wish to sit down;
> We shall not attempt to resemble the Muslims in any way with regard to their dress, as, for example, with the *qalansuwa*, the turban, sandals, or parting the hair;
> We shall not speak as they do, nor shall we adopt their forenames;
> We shall not ride on saddles;
> We shall always adorn ourselves in our traditional fashions. We shall bind our belts, *zunnār*, around our waists.
> Anyone who deliberately strikes a Muslim will forfeit the protection of this pact.

(This last clause was supposedly added by the Caliph to the list of concessions made by the Christians.)

We can see immediately that in the passage from his letter just quoted al-Jāḥiẓ is alluding to contraventions of exactly these regulations by Christians who thought themselves above such petty restrictions. The actual misdemeanours of these Christians maybe match the theoretical legislation in the Covenant too closely for anyone to be persuaded that they committed them precisely in this form (unless they were going out of their way to show their contempt for them). But even allowing for literary caricature, there is enough in what al-Jāḥiẓ says to show that Christians, and others, were divided from Muslims by more than religion and customs. The divide was legal and formal, and it must have produced a clear sense of disjunction and dissonance between Muslims and their client peoples.

There are, however, signs that in this early period the regulations were not

rigorously enforced. For one thing, the very fact that al-Jāḥiẓ could refer to Christians acting so openly in defiance of them indicates that they might be ignored with some confidence of immunity. And, more significantly, on two occasions in fifty years the Caliphs Hārūn al-Rashīd in 191/807, and al-Mutawakkil in 235/849–50, thought it necessary to issue orders that enforced elements of them in order to curb *Dhimmī* freedoms. Hārūn al-Rashīd's order was intended to ensure that *Dhimmīs* were distinguished from Muslims with respect to their dress and mounts,[22] though al-Mutawakkil went much further, for as well as dress rules he also ordered distinctive signs to be placed on the houses of *Dhimmīs*, the removal of Christian officials from positions of seniority, and other openly discriminatory measures.[23] The necessity to issue orders such as these shows that whatever regulations existed were not at all times applied to the letter. And the fact that al-Jāḥiẓ refers to Christians not even paying the *jizya*, the tax levied on *Dhimmīs* from the earliest times, suggests that conditions must generally have been very lax. But on the other hand, the fact that he can merely mention the regulations without elaboration, and their periodic enforcement, show that people knew they were always there and could be brought into use at any time.

It would appear, then, that Christians and other non-Muslims were permitted in Muslim society, but only on the level of tolerance. They served definite purposes and brought distinctive skills and knowledge for which they were recognised and maybe respected, but they were never welcomed into society as full and equal members. And there was always the fear that their uneasy participation might be suspended as legal restrictions were put in place. It is perhaps no wonder that the Christians about whom al-Jāḥiẓ writes held such an ambivalent attitude, on the one hand wanting to show in their dress, pastimes and refusal to observe marks of distinction that they were no different from Muslim neighbours, while on the other twisting legalities and employing unfair means to poke fun at Muslims and their sensitivities. They exhibit the conflicting attitudes typical of a marginalised group, striving at once to identify with the mainstream culture and to preserve their own separate existence.

Common themes and mutual borrowing

As we noted at the beginning, the early ʿAbbasid period was a time of unprecedented progress in Islamic religious thought. Not only were the main elements of a distinctive theology established at this time, but also the relationship between the teachings of Islam and other faiths. It is fearsomely difficult to talk about the origins of this great surge in ideas, and almost as difficult to plot its development or outline at any given date in this early time. This is because the works that have survived from authors who were active in the third/ninth century and earlier are very few. Indeed, we can only ascertain the teachings of some of the leading thinkers of this time from relatively meagre quotations and mentions found in works from later centuries. The

books which they wrote have either perished from neglect or destruction, or may possibly lie unidentified in overlooked corners of libraries. Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq's many lost works are only some of the casualties of change in intellectual fashion and the depredations of invading armies.

It will be clear from what we have already seen that Islamic religious thinking developed in a multi-religious milieu. And it is likely that from an early date encounters between Muslims and members of other faiths, prominent among them Christians, raised issues that forced religious thinkers to concentrate on particular questions. It is possible that the record of one of these encounters is represented in the *Disputatio Saraceni et Christiani*, a debate between a "Saracen" and a Christian that is attributed to the Christian theologian John of Damascus (d. *c.* 132/750), who was brought up in the Umayyad court and was for a time a senior official under the Caliph.[24] Although it has survived in a rather disordered form and its authorship is by no means certain, it is generally considered to derive from the mid or late second/eighth century[25] and so can be accepted as a witness of debate from this period.

At the very beginning of the *Disputatio* the difficult question of the relationship between divine omnipotence and human responsibility is raised, and the Christian convinces the Muslim that there must be a measure of human autonomy.[26] Now it is known from elsewhere[27] that this particular problem was being heatedly debated in Islam between those who stressed the scriptural emphasis upon the unassailable omnipotence of God and others who saw in scripture equally important teachings about human responsibility.[28] So here in this debate we may see a Christian taking polemical advantage of an issue that caused disagreement in Islam, and magnifying the problem into an acute challenge.

The reality of the disputational interreligious milieu cannot be denied, though how strongly the emergence and development of theological thinking in Islam was instigated and directed by influences from outside is by no means clear, and scholarly views differ considerably over the issue.[29] Whatever the actual situation may have been, it is certain that before the beginning of the third/ninth century Islamic theological thought had begun to mature into a distinctive systematic discipline with its own methodology. This was known as *kalām*, and it has sometimes been equated with theology in Christianity, though the resemblance is not always close.

In the years before and after the beginning of the third/ninth century the leaders in *kalām* were thinkers known as the Muʿtazila, who were loosely associated into two groups at Baghdad and Baṣra. They became important not only theologically but also politically under the rule of some Caliphs, as their views became officially recognised and in particular their doctrine that the Qur'an was not eternal but created was used as a test, the *Miḥna*,[30] for anyone serving in public posts.

The Muʿtazila usually called themselves *Ahl al-tawḥīd wa-al-ʿadl*, the People of God's Unity and Justice. This epithet derives from two of the five princi-