

DAVID THOMAS
UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Idealism and Intransigence: A Christian-Muslim Encounter in Early Mamluk Times

Sometime just before 1316 an unknown Christian author resident in Cyprus wrote a carefully composed letter in which he showed how his own faith was supported by the Quran. He wrote with the evident intention of opening a debate with Muslims, because in 1316 itself a copy was sent to Ibn Taymīyah in Damascus, and then five years later another was sent to Muḥammad Ibn Abī Ṭālib, a local celebrity in the Damascus area. It provoked both scholars to write long and disparaging replies, making what is undoubtedly the most substantial correspondence in the history of Christian-Muslim relations—few in number at only three items but containing two of the longest Muslim responses to any claims by Christians. The correspondence is unique in the detailed knowledge of the beliefs and doctrinal positions of the other that is shown by the three participants, but it is typical in many ways of the relations between followers of the two faiths that had developed over the seven centuries since the origin of Islam. Moreover, it eloquently represents the regard—or lack of it—that Christians and Muslims held towards one another in the turbulent times in which the letters were written.

The story of this correspondence actually begins about a century before the first letter was written. This was when the Melkite bishop of Sidon, Paul of Antioch, sent his politely worded but ingeniously subversive letter to a Muslim friend.¹ Writing in Arabic, he employed the personae of Christian scholars in Europe to demonstrate that in its own terms the Quran proves that Muḥammad was sent with an Arabic revelation to the pagan Arabs alone, and that its teachings give unmistakable indications that the main elements of Christian belief and practice are sound and God-given. Exactly when Paul wrote is not known,² but a date in the latter years of the twelfth century seems best to fit the available evidence.

This letter circulated widely among Christians,³ and it evidently became known to Muslims as well because in the mid-thirteenth century the Egyptian jurist Aḥmad Ibn Idrīs al-Qarāfī (1228–85) targeted its arguments in his *Al-Ajwibah al-Fākhirah*

© The Middle East Documentation Center. The University of Chicago.

¹ Paul Khoury, *Paul d'Antioche, évêque melkite de Sidon (xiiie s.)* (Beirut, 1964).

² On this see Samir Khalil Samir, "Notes sur la 'Lettre à un musulman de Sidon' de Paul d'Antioche," *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica* 24 (1993): 179-95.

³ Taqī al-Dīn Ibn Taymīyah, *Al-Jawāb al-Ṣaḥīḥ li-man Baddala Dīn al-Masīḥ*, ed. 'Alī Ibn Ḥasan Ibn Nāṣir et al. (Riyadh, 1999), 1:101.



©2009 by David Thomas.

DOI: [10.6082/M189140F](https://doi.org/10.6082/M189140F). (<https://doi.org/10.6082/M189140F>)

DOI of Vol. XIII, no. 2: [10.6082/M1S180KZ](https://doi.org/10.6082/M1S180KZ). See <https://doi.org/10.6082/H4JA-V574> to download the full volume or individual articles. This work is made available under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC-BY). See <http://mamluk.uchicago.edu/msr.html> for more information about copyright and open access.

‘*an al-As’ilah al-Fājirah*, though without identifying it.⁴ Then, sometime in the early fourteenth century the anonymous Christian in Cyprus made Paul’s letter the basis of his own initiative to encourage some debate with Muslim scholars about faith.

This unknown master worked carefully through Paul’s letter and made subtle changes, additions, and omissions to turn it into a document with a rather altered character from the original.⁵ It could be that a different temperament was responsible, or that changed political and social conditions demanded a new tenor, but the result is a work that invites agreement and acknowledgement rather than the provocation and assertiveness of Paul’s original.

A close comparison of the two letters shows that the anonymous author approached Paul’s letter conservatively, but with his own clear intentions; he went much further than simply editing it.⁶ Put briefly, he completed quotations from the Quran that Paul had edited down in order to fit his arguments, he removed some of the more pointed exegeses of verses used by Paul to bring out Christian significances, and he added a long series of verses from the Quran and Bible, mainly the Old Testament. Thus, he removed quotations that might have caused unnecessary offense to Muslims, and reduced the chances of his version of the letter provoking disagreement. Whereas Paul might be said to compel his reader to admit the pure logic of his case, this author was more concerned to persuade and maybe to commend the point that Christianity and Islam were complementary faiths that need not compete.

Two features of his letter give strong indications that this was indeed the author’s intention. The first is the long series of quotations from Old Testament books that show uncompromising prejudice against the Jews. These are added to Paul’s original in a series of lengthy blocs,⁷ which serve to demonstrate that although the Jews possessed in their scriptures clear indications that God would send Christ, they ignored them, and more seriously they ignored the commands he gave:

When Moses withdrew from them onto the mountain to converse

⁴ Edition by Bakr Zaki ‘Awaḍ (Cairo, 1987).

⁵ Published in Rifaat Y. Ebied and David Thomas, ed., *Muslim-Christian Polemic during the Crusades: the Letter from the People of Cyprus and Ibn Abī Ṭālib al-Dimashqī’s Response* (Leiden, 2005), 54–147.

⁶ On this see *ibid.*, 1–14, and more fully, David Thomas, “Paul of Antioch’s *Letter to a Muslim Friend* and *The Letter from Cyprus*,” in *Syrian Christians under Islam: the First Thousand Years*, ed. *idem* (Leiden, 2001), 203–21.

⁷ Ebied and Thomas, *Muslim-Christian Polemic during the Crusades*, 76–81, 84–89, 98–107, and particularly 108–17.



with God the exalted, and took the Torah from the hand of God the exalted for them, they abandoned the worship of God and forgot all his acts, worshipping a heifer's head.

Then after this they worshipped idols, not once but many times. They made sacrifices to them, not inarticulate animals but their sons and daughters. This is according to what the prophets prophesied against them. All their acts are written in the chronicles of the People of Israel.

When God, blessed and exalted, saw the hardness of their hearts, their stubbornness and their disbelief in him, and their vile, abominable acts, he grew angry with them and made them contemptible and insignificant among all the nations, and they have had no king, priest or prophet ever again. This is as the prophets prophesied about them, and as their books, which they have in their possession today, bear witness.

To this effect is what God said to the prophet Isaiah, "Go, say to this people: You will hear but not understand, you will look but not see, because the minds of this people have been dulled and they understand little of what they hear; they have closed their eyes so that they cannot see or hear with their ears or understand with their minds or turn to me to save them."

Isaiah also said, "Likewise your sabbaths and new moons are abominable to me and have become despicable in my eyes"; God said: "On that day I will put an end to all sabbaths and festivals, and I will give you a new chosen law, not like the law I gave to my servant Moses on the day of Horeb, the day of the great assembly, but a new chosen law which I will enjoin and will send out from Zion." Now Zion is Jerusalem, and the new chosen law is the law which we Christians have received from the hands of the Apostles, the holy disciples. What demonstration could be clearer than this that we have quoted from the word of God the exalted, particularly since our enemies the Jews acknowledge to us that this is correct? If they did make a denial, this would be a denial among those who had no knowledge of their books, and this is due to their wickedness, ignorance and stubbornness. Just as these prophecies are in our possession, so they are in the possession of the Jews and also of all the Christians scattered over all the world and in all their languages, as they received them from the pure Apostles, to this day a single message.

As for the Jews' argument concerning these prophecies, they



say and believe that they are true, and they do not deny that they are the word of God, blessed and exalted. But they say that they will be fulfilled and completed when the Messiah comes, though the Messiah has not come and is far off, and he who has come is not the Messiah. And not only do they not believe, but they want only to compound their unbelief by saying that he was a deceiver, for the Messiah is still to come, and the prophecies of the prophets' will be fulfilled. "And when he comes, we will follow him."

This is what they think and believe about the lord Christ, though what greater disbelief could there be than theirs? It is because of this that the Quran has called them "those who earn thine anger," because of their dispute over the word of God which he uttered through the mouths of the prophets. And since we Christians adhere to the word of the prophets, and since we hold to what the pure Apostles commanded us, it calls us "those whom thou hast favoured."⁸

Clearly, the Jews have been superseded by the God-given truth of Christianity. In developing this idea at such length, the author is inviting his Muslim readers to acknowledge that his own faith is part of God's plan in history, and he is also perhaps appealing to them to unite in friendship with the Christians, as both of them express a common hatred of the Jews. Here he would have been inviting his Muslim correspondents to admit openly the same prejudices that four hundred years earlier the essayist and stylist Abū 'Uthmān al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 869) had resentfully mocked among the people of Baghdad. In the Abbasid capital al-Jāḥiẓ noted how Muslims admired Christians because of their senior positions in commerce and the professions, while both faiths despised the Jews because of their inferior trades and their physical ugliness.⁹ The author of this letter appears to be appealing to a similar sentiment as he documents the stubbornness of the Jews and their condemnation by God, and thereby distinguishes the Christians, who by comparison are obedient and blessed by God, for commendation by Muslims.

The second feature is what the author says about Muḥammad and Islam. This is more implicit than direct, but he makes plain at the beginning that the Prophet, who was sent to the Arabs with an Arabic scripture, was clearly sent from God as an inspired messenger.¹⁰ While he does not develop this point at any length,

⁸ Ibid., 111–17.

⁹ Al-Jāḥiẓ, *Fī al-Radd 'alā al-Naṣārā*, in *Thalāth Rasā'il li-Abī 'Uthmān al-Jāḥiẓ*, ed. Joshua Finkel (Cairo, 1926), [10–38] 13–19; trans. (in part) Joshua Finkel, "A Risāla of al-Jāḥiẓ," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 47 (1927): [311–34] 322–30.

¹⁰ Ebied and Thomas, *Muslim-Christian Polemic during the Crusades*, 56–61.



his use of the Quran as the basis or support for many of his arguments in favor of Christianity presupposes that he accepts it as an authentic scripture.

Both these features are present in Paul of Antioch's original, but the anonymous author makes more of them by adding illustrative verses from the Bible and Quran to present by implication an argument that seeks to locate Christianity as a faith that commands respect and acceptance in a relationship with Islam in which both figure as inspired dispensations.

This much will, in theory, have attracted, or been intended to attract, Muslim readers to the letter, and warmed them towards the arguments it contains. The author ingeniously suggests a communion of spirit between the two faiths in their ascendancy over the Jews, and also finds a place for the Prophet and the Quran within a divine economy centered on Christianity. This is extremely unusual among Christians before the modern era, and it shows remarkable openness towards a figure who among Europeans at the time was conventionally cast as demonic and condemned to the lowest circles of hell. The conclusion can thus be understood as a sincere declaration of agreement between the faiths, and a well-meant invitation to constructive debate:

This is what I was able to ascertain about the views of the people I met and conferred with, and about the arguments they were using on their own behalf. Praise and blessing be to God, for he has brought unanimity of view and put an end to suspicion between his servants the Christians and Muslims, may God protect them all!

If he has found anything different from this, may our master the revered teacher (may God eternally protect him and prolong his existence) point it out so that I may inform them about it and determine what views they have on it. For they have asked me to do this and made me a mediator. Praise be to God, Lord of the worlds.¹¹

This is a singular and in many ways startling composition. The positive attitude towards Islam it expresses leads one to ponder the author's intention in writing, though the investigation of what this may have been introduces less constructive implications than at first appear and relates this apparently enlightened initiative to the stubborn difficulties that waylaid Christian-Muslim relations from the start.

Nothing is known about the author apart from what is given in this letter,

¹¹ Ibid., 147.



which is very little.¹² Writing from Cyprus, he was obviously at home with Arabic, editing Paul of Antioch's letter and turning it into his own Arabic composition. This raises the question whether he was, in fact, a native of the island or had come there from the mainland. He knows the Quran intimately, and maybe by heart, so much so that he could change Paul's edited version of Q 57:25: "And we sent our messengers with clear proofs, with them the book, that mankind might observe right measure," to the correct: "Indeed, we sent our messengers with clear proofs, and we sent down with them the book and the balance, that mankind might observe right measure."

Paul's small omissions create the impression that the messengers sent with the book are the Apostles of Jesus, though the anonymous author's restoration shows this is a distortion of the original. He was also able to supply the names of surahs, as well as quote the Bible in Arabic. And lastly, he knew Damascus so well that he was able to identify as recipients of his letter not only the renowned scholar Ibn Taymiyah but also the more locally known Ibn Abī Ṭālib. Thus it is possible that he was originally from the Damascus area and may even have been a convert to Christianity from Islam.¹³ This being so, his letter may not have had the pure intentions which the reading offered above suggests. For one thing, his portrayal of the Jews may not have been simply historical and literal, relating how they turned away from the signs and revelation given by God to follow their own intransigent ways. He may also have meant it symbolically to refer to Islam, with the veiled warning that if the Muslims ignore what is evident in their scripture about Christianity, which he spells out in the course of this letter, they risk the same fate as the Jews: religious rejection and social ostracism. And for another, his portrayal of Muḥammad and the Quran ranks them below Christ and Christianity. For, as the letter says at the start,¹⁴ the Quran was not sent to people who already had a scripture, but as an Arabic revelation it was intended only for native Arabic speakers. Thus, the Prophet, although sent from God, possessed only local significance in Arabic-speaking areas, and coming after the revelation of Christianity he was secondary in status, a messenger sent to bring the pagans to a simple form of monotheism.

The apologetic purpose that is detectable in the letter may be taken as a reflection of the wider inter-religious context in which it was written.¹⁵ This would be in the period after 1291 when the Crusader forces had lost their last possessions on the mainland and the refuges that many had sought in Cyprus had

¹² Ibid., 5–19, contains a full discussion of most of the following details.

¹³ Of course, Paul of Antioch's intimacy with the Quran indicates that not only Muslims learnt it, though he does not show the evident respect for it that this author does.

¹⁴ Ebied and Thomas, *Muslim-Christian Polemic during the Crusades*, 55–61.

¹⁵ Ibid., 13–17.



become permanent homes—in fact, could the author have been a refugee (and if a convert, someone who had found it acutely necessary to escape from the incoming Mamluks)? Moreover, this was after the invading Mongols had dashed Christian hopes by failing to join an alliance against the resurgent Muslims, had been defeated at ‘Ayn Jālūt in 1260, and had become Muslims. So there could have been an imperative, in some minds at least, to maintain an engagement of sorts with the Muslims in order to appear not to have surrendered completely. In fact, at the time of writing in the early fourteenth century, the author would have been aware of numerous plans to launch fresh crusading offensives against the eastern and southeastern shores of the Mediterranean with Cyprus as the marshalling point. Almost every few years a new plan was presented in the papal and royal courts of Europe, and in Cyprus rumors about these plans must have kindled hopes and expectations, though the lack of armies to put these plans into effect must have made them seem progressively hollow and fanciful, continually raising hopes and then dashing them.

The author of the letter may, therefore, have had in mind the plan to produce a sound theological argument that proved the ascendancy of Christianity in order to show to leading Muslims that his faith was not to be dispensed with easily, but commanded respect and careful consideration. Thus, while Christian forces may have suffered a temporary loss, the faith itself retained the integrity it had been given by God at the beginning. It is also possible that he wrote to encourage Christians who could read his words, especially the remnant communities who lived under Muslim rule, to remain loyal to their faith. This they would do when they were reminded that the faith of their rulers was in its essence a distorted form of an original that was not only compatible with Christianity, if a pale preliminary version of it, but also derived from a scripture that attested to Christian truth and that was intended only for the local audience of pagan Arabia. They might thus be able to put Islam in its proper relationship with Christianity and not give in to the temptation to convert.

Of course, the letter gives no indication of its purpose or its author’s intention. But if the inferences drawn here are at all accurate then it can be seen as more a weapon of hostility or a defensive mechanism than its conciliatory and persuasive tone at first suggests. Offering discussion on grounds that Muslims would find familiar and presumably acceptable, with the implicit acknowledgement that the Quran and Muḥammad are authentic, it actually leads to the ascendancy of Christianity over Islam. No wonder the two scholars it is known to have reached replied so vehemently and at such inordinate length; they must have seen these dangers, and they took elaborate measures to counter them.

From very early times, Muslim attitudes towards Christianity were based on the acknowledgement that the earlier dispensation was given from God with a



scripture that agreed in essence with the Quran mediated by a messenger who was like Muḥammad. But it very quickly qualified these appraisals with the accusation that Christians had distorted the pure teachings about God, had divinized Jesus, and had mistaken or textually distorted the teachings of the Gospel. There was a strong element in their attitude that Islam had come not only to confirm but also to correct Christianity, and there was little that this fractured faith could give them in return. Added to this, for purposes of social relations, Christians, like other scriptural believers, were given client status and were governed by the set of regulations known as the Pact of ‘Umar, after the second caliph. The precise form that these took in the early centuries is not clear, but there is enough evidence in the documents that have survived to show that by the ninth century they theoretically imposed upon *dhimmīs* restrictions that separated them from Muslims in society and impressed upon them a clear sense of their own inferiority.

By the time this letter from Cyprus was written, it is likely that the regulations of the Pact of ‘Umar had become so internalized into Muslim consciousness that they formed the framework in which attitudes to matters of society and religion were expressed. An eloquent attestation of this is to be found in the *Refutation of the Client People and Those Who Follow Them*, which was probably written a few decades before the letter from Cyprus by a certain Ghāzī al-Wāsiṭī.¹⁶ Originally from Iraq, as his name indicates, this author had served in northern Syria in the mid-thirteenth century before moving to Egypt where he wrote his refutation. The latest reference he gives is datable to 1292,¹⁷ so his work may have appeared in Egypt within twenty years of the letter from Cyprus. It is a colorful portrayal of the place of *dhimmīs* in the society that al-Wāsiṭī knew.

Like the *Refutation of the Christians* of al-Jāhīz, written more than four hundred years earlier about the Christians of Baghdad,¹⁸ al-Wāsiṭī’s work has the character of a resentful complaint against the liberties taken by Christians in Ayyubid and Mamluk Syria and Egypt and their ungrateful and deceptive ways. Although it shows no knowledge of the earlier diatribe, this thirteenth-century reply could almost have been framed on its predecessor.

Al-Wāsiṭī sets out his general attitude at the very start: “The protected people who, not being subjected to fear, have been allowed to live freely in Egyptian and Syrian regions, some of them unbelievers belonging to the Jewish faith and

¹⁶ Richard Gottheil, “An Answer to the Dhimmi,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 41 (1921): 383–457. Moshe Perlmann, “Notes on Anti-Christian Propaganda in the Mamlūk Empire,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 10 (1942): 844, suggests 721/1321 as a possible date of composition but without offering an explanation.

¹⁷ Gottheil, “Answer,” 384.

¹⁸ See n. 9 above.



others to sects of the Christians, are worse unbelievers and more stiff-necked than those who wield the sword (*ahl bi-al-sayf*) who have kept their hold over Islam by oppression and tyranny.”¹⁹ He draws a contrast between the client populations and the Crusaders, and he implicitly questions the attitude of the former, who show hostility even though they are given freedom and treated fairly. His understanding is evidently that they have no reason to be anything but compliant because their treatment is unexceptionable, and they are religiously in the wrong anyway.

Al-Wāsiṭī begins to build his case by quoting Quranic verses that condemn the People of the Book and counsel separation between them and Muslims—there is no mention of such positive verses as Q 5:82, where Christians are called the nearest in affection to the believers. He follows with prophetic hadiths, injunctions from the founders of the Sunni law rites, and stories of dealings between early caliphs and Christians, all showing that the authorities of Islam distanced themselves from Christians while treating them with fairness and respect. The underlying reason is religious, as he indicates early on in his argument: “Just as soon as any one of the People of the Book declares the law of Allah and of his Prophet to be untrue, and disobeys the demands as laid down by the Prophet of Allah, idolatry adheres to him (*fa-lazimahu al-shirk*).”²⁰ As *mushrikūn*, associators of other divinities with God, Christians among other People of the Book are religiously suspect and unclean. Therefore, as the stories from the Prophet and the caliphs describe, even the help offered in warfare and in bureaucratic jobs must be refused. The priority of doctrinal principle over practical considerations is so important to al-Wāsiṭī that even financial loss is better than allowing Christians to go on unimpeded. He makes his point with a well-known story from the Umayyad caliph ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Aziz, who, when the governor of Egypt informed him that conversions from the client populations to Islam were reaching such a pitch that tax revenues from them were at risk of drying up, ordered the governor to be punished and expressed the hope that they would all be converted, for “Allah has sent Muḥammad as a preacher, not as a tax-gatherer.”²¹

Al-Wāsiṭī builds upon this a series of stories from nearer his own time about the perfidiousness of Christians and Jews in Egypt, including one of the Christian Ibn Dukhkhān who spied for the Crusaders,²² and another of Christians who dressed

¹⁹ Gottheil, “Answer,” 416 (quotations are from his translation with reference to the Arabic text).

²⁰ Ibid., 418. Al-Wāsiṭī’s condemnation of Christians and Jews committing the sin of *shirk* (he may have in mind Q 9:30: “The Jews call ‘Uzayr son of God and the Christians call Christ son of God”) may seem extreme, but it is paralleled in al-Dimashqī, who habitually accuses his Christian opponents of committing this same sin; Ebied and Thomas, *Muslim-Christian Polemic during the Crusades*, e.g., 217, 291, 295, 385.

²¹ Gottheil, “Answer,” 424.

²² Ibid., 435–38.



to look like Muslims and intentionally misled Muslims out of spite.²³ He goes on to complain about the Christians who profess to be Muslims for professional reasons but retain their own beliefs and practices in private, and he includes a story in which he was personally involved of Christians in Damascus who took advantage of the ruling Mongols' declaration that all faiths could be followed freely to write books exposing contradictions in the Quran.²⁴ Maybe his most telling point from his own times is his contrasting of Christians who amass wealth from public service which they use for their own enrichment and pleasure with Muslims who use the earnings from the same service "for the interests of the Sultanate and increasing its splendour. . . . Indeed, at the end of their life they are in debt and poor, because of the strength of mind they have shown and their fidelity [to the ruling house]."²⁵ The Christian is self-centered and ready to take personal advantage of the position granted him in society, while the Muslim is public-spirited and open to acknowledging his debt to society.

This refutation is, of course, a collection of arguments and illustrations intended to prove al-Wāsiṭī's point about the inferiority and untrustworthiness of Christians (and to some extent Jews). In this respect, it must be treated with care as a historical document, though it is evidently indicative of one attitude towards Christians that must have been recognizable and was maybe acceptable in early Mamluk society. Furthermore, at least some of the stories and appraisals it brings together must have been known to its intended readers. Thus, it can be taken as giving some indications of popular estimations of Christians in the society of the time, and as revealing an ingrained impression that, apart from any religious or doctrinal errors Christians preserved in their beliefs, they were social pariahs who took advantage of the privileges they were accorded by Muslims to betray the trust placed in them and harm wider society in whatever ways they could. The series of complaints brought together here point to rivalry and mistrust in all relations between the two faiths, arising from the moral failure that is consistently shown by Christians. The clear implication is that the faith they profess is fatally fractured, and there is little profit in taking them as colleagues and friends, or at all seriously.

This refutation gives some hints about Muslim attitudes towards Christians at the time the anonymous Christian author sent his letter from Cyprus. Interestingly,

²³ Ibid., 439–40.

²⁴ Ibid., 445–50. Al-Wāsiṭī's brief reference to one of these, entitled *Al-sayf al-murhaf fi al-radd 'alá al-muṣḥaf*, "The sharp sword, in refutation against the Scripture" (447–49), shows it contained arguments long known in Christian anti-Muslim polemic. Its author's knowledge of the Quran shows none of the completeness of the author of the Letter from Cyprus, and certainly none of his respect.

²⁵ Gottheil, "Answer," 445.



it says little about the Crusaders themselves; they are on the margins of al-Wāsiṭī's concerns as a menace with whom the indigenous *dhimmī* Christians are often in conspiracy. It is as though they are a defining evil, against which the betrayals and malevolent acts of Christians within Muslim society can be gauged. If these latter are unworthy of anything but the harshest treatment, the Crusaders are beyond any fair treatment at all.

The date when the anonymous author in Cyprus wrote cannot be known exactly. But since his reworked version of Paul of Antioch's letter reached Ibn Taymiyah in 1316, having been sent to him expressly, it is unlikely that it was finished very much earlier. It was, of course, sent to him as the leading religious scholar of his day, and certainly the best known religious authority in Damascus. It was sent with the express intention of inviting a reply; as its conclusion, which has been quoted above, innocently says, let the recipient indicate any points on which he disagrees, so that there can be discussion between the two sides.²⁶ But if he thought he would start a serious debate in which the Muslim would weigh the points he had made and ponder them dispassionately, he was completely wrong.

Ibn Taymiyah replied with the *Jawāb al-Ṣaḥīḥ li-Man Baddala Dīn al-Masīḥ*,²⁷ a painstakingly detailed exposure of Christianity that is not rivalled in the whole of Islam for its detail and length. This text has been the subject of a number of studies,²⁸ although a full analysis of its contents remains to be made. In short, it can be said that Ibn Taymiyah pays little regard to the arguments from Cyprus, but rather uses the letter to show how Muslims can be led away from the path of true faith by distorted interpretations such as this. While he quotes the letter at length in the course of his reply, he does not so much give answers to it as employ it as a warning to fellow Muslims of the dangers of any deviation from the norms of the Quran. Thus, his *Jawāb al-Ṣaḥīḥ* is not addressed to the author from Cyprus or even to Christians, but to Muslims, and it ranks Christianity with forms of Shi'i extremism as a faith that departs from true monotheism.

Whether this thundering reply was ever sent to Cyprus is not known. But about five years after the anonymous author sent his first copy to Ibn Taymiyah in Damascus, he sent another copy, this time to Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad Ibn

²⁶ Ebied and Thomas, *Muslim-Christian Polemic during the Crusades*, 147 (quoted above).

²⁷ Ed. 'Alī ibn Ḥasan ibn Nāṣir et al. (Riyadh, 1999); partial trans. Thomas Michel, *A Muslim Theologian's Response to Christianity: Ibn Taymiyya's al-Jawab al-Sahih* (Delmar, New York, 1984).

²⁸ Michel, *A Muslim Theologian's Response*; Mark Swanson, "Ibn Taymiyya and the *Kitāb al-Burhān*: a Muslim Controversialist responds to a Ninth-Century Arabic Christian Apology," in *Christian-Muslim Encounters*, ed. Yvonne Y. Haddad and Wadi Z. Haddad (Gainesville, 1995), 95–107; David Thomas, "Apologetic and Polemic in *The Letter from Cyprus* and Ibn Taymiyya's *Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ li-man baddala dīn al-Masīḥ*," in *Ibn Taymiyya and his Times*, ed. Shahab Ahmed and Yossef Rapoport (Karachi, forthcoming).



Abī Ṭālib, a well-known scholar in the town and, like Ibn Taymīyah, someone whose response would be based on experience and sincere scholarship in faith. His reply, written in 1321, within a few months of receiving the letter, can be placed alongside Ghāzī al-Wāsiṭī's refutation as a prime example of the attitudes held among Muslims towards Christians in early Mamluk times, and an indication of the tremendous differences between the faiths that present obstacles not only at times of open hostility such as the Crusades but at all times.

While he apparently did not enjoy the international celebrity status of Ibn Taymīyah, al-Dimashqī was enough of a celebrity in Damascus to merit an entry in al-Ṣafadī's *Al-Wāfi bi-al-Wafayāt* and again in his *A'yān al-ʿAṣr wa-A'wām al-Naṣr*.²⁹ Al-Ṣafadī was, in fact, a personal friend of al-Dimashqī and remembered spending time at his home and being asked by him to revise one of his poems. He regarded al-Dimashqī as "one of the cleverest people alive, with the power to penetrate into every discipline and the boldness to write about every field."³⁰ Thus, to anyone in Cyprus who knew something about the intellectual and cultural life in Damascus, he would be the natural recipient of a letter that was intended to start a public discussion.

Al-Dimashqī followed Ibn Taymīyah in replying to the anonymous letter with one of the longest and most detailed exposés of Christianity that has survived, the *Jawāb Risālat Ahl Jazīrat Qubruṣ*.³¹ He may, in fact, have known Ibn Taymīyah's *Jawāb al-Ṣaḥīḥ*—he certainly knew that Ibn Taymīyah had been sent another copy of the letter³²—because a number of the illustrative arguments he employs are also found in the earlier work. But a close examination of the two remains to be made.³³

Al-Dimashqī gives some details about the circumstances in which he received the letter from Cyprus, recounting that it was personally delivered to him by a

²⁹ *Al-Wāfi bi-al-Wafayāt*, vol. 3, ed. Sven Dederer, Bibliotheca Islamica vol. 6c (Wiesbaden, 1974), 163–64; *A'yān al-ʿAṣr wa-A'wām al-Naṣr*, ed. ʿAlī Abū Zayd et al. (Beirut and Damascus, 1998), 4:475–80.

³⁰ *Wāfi*, 3:163.

³¹ Ebied and Thomas, *Muslim-Christian Polemic during the Crusades*, 150–497.

³² *Ibid.*, 156–57.

³³ A full investigation of Ibn Taymīyah's *Jawāb al-Ṣaḥīḥ* and al-Dimashqī's *Jawāb Risālat Ahl Jazīrat Qubruṣ* should also include Ibn Taymīyah's *Risālat al-Qubruṣiyyah*, which contains some of the same arguments; ed. and trans. (French) Jean Michot, *Lettre à un roi croisé = al-Risālat al-Qubruṣiyya* (Louvain-la-Neuve and Lyon, 1995). This work, which was written to a noble in Cyprus to request fair treatment for Muslim prisoners, can be dated to just after 1300, a good fifteen years before the correspondence between the anonymous author in Cyprus and the two Damascus scholars began. It might be assumed that it forms part of the background reason for the Christian letter, but the latter shows no explicit or implicit awareness of it or of its contents.



certain Kilyām the merchant, chamberlain of the Watchtower (*wazīr al-Marqab*).³⁴ Al-Marqab (Margat) was the great Crusader fortress along the shore road north of Latakia that was captured by Sultan Qalāwūn in 1285, and Kilyām (presumably Guillaume), if he was a real person, would have been one of the original garrison. He is mentioned a number of times in the *Jawāb*, though al-Dimashqī appears to use him as a persona to whom to attach questions and arguments in the letter from Cyprus that are otherwise awkwardly anonymous. If he was indeed real, he serves to show that in a period of open hostility, when papal edicts frequently forbade trade between Muslim and Christian areas, communications were still in fact maintained.

The letter reached al-Dimashqī in March 1321, and he completed his reply in June of the same year. Like Ibn Taymiyah, he follows the method of quoting a passage from the letter and using it as the basis for a demonstration of the truth of Islam and the impoverishment of Christianity. He finds no merit at all in what the letter attempts to set out, and he dismisses its arguments without any constructive response. A Muslim would find many familiar arguments in it, for while the *Jawāb* is directed at the Christians, it was clearly intended for a Muslim audience as well. His reply is a sustained attestation to Muslim self-confidence and the intolerance towards Christianity that Ghāzī al-Wāsiṭī exemplifies in his briefer refutation.

Al-Dimashqī divides his *Jawāb* into thirteen sections, each headed by a quotation from the letter, together with a short introduction. He makes his stance clear at the very start, where he explains his interpretation of the intention held by the people of Cyprus in writing the letter: “They were opening up means of seeking a confrontation through it, under the impression that they had mastered what they had been assured was teaching, or that this might lead straight to the religion by mention of it.”³⁵ His realistic assessment of the letter, that all it is attempting to do is either to confuse Muslims or convert them, shows that he has seen through its politeness and irenic posturing and has sensed the danger implicit in what it proposes.

Al-Dimashqī gets into the main argument of the *Jawāb* in response to the first claim he identifies in the letter, namely that Muḥammad appeared without warning rather than after announcements from earlier prophets and the miraculous signs that were conventionally associated with each advent of a prophet. This section of the *Jawāb* is the longest,³⁶ and it affords an excellent insight into his approach, giving a perspective of the general Muslim attitude towards the supremacy of Islam at the time.

³⁴ Ebied and Thomas, *Muslim-Christian Polemic during the Crusades*, 154–55.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 156–57.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 158–227.



Al-Dimashqī expresses shock at this accusation and systematically presents a long string of proof texts and stories to counter it. He begins with a series of quotations from the Old and New Testaments that from the ninth century or earlier had been seen by Muslims to contain references to the Prophet.³⁷ Many of these were familiar by the fourteenth century, and some, such as the riders on the ass and the camel of Isaiah 21 and the promises of the coming of the Paraclete in the Last Supper discourses in John 15 and 16, were commonplace. But they serve his purpose more than adequately. He adds to them stories that had passed from legend into religious history, such as the discovery of portraits of the Prophet and Rightly-Guided Caliphs in the possession of the people of Sicily when the first Muslims landed there,³⁸ and the surrender of Jerusalem to the caliph ʿUmar when the people recognized him as the one foretold: “This would never have happened unless they had known about the mission of Muḥammad (may God bless him and give him peace) to all humankind and the pre-eminence of his religion over all others, and, from his particular description and bearing, that his caliph ʿUmar would be the conqueror of Jerusalem.”³⁹

Of course, there is no question of the veracity of these stories, but more importantly there is no evident need for al-Dimashqī to do much more than refer to them or summarize them for him to consider his point made. They are obviously so well known among Muslims that the simple reminder of what they say is enough. This is strongly suggestive of widely held prejudices throughout Muslim society at this time.

But al-Dimashqī does not leave the matter with this spectacular display of evidence in support of Muḥammad’s being attested by prophecies and miracles. He goes on to explain why Christians have ignored them, locating the guilt for this in the early community. In a breathtaking rewriting of known historical facts, he recounts how Constantine was converted to Christianity and wanted to proclaim his new faith in the empire. So Christian teachings were put in order, and the emperor was informed about the Gospel references to the Paraclete, though the religious experts were afraid that he might abandon his faith if he knew the true identity of this being and said it was the Holy Spirit. “This became Constantine’s conviction, for he had been a Ṣābian, a worshipper of idols and the spiritual forces of the stars. So he accepted what they claimed about the matter of the Holy Spirit because he himself was familiar with belief in spiritual forces.”⁴⁰ This official acceptance of the misinterpretation of Jesus’ true teachings is the starting

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 162–75.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 174–76.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 178–79.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 184–85.



point of Christian errors and the reason why, in al-Dimashqī's explanation, the Quran contains condemnations of the distorted doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation.⁴¹

To say that this reinterpretation of well-known Christian history is contentious is to state the obvious. Christians would have challenged every detail and insisted upon its factual inaccuracy. Al-Dimashqī, however, is clearly untroubled by this eventuality. The version of this history he preserves, and particularly the key role played by Constantine in perverting original Christian truth, is so securely accepted among his fellow Muslims that any challenge would stand little chance of a hearing, let alone acceptance. It shows how fully Muslims at this time were provided with an explanation of the way in which Christianity originally presented true teachings, as the Quran states, but these were distorted through wilful misinterpretation by a power-seeking elite, and how Islam then came to restore the truth and expose the criminal distortions.

It cannot be assumed that this recasting of the history of Constantine and the early years of the emancipated church is al-Dimashqī's own composition. Certainly, Constantine is conventionally implicated in Muslim explanations of the distorted form of Christianity.⁴² And judging by another story al-Dimashqī employs, it might well be the case that with Constantine as well he is drawing upon a well-recognized tradition. This other story concerns St. Paul and his part in the corruption of the faith.

According to al-Dimashqī, Paul, who lived about a hundred and fifty years after Christ, was at first a persecutor of the Christians but then "he showed a desire for Christianity." So he withdrew from the world and was served in his seclusion by four scholars. He took each of these aside in turn and fed him teachings about the nature of Christ, each slightly different, and "in this way they became four sects."⁴³

This account is as neat as the story of Constantine, telling how historical Christianity split into the main denominations known within the Muslim world. Its historicity is, of course, entirely spurious since it conflates the ministry of Paul in the first century with the emergence of the non-Chalcedonian churches in the fifth century and after. But al-Dimashqī need not be troubled about questions of factual accuracy, because this etiology had been circulating in different forms since at least the eighth century.⁴⁴ And if the historian Sayf ibn ʿUmar (d. 796 or

⁴¹ Ibid., 186–93.

⁴² See Samuel M. Stern, "Abd al-Jabbār's Account of How Christ's Religion was Falsified by the Adoption of Roman Customs," *Journal of Theological Studies*, new series 19 (1968): 142–45, 159–76.

⁴³ Ebied and Thomas, *Muslim-Christian Polemic during the Crusades*, 398–401.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 397–99, n. 23.



slightly later), who wrote one of the first accounts of the dissension within the earliest Muslim community, is to be believed, the account can be traced back to ‘Abd Allāh Ibn ‘Abbās, the Prophet’s cousin, in the seventh century.⁴⁵ In Sayf’s version the fourth servant of Paul was a certain al-Mu’min. He rejected what Paul said, and he and his successors preserved the true monotheistic teaching of Jesus until the coming of Muḥammad.

This example, from later in the *Jawāb*, serves to show how full al-Dimashqī’s work is with tales and examples from Islamic polemic and apologetic history, and how by his time this history had achieved a complexity and substantiality that would withstand any attempts by Christians to suggest the facts might tell a different story.

Returning to the first section of the *Jawāb*, having now established to his own satisfaction that Muḥammad was foretold in Christian scripture, that his coming was accompanied by miraculous events, and that Christians only reject this because of distortions in their history, al-Dimashqī now adds eight anecdotes, as he calls them, to support and confirm his argument.⁴⁶ They contain further elucidations of Biblical verses to show that these refer to Muḥammad, a reconstruction of the events of the passion and crucifixion of Christ to indicate the truth of the Muslim belief that he himself was not executed, but Judas in his place, and a retelling of further details of Christian history to explain the theologizing attempted by Christians in their endeavor to explain why Christ was sent by God to die.

This great accumulation of arguments goes further than supporting the contention that Muḥammad was truly sent by God, for it gradually retells early Christian history and suggests why the account preserved by Christians is wrong in the places where it diverges from the Quran-based account. Al-Dimashqī exhibits supreme confidence in the approach he takes, with no acknowledgement that his rival reconstruction may not command the acceptance of his Christian opponents. His disdain for them is well demonstrated in his concluding comment to his examination of the Christian account of the death of Christ:

People with understanding and compassion took some consideration for the Christians and said to advise and admonish them, “If anyone were to relate to you part of this tragic joke from other people, and reported that they had cut themselves off from humankind in a corner of the earth, and that this doctrine was theirs, this creed theirs, and this supposition about the Lord of the worlds was theirs, would you people regard them as reasonable, call them people

⁴⁵ Pieter van Koningsveld, “The Islamic Image of Paul and the Origin of the Gospel of Barnabas,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 20 (1996): 200–28.

⁴⁶ Ebied and Thomas, *Muslim-Christian Polemic during the Crusades*, 192–221.



of religion, say that they followed the religion of any prophet, or had any serious purpose? No, by God! Instead, you would be amazed at God's gentleness and forbearance towards them, and you would conclude that they were in error and ignorance. And as a declaration that he is above all this you would say, 'Our God is holy, and is far above the things with which these people associate him and characterise him.'"⁴⁷

He essentially dismisses the Christian doctrine of the atonement as an irrational fantasy.

Al-Dimashqī rounds off this long and variegated reply to the first point in the letter from Cyprus by dealing with the interpretations given there of Quran verses that refer to the specifically Arabic Quran. The anonymous author maintains that these verses indicate the Quran was not intended as a universal scripture but was sent only for Arabic speakers. However, al-Dimashqī shows, one by one, that the verses do have a universal reference, and so they actually destroy the Christian's case rather than support it. A single example from his response to this matter gives an indication of his uncompromising approach. The Christian has quoted Q 3:164, "By sending them a messenger of their own," as part of his point that Muḥammad was from the Arabs and for them, following the conventional vocalization of the last words, *min anfuṣihim* (pl. of *nafs*), to understand them as "from among themselves," with the implied restriction upon his activities and relevance. But al-Dimashqī challenges this, reading the last words as *min anfasihim* with the slightly changed vocalization to mean "from the most distinguished among them," in which *anfasihim* is taken as the elative form of the adjective *nafis*, and the verse is open to mean that Muḥammad was the most distinguished person of his time.⁴⁸ This reading had substantial authority, in that the Prophet himself was supposed to have sanctioned it,⁴⁹ but it presumably did not have much currency in al-Dimashqī's own time or the anonymous author would not have risked the reading he did. But al-Dimashqī will not concede even this one point, and is prepared to challenge the received reading of this verse in order to maintain his resistance.

This response to the first point made in the letter from Cyprus comprises an onslaught that brings together a substantial variety of scriptural, historical, to some extent rational, and exegetical arguments. Al-Dimashqī evidently intends to remove all possibilities that might suggest his opponent's arguments have validity. He repeats this procedure in all the other twelve sections of his *Jawāb*, building up

⁴⁷ Ibid., 216–17.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 222–23.

⁴⁹ Cf. al-Zamakhsharī, *Kashshāf ‘an Ḥaqā’iq Ghawāmiḍ al-Tanzīl*, ed. ‘Ādil Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Mawjūd and ‘Alī Muḥammad Mu‘awwad (Riyadh, 1998) ad Q 9:128.



one form of argument upon another to provide an unanswerable demonstration that the contents of the letter do not deserve any serious reception.

He is clearly incensed by what he reads in the letter (this is evident from the very start of his reply where he upbraids the author for not using the proper form of commendation when referring to Muḥammad),⁵⁰ and maybe he perceives the implicit intention to make Muḥammad and the Quran secondary in importance to Christianity and restricted in relevance to the Arabian peninsula and its inhabitants. His approach, with the confident arguments he adduces, perhaps has something in common with al-Wāsiṭī's refutation, in that it appears to assume from the start that the Christian approach is insincere and bound up with trickery, as well as having no validity in either reason or scripture. Again, words from the opening of his *Jawāb* strongly suggest this: "A letter came . . . exemplary in politeness but alien in intention and shocking in purpose."⁵¹ Beneath its courteous surface he detects duplicity and cunning.

Whatever the true intention of the Christian, who may or may not have meant to imply that Muḥammad and the Quran were secondary to Christianity itself, al-Dimashqī's reply contains a degree of rejection that amounts to vehemence. He does not so much want to show where these particular points are wrong, or even where Christian doctrines and beliefs are wrong, but appears to want to prove that both Christianity as a faith and Christians as people are to be condemned and dismissed as valueless and contemptible. In this, his stance is the same as that of al-Wāsiṭī and Ibn Taymīyah, and it contrasts noticeably with the more measured approach of earlier Muslim masters.

Three or four centuries before al-Dimashqī's explosive reply to Christian claims, Muslim theologians such as al-Māturidī, al-Bāqillānī, and 'Abd al-Jabbār also wrote about Christianity. These three leaders of theological thinking left the first surviving treatises of Islamic theology, in which they combined in different forms demonstrations of their own theology with refutations of Christianity and other non-Muslim faiths.⁵² With some subtlety they positioned these refutations in relation to their presentation of positive Muslim doctrine so as to make clear that the errors of logic in the way the practitioners of these faiths presented them both made them unviable and also proved the validity and inevitability of the strict monotheism of Islam. Thus, for example, the Mu'tazilī 'Abd al-Jabbār (who died in 1025, three hundred years before this correspondence between Cyprus and Damascus), in his great theological compendium the *Mughnī*, places his refutation

⁵⁰ Ebied and Thomas, *Muslim-Christian Polemic during the Crusades*, 160–63.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁵² Cf. David Thomas, "Dialogue with Other Faiths as an Aspect of Islamic Theology," in *Religious Polemic in Context*, ed. Theo L. Hetteema and A. van der Kooij (Assen, The Netherlands, 2004), 93–109.



of Christianity, together with attacks on dualist faiths, after his exposition of the Mu‘tazilī doctrine of *tawhīd*. Just as he proves that dualist versions of doctrine are wrong, so he proves that the Trinity, which fragments the being of God, and the Incarnation, which brings divinity into intimate proximity with creaturely humanity, are also wrong in that they cannot be given a rational foundation. According to the severely rational frame of reference he sets himself, his arguments disprove Christianity as uncompromisingly as al-Dimashqī’s, but he does so in a measured, systematic way that Christians who observed the same logical method could appreciate and either accept or respond to with arguments of a similar character. The same applies to other tenth-century theological refutations, which forensically analyze the doctrines they have before them and expose their deficiencies with unrelenting logical rigor.

The dispassionate, abstract approach of these Muslim precursors is far from the arguments assembled by al-Dimashqī, not least in the way their argumentative cogency contrasts with the anecdotes and popular tales he employs. Their intention is manifestly to impress their religious opponents with points that must be accepted by rational minds, while al-Dimashqī seems more concerned to appeal to Muslims who would accept his accounts of Christian belief and history and traditions of the Prophet’s veracity than to Christians who would decry them as unfounded. His stance is utterly different from his predecessors of a few centuries.

One can imagine that as an individual al-Dimashqī would be less concerned to win the minds of Christians than to display to local Muslims the strength of his case for rejecting the contents of the letter. But one must wonder whether, in the circumstances of the time, with the Christian West in retreat and Islam triumphant in lands that within living memory had been occupied by Crusaders and invaded by Mongol armies, there was a more widespread sense that Christians and their faith did not have to be taken seriously. There was no need to engage on any deep level with the claims of their faith, the intellectual battle had been won just as the military encounter had proved decisive, and it was now a matter of reminding oneself and one’s fellow believers about the reasons for accepting the supremacy of Islam.

Al-Dimashqī says nothing to support such suppositions, and the relative superficiality of his huge response to the carefully worked letter cannot be finally explained. But in this instance of an apparently naïve and idealistic Christian constructing fragile possibilities and an intransigent Muslim countering with unconvincing stories is to be found one of the permanent traits of encounters between followers of the two faiths. True meeting of minds was a rare occurrence in this period, though it has hardly occurred between Christians and Muslims at any other.

