Early Islamic theological thinking developed in a fiercely competitive multi-faith context. In the towns and cities of the late Umayyad and early Abbasid empires Muslims vied with Christians and others to present the truest account of reality in its transcendent and contingent states. And there was, at least for a time, a vogue for debates between faith representatives, analyses of rival doctrines, and easy cross-fertilisation of ideas. In this atmosphere, followers of the faiths learnt a great deal about and from one another. Many inquisitive Muslims, for example, became thoroughly acquainted not only with the major Christian doctrines but also with Christian origins and history, and with the many sectarian teachings that orthodoxy had condemned as heresy. They were also able to quote key verses from the Bible. Despite this, the majority of Muslims were surprisingly uncurious about Christianity and other faiths. Their sole interest was in how the teachings of these faiths could be used to demonstrate the correctness and coherence of Muslim doctrine as it developed into an all-embracing system. In their eyes, other faiths and their scriptures had been superseded by their own, and there was little profit in studying them except to discover their errors. Thus, the Bible remained largely unexplored by Muslim theologians in the early centuries, not only because its languages made it largely inaccessible to all but a few, but also because its contents were widely considered unreliable.

Early Islamic theology and Christianity

The relationship between the earliest theological thinking in Islam and Christianity remains a matter of debate. Some think that Muslims were deeply influenced in the issues they first considered by the questions current among Christian scholars under their rule. Others see less influence, and rather Muslims being challenged by
Christian discussions to search for answers in their own resources. While there must surely have been some influence, if only of the kind that led Muslims to awareness of the issues implicit in their revealed texts—the precise character of a strictly unified Divinity, or the scope of human freedom and responsibility in relation to an overwhelmingly omnipotent God—it seems clear that at least from the time that any substantive records survive, from about 200/815 onwards, Islamic theological thinking had been established on sophisticated methodological lines, and with its own agenda of questions generated by reflection on its own internal tradition of teaching.

This suggests a lesser degree of extraneous influence rather than a greater. But what is striking from the records that survive is that almost every theologian of note from the ninth century on wrote works against Christianity and other faiths alongside works on the nature of God, the nature of the material world, politics, and other native Muslim matters. Only a small fraction of these is extant, unfortunately, but if those that are typify the approach generally adopted towards the other faith, then it appears that their authors were only interested in those aspects that had a direct bearing upon Islamic thought itself.

Some examples will illustrate this point. In the mid-third/ninth century the independent-minded rationalist theologian Abū ʻIsā al-Warrāq wrote his Radd ʻalā al-thalāth firaq min al-Naṣārā, one of the longest and most detailed refutations of Christianity that has come down from any Muslim author. In his introduction Abū ʻIsā hints that he knows many details of Christian faith and history, including the circumstances in which the Nicene Creed was agreed, and the beliefs of a series of heterodox sub-sects. But in the body of

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4 Thomas, Trinity, pp. 70-3.