Chapter 3

Manipulation of the Qur’an in the Epistolary Exchange between al-Hāshimī and al-Kindī

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The well-known text purporting to be an exchange of letters between the Muslim ʿAbd Allāh ibn Ismāʿīl al-Hāshimī and the Christian ʿAbd al-Masīḥ ibn Isḥāq al-Kindī written at the beginning of the ninth century has remained the subject of speculation among scholars. Little is known of its provenance, and important questions persist about the identity of its author(s), context and actual date. Because of these uncertainties, the text has been generally ignored by scholars until recently. A further difficulty is that the earliest Arabic manuscripts available, apparently copies of a 12th century text, are dated from the 17th century. To date, no critical edition has been made, and the only published versions of the Arabic text remain the 1977 dissertation thesis of George Tartar, which he also translated into French, and the edition of A. Tien.1

In spite of the paucity of information about the early history of exchange, it was apparently held to be of enough significance to be translated into Latin in the medieval period. As one of the few such texts known in the West, it played an unusually important role for Latin-speaking scholars by providing knowledge of earlier debates between Muslims and Christians in the Middle East. For example, we can be quite sure that the exchange was a source for Nicholas of Cusa (d. 1464) in writing his influential *Cribratio Alcorani* (1460/1). Jasper Hopkins in particular has argued that the Latin translation of the ‘debate among those noble Arabs’ mentioned by Nicholas is none other than the *Risāla al-Kindī*. As far as is known, Nicholas had access to this text through the ‘Toledan Collection’, a group of Arabic texts commissioned for translation into Latin in the mid-12th century by Peter the Venerable, which also includes the earliest known Latin rendering of the Qur’an by Robert of Ketton. In the past two decades, there has been renewed scholarly interest in the medieval Latin engagement with Islam, and as a consequence the Latin version of the letters of al-Hāshimī and al-Kindī has recently been edited and translated into Spanish. This has prompted a fresh look at the Arabic original and search for answers concerning its origins.

The text as it has been preserved includes only the invitation of al-Hāshimī to Islam and the response of al-Kindī. The latter makes up nearly 85% of the translation, and makes no mention of a further response on the part of al-Hāshimī. As noted in the chapter in this volume by Fr. Emilio Platti, the text reveals a high level of knowledge about the origins and contents of the Qur’an on the part of the Christian author, whose identity has yet to be determined satisfactorily: is he a Christian who participated in actual exchanges with Muslims; to which denomination does he belong; how did he come to know so much about Islam? Even more intriguing is the question of whether the entire exchange was written by a single author as a hypothetical exercise, or represents an actual conversation between a Muslim and a Christian. The assumption among many scholars has been that the ‘epistolary exchange’

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4 Gónzález Muñoz, *Exposición*. 