POLITICAL POWER AND RIGHT RELIGION IN THE EAST SYRIAN DISPUTATION BETWEEN A MONK OF BĚT HĀLĔ AND AN ARAB NOTABLE

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The epigraphic coins that were the result of the coinage reform of the Umayyad caliph ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwân (685-705 AD) proclaimed a strong politico-religious message. One of the oldest known post-reform dirhams from South Iraq was struck in Kashkar in the year 79 AH (698/9 AD), another in the same year in Kufa. Their obverse field has: ‘There is no god but God alone. He has no partner.’ The reverse field has the text of Qur’an 112, surat al-Ikhlāṣ: ‘God is One, God is the Everlasting. He does not beget nor is He begotten, and there is none equal to Him.’ The reverse margin offers an approximation to Qur’an 9.33 (cf. 61.9): ‘Muhammad is the messenger of God whom he sent with guidance and the religion of truth in order to make it victorious over all religions, even though the polytheists detest [it].’

For the first time since the Arab-Islamic conquests, the Arab rulers, namely, the Umayyad authorities and pro-Umayyad circles, now began officially and by various means to propagate and promote the claim of Islam to be the true religion, succeeding Christianity and superior to it. As has recently been emphasized by Larry Conrad, the proclamation of Islam through inscriptions in and on buildings and

2 Klat, Catalogue, p. 11. For the analogous texts on the post-reform dinars, which were struck from 77 AH (696/7 AD), see J. Walker, A Catalogue of the Arab-Byzantine and Post-Reform Umayyad Coins, London, 1956, p. 84.
coins, as well as through literary texts, implicitly made an appeal to the non-Muslim populations of the Middle East to join in the new faith. These proclamations had a distinct anti-Christian polemical tenor, stating on the basis of Qur’anic texts that the Christian view of Christ as God or Son of God is false and the Islamic view of Jesus the son of Mary true, and that Islam’s absolute monotheism and not Christian Trinitarian doctrine represents the true religion.

It is quite understandable that these new and unexpected developments had a strong impact on the Christian clergy in particular. We will not enter into the question of the political and social factors which incited the Marwanids to this radical policy change, beginning in the 690s, but will rather discuss here the different patterns of

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4 See also O. Grabar, The Formation of Islamic Art, New Haven and London, 1973, pp. 94-5; Crone and Hinds, God’s Caliph, p. 25, n. 8; Blair, ‘What is the Date?’, p. 67.

5 L.I. Conrad, ‘Heraclius in Early Islamic Kerygma’, in G.J. Reinink and B.H. Stolte, eds, The Reign of Heraclius (610-641): Crisis and Confrontation, Leuven and Dudley, MA, 2002, pp. 113-56, esp. pp. 122-4. Conrad suggests a relation between the genesis of the Arab Islamic ‘Messenger Stories’, in which the role of Islam as a religion superseding the other religions, in particular Christianity, is asserted, and the building of the Dome of the Rock by ‘Abd al-Malik with its Qur’anic inscriptions declaring Christianity to be the superseded religion. Al-Zuhrî (d. 761), who seems to have been responsible for the creation of these stories, is reported to have had important connections with the Umayyad caliphate in Damascus.

6 Reference to Q 4.171-2; 19.34-7 (God has no son) in the inscription on the inner face of the octagonal arcade in the Dome of the Rock. References to Jesus and/or Muhammad being God’s messengers are found in the inscriptions on the outer and inner face of the octagonal arcade of the Dome of the Rock, on ‘Abd al-Azîz’s posters and on ‘Abd al-Malik’s post-reform coins.

7 Reference to Q 112 (God does not beget nor is He begotten) in ‘Abd al-Azîz’s posters, in the inscription on the outer face of the octagonal arcade in the Dome of the Rock and on ‘Abd al-Malik’s post-reform coins. For the proclamation of Islam on the milestones from the reign of ‘Abd al-Malik and the Arabic-Greek/Greek-Arabic protocols from the time of Walîd I (705-715) and Yazîd II (720-724), see R.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, pp. 700-1.

8 For a discussion of the appearance of proclamations of Islam through different public media by the time of ‘Abd al-Malik’s successful conclusion of the Second Arab Civil War (691/2), see Hoyland, Seeing Islam, pp. 550-9; G.J. Reinink, ‘Fol-