CHRISTIAN THEOLOGIANS AND NEW QUESTIONS

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Introduction

The Christians who came under Muslim rule in the seventh and eighth centuries AD encountered monotheists of a kind entirely different from themselves. Their own internal debates about the Trinitarian nature of God and his relationship with the created order through the incarnate Son clashed in every respect against the Muslim emphasis upon God’s unity. And so when Christians met Muslims to explore their differences, they found opponents who confronted them with new and unexpected challenges. The two sides were set on such different courses in developing their fundamental beliefs that they were almost bound to lay the beginnings of what became a tradition of misunderstanding that inevitably led to indifference and condemnation.

In order to demonstrate the huge gap between Muslims and Christians in their mutual understanding in the early Islamic period, and also the Muslim attitude towards and treatment of Christian beliefs, we will examine in this chapter two of the earliest surviving treatises written by Muslim thinkers against Christian doctrines. These are the relatively brief *Radd ‘alā al-Naṣārā* of the Zaydi Imām al-Qāsim b. Ibrāhīm al-Rassī (d. 246/860) and the extremely long *Radd ‘alā al-thalāth fī raq min al-Naṣārā* of the independent Shī‘ī theologian Abū ‘Īsā Muḥammad b. Hārūn al-Warrāq (fl. c. 250/864). Both date from the third/ninth century, though it is quite probable from some underlying similarities in their structure and approach to Christian beliefs that they reflect attitudes established rather earlier but now irrecoverable by direct means.

These two Muslim responses to Christianity can be set in an inter-religious intellectual context by a brief consideration of the major work of John of Damascus, *The Fount of Knowledge*, the most comprehensive treatise of Christian theology from the late Patristic period. As is well known, John was probably brought up in the Umayyad court and functioned as a senior official under the caliph before withdrawing
from public life, taking the monk's habit at the monastery of Mar Sabas outside Jerusalem, and devoting himself to writing.\textsuperscript{1} This was probably in about 100/718, a century or so before the two Muslim authors we shall examine were active.

John composed \textit{The Fount of Knowledge} on the basis of considerable experience at the centre of Islamic rule, and in a religious milieu in which Islam was increasingly influential. Despite this, it is difficult to see any but the merest traces of Islamic influence upon the composition of the work. If, for example, we take the part which is concerned with the exposition of Christian doctrine, \textit{The Orthodox Faith}, we find in its hundred chapters expected accounts of the nature of God in himself and of the Incarnation of the Son.\textsuperscript{2} But we do not find any studied explanation of precisely how it might be possible for the three divine Persons to be one single and undivided God, nor any demonstration of exactly how the infinite, unbounded God could become united with the finite, constricted human Jesus. Rather, the majority of the presentation is taken up by defences of John's own Christology against those of other Christians. In this way, the work substantially reflects past traditions of Christian doctrinal teaching and inter-denominational rivalries, and there is no obvious gesture towards Muslim questions about the possibility of God being a Trinity or of his uniting with a human.\textsuperscript{3}

This apparent indifference to the new inter-religious context is maybe explained by the one part of \textit{The Fount of Knowledge} that is explicitly concerned with Islam, Chapter 100/101 of the second part of the work \textit{On Heresies},\textsuperscript{4} where John briefly portrays the faith as a mishmash of beliefs concocted from Christianity and entirely human in origin, and only seems interested in its teachings insofar as these support Christian doctrines about the person of Jesus Christ


