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A New Source for Church History?

([Eastern Christianity in 'Abd al-Jabbār's (415/1025)
"Confirmation"¹]

Recently a number of important works in Islamic Studies have attempted, quite successfully in my opinion, to challenge traditional theory about the political institutions and religious doctrines of early Islam by using non-Islamic sources. Among these we might include the controversial *Hagarism* of M. Cook and P. Crone (1981) as well as the more recent, and more helpful, work by R. Hoyland: *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (1997). These works have not, by most accounts, led to a total reconstruction of the early Islamic period, partially due to the polemical nature of their source materials. Yet their presentation of the other side of the story has helped provide a certain depth to our historical vision that was lacking in the pictures painted by earlier generations of scholars such as J. Wellhausen, W. M. Watt, F. Rahman and M. Rodinson.

The present article is an exercise in the other direction. That is, I seek to use the evidence of a Muslim polemical treatise to cast a different type of light upon the doctrines and practices of the Eastern Church. As my field is more properly Islamic, I am not able to provide an adequate assessment of the historical value of the reports that I will share. For this reason the title is framed as a question. I hope that the readers might themselves be able to judge if the accounts of a polemicist might actually provide us with a new insight into church history, or if they must be considered something like a tabloid journal: fun to read but not to be believed. This article, then, might be considered a limited case study in the value of such historiography. Indeed, there is a vast literature of unpublished or unread medieval Islamic anti-Christian polemics which might either yield a considerable harvest of historical data, or merely add up only to so many popular newspapers fit to be discarded. My task as I see it, then, is to introduce this particular polemical treatise, to

1 I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Fr. Samir Khalil Samir and Fr. Sidney Griffith for their assistance with this material.

describe its historical context and to report its most significant accounts regarding the Eastern Church. The rest I will leave up to the reader.

The Source: 'Abd al-Jabbār's *Confirmation*

The text that is the subject of our study is one that stands out from almost all other Islamic anti-Christian polemics. 'Abd al-Jabbār's *Tathbīt dalā'il al-nubuwwa* (*Confirmation of the Proofs of Prophecy*) is ostensibly a work of apologetic, not polemic. Ostensibly, the goal of a work of *dalā'il* ("proofs," "signs") is to demonstrate the authenticity of Muḥammad's prophetic vocation, and thus the authority of the prophetic teaching which he brought. 'Abd al-Jabbār, however, makes no division between the defense of Islamic doctrine and the deconstruction of non-Islamic doctrine. Thus he goes on the offensive, attacking all of those groups that do not recognize the prophecy of Muḥammad (or at least not in the way that he does): philosophers, astrologers, Shī'īs, Zoroastrians, Jews and most prominently, Christians. His salient interest in Christianity, I believe, stems from two factors. First, at the time that he was writing (385/995), the Christian Byzantine Empire very much had the upper hand in the frontier warfare that marked the eight centuries in which that Empire and Muslim principalities co-existed.

Through the middle and late fourth/tenth century, the Byzantines routinely dealt defeats out to the Ḥamdānīd Dynasty of Syria. They held the city of Antioch for most of the century and in 962, the Emperor Nicephorus Phocas sacked the capital of the Ḥamdānids, Aleppo, forcing a humiliating tribute upon them (which included mounting a Cross on the highest minaret of the city).² Accordingly, one scholar, H. Busse, has linked the rise in aggressive anti-Christian polemics with the political climate of this time.³ Whether or not he is right, we can certainly notice how, in the *Confirmation*, 'Abd al-Jabbār is quite conscious of the Byzantine threat. This, combined with the simultaneous rise of the Ismā'īlī Shī'ī Fāṭimids in Egypt, gave him the feeling that Islam was under siege:

Now when Islam first [began], [the Byzantines] were careful with captives, due to the strength of Islam and their weakness, that they might benefit from them. Yet the conduct of the kings of Islam became bad, and their concern for [Islam] became little. Those who carry out the raids

² See E. Sivan, *Islam et la Croisade: idéologie et propagande dans les réactions musulmanes aux Croisades* (Paris: A. Maisonneuve, 1968), 12ff.

³ In describing earlier Muslim/Christian writings (of the late third/ninth and early fourth/tenth century), Busse concludes, "Im ganzen herrschte aber ein ruhiger Ton, sehr im Gegensatz zu den sich mehrenden Tumulten nach der Jahrtausendwende." *Chalif und Grosskönig: die Buyiden im Iraq* (Beirut: Franz Steiner, 1969), 477.

against [the Byzantines] were such as Sayf al-dawla 'Alī b. Hamdān.⁴ Those in Egypt,⁵ the enemies of Islam, took possession of the religious funds (*awqāf*) of the frontier cities. The Muslims became unimportant in the eyes of the Byzantines.⁶

A second factor which, I believe, lies behind the composition of the *Confirmation*, is the important Christian community that 'Abd al-Jabbār encountered in Rayy, the city where he was appointed a lead judge (*Qāḍī al-quḍāt*) in 367/977 by the influential Būyid vizier, al-Šāhib b. 'Abbād (385/995).⁷ Indeed, I am convinced that it was as a judge in this Iranian city that 'Abd al-Jabbār had his first extensive contact with Christians. While he had previously been in cities that had important Christian populations (especially Baṣra and Baghdād), 'Abd al-Jabbār while there likely stayed within the elite world of Muslim intellectuals and doubtlessly had little interaction with Christians. The *Confirmation* itself lends important evidence to this effect. When compared with the anti-Christian polemic that 'Abd al-Jabbār wrote before the *Confirmation*,⁸ most importantly his voluminous *Comprehensive Work on the Questions of Divine Unity and Justice* (*al-Mughnī fī abwāb al-tawḥīd wa-l-'adl*), the effect is remarkable. The anti-Christian polemic of the *Comprehensive* is classical *kalām* (Muslim theology), written in precisely the same discursive (Arabic: *masā'il wa-ajwiba*) format that 'Abd al-Jabbār uses in his purely Islamic theological writings.⁹

4 Abū 'l-Ḥasan b. 'Abd Allāh (d. 356/967), Ḥamdanid ruler known for the literary circle at his court and his many campaigns against the Byzantines.

5 i.e. the Fāṭimids.

6 *Tathbūt dalā'il al-nubuwwa*, Ed. 'Abd al-Karīm 'Uthmān, 2 Vols. numbered consecutively (Beirut: Dar al-'Arabiyya, 1966), 168.

7 Ibn al-Athīr goes to pains to remind the reader that 'Abd al-Jabbār was "Qāḍī al-quḍāt" of Rayy alone, and not of the entire 'Abbāsīd Empire. Clearly later admirers of 'Abd al-Jabbār (like some Orientalists) had exaggerated his position after his death. See Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil fī 'l-tārīkh*, 11 Vols. (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-'ilmiyya, 1995), 7:380. The idea that Qāḍī al-quḍāt is title more meaningful than simply 'Abd al-Jabbār's vocation in Rayy is reflected in Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt al-shāfi'iyya al-kubrā* (Cairo: Maṭba'a 'Isā al-Bābī, 1964), 5:97. Two different letters from al-Šāhib b. 'Abbād to 'Abd al-Jabbār are preserved which discuss the latter's position in Rayy. See al-Šāhib b. 'Abbād, *Rasā'il*, Ed. 'Abd al-Wahhāb 'Azzām (Cairo: Dār al-fikr al-'arabī, 1366/1947), 42-46.

8 See for example *al-Mughnī* (Cairo: Dār al-Miṣriyya, 1965), V: 80-151; *Sharḥ al-uṣūl al-khamsa*, Ed. 'Abd al-Karīm 'Uthmān (Cairo: Maktabat wahba, 1965), 291-8; *al-Majmū' fī 'l-muḥīt bi-l-taklīf*. 3 Vols. (Beirut: Dār al-machreq, 1965-1999), I:222ff. This last work is more properly assigned to Abū Muḥammad b. Mattawayh (469/1076), a disciple of 'Abd al-Jabbār who used much of his teacher's material, but the first of the three volumes ascribes it to the teacher himself.

9 'Abd al-Jabbār is best known as a *mutakallim* (theologian), most particularly as a (Baṣran) Mu'tazilī, a part the theological school which defended the createdness of the Qur'ān and the human (as opposed to the divine) origin of human acts in their efforts to articulate the oneness and justness of God. Mu'tazilism seems to have been the central movement in the early development of *kalām*, when "almost anyone who engaged in theological discourse was

This is absolutely not the case with the *Confirmation*. Here ‘Abd al-Jabbār has little interest in deconstructing abstract Christian theological formulations surrounding the Trinity and Incarnation. Rather, his fundamental goal is to demonstrate how Christians historically changed the message of Christ: “The Romans did not become Christians, not did they respond to the message of Christ. Rather the Christians have become Romans and apostatized from the religion of Christ.”¹⁰ The effect is that ‘Abd al-Jabbār has provided us with an extraordinary anti-Christian polemic:

In another respect, too, it contrasts with the same author’s systematic books on theology: it is no abstract exposition of doctrine, but is full of lively and idiosyncratic polemics against various contemporary trends of thought. ‘Abd al-Jabbār appears as a more remarkable man than one would have thought from his scholastic books.¹¹

‘Abd al-Jabbār’s endeavor to show how Christians have changed the religion of Christ leads him to report the passages that we will discuss below relating to the East Syrian Church. They form an integral part of his greater polemical strategy: to show that Christian laziness, greed and lust for power has led them to compromise the precedent (*sunna*) which Christ set for them, and to change the teaching which he gave them in the Gospel (*injil*). Before looking at these passages, however, let us see what we can know about the Christians

regarded as a Mu‘tazilite of one sort or another” (D. Thomas, *Anti-Christian Polemic in Early Islam* [Cambridge: Cambridge 1992], 4). Mu‘tazilism became state theology for a brief period under the ‘Abbāsīd caliph al-Ma’mūn (r. 198/813–218/833) but was rejected and suppressed by the caliph al-Mutawakkil (r. 232/847–247/861). Its political decline was followed by a gradual decline in popularity, so that ‘Abd al-Jabbār might be considered the last great representative of the school: “His fame and his greatness spread wide. He received power among the Mu‘tazila until he became their religious leader and scholar without opposition. His fame has no need of an exaggerated description” (al-Khatīb al-Baghdādī, *Ta’rikh Baghdad*, 14 Vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1995), 11:114). The value of ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s works (most of which were discovered during an Egyptian project in Yemen, in the 1950’s) is inestimable. Besides containing his own articulation of Mu‘tazilī theology (and refutation of non-Mu‘tazilī theology), his writings also catalogue the views of scores of important earlier theologians (Mu‘tazilī and non-Mu‘tazilī), whose thought would otherwise be unknown to us. The most complete biography of ‘Abd al-Jabbār is by the editor of the *Confirmation*, ‘Abd al-Karīm ‘Uthmān: *Qāḍī al-quḍāt* (Beirut: Dār al-‘Arabiyya, 1967). In English see W. Madelung, “‘Abd-al-Jabbār,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Ed. Ehsan Yarshater (1982–Present), 1:116–8.

10 *Tathbūt*, 168.

11 S. Stern, “Quotations from Apocryphal Gospels in ‘Abd al-Jabbār,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 18 (April 1967), 34. A second scholar, S. Pines, who became aware of the *Tathbūt* simultaneously with Stern was equally surprised by what he found: “When first taking cognizance of ‘Abd al-Jabbār treatise, I looked cursorily through the chapters on Christianity, and found the subject-matter and the approach most peculiar; they bore little similarity to the ordinary Moslem anti-Christian polemics.” Pines, *Jewish Christians of the Early Centuries of Christianity According to a New Source* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1966), 2.

whom 'Abd al-Jabbār likely encountered in the medieval Iranian metropolis of Rayy.

The Context: Rayy and the East Syrian Church

The evidence that 'Abd al-Jabbār wrote his *Confirmation* in the Iranian city of Rayy is, I believe, quite compelling. What we know about his life matches with what we see in this work regarding the date and place of its composition. And what we see in this work matches with what we know of Rayy in the late fourth/tenth century. To observe this more clearly we might begin by looking at the evidence that 'Abd al-Jabbār offers us regarding the circumstances in which he composed the *Confirmation*. He tells his readers on page 168, "And today you are about in the year 385." The Islamic year 385 corresponds to the Christian year 995, which can be safely taken as an approximate composition date.

What, then, do we know about 'Abd al-Jabbār's whereabouts at this time? The Mu'tazilī biographer al-Ḥākim Abū Sa'd al-Bayhaqī (545/1150), reports that Ibn 'Abbād summoned 'Abd al-Jabbār to Rayy in the year 360/970.¹² This date is contradicted, however, by Ibn al-Athīr and al-Rāfi'ī in his *al-Tadwīn fī akhbār Qazwīn*, who reports the year as 367/977, in the month of Muḥarram.¹³ This later calculation might be the stronger one, since we know from an independent source that Ibn 'Abbād appointed 'Abd al-Jabbār as chief Qāḍī of Rayy in that same year. Two different letters from the Vizier to 'Abd al-Jabbār, relating to this event, are preserved. In the first, Ibn 'Abbād designates 'Abd al-Jabbār Qāḍī over Rayy, Qazwīn, Suhraward, Qūm and the areas adjoining them.¹⁴ In the second, Ibn 'Abbād praises 'Abd al-Jabbār and promotes him:

Therefore [Mu'ayyid al-dawla], by the command of the Prince of the Faithful, al-Ṭā'ī' li-llāh (May God grant him a long existence), has seen to adjoin under ['Abd al-Jabbār's] authority his territories of Jurjān, Ṭabaristān and their dependencies to the territory which he previously entrusted to him.¹⁵

'Abd al-Jabbār would remain in Rayy until the end of his life, as a second Mu'tazilī biographer, Ibn Murtaḍā (840/1437), tells us in his *Tabaqāt al-mu'ta-*

12 al-Bayhaqī, 366; Ibn al-Murtaḍā, 112.

13 Ibn al-Athīr, 7:380. 'Abd al-Karīm b. Muḥammad al-Rāfi'ī, *al-Tadwīn fī akhbār Qazwīn*, 4 Vols. (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-'arabiyya, 1408/1987), 125.

14 See al-Ṣāhib b. 'Abbād, *Rasā'il*, Ed. 'Abd al-Wahhāb 'Azzām (Cairo: Dār al-fikr al-'arabī, 1366/1947), 42-46.

15 Ibn 'Abbād, 34; cf. Rāfi'ī, 119.

zila: "[ʿAbd al-Jabbār] remained there persevering in teaching until he passed away (May God most high have mercy on him) in the year 415 or 416 (1024-5)."¹⁶

The *Confirmation* itself adds further support to our hypothesis that ʿAbd al-Jabbār was writing in Rayy. For one thing, the main target of his attacks is quite clearly the Nestorian Church, which, as we shall see, was the primary church of Rayy. On a number of occasions ʿAbd al-Jabbār singles out the Nestorians specifically. On page 96 ʿAbd al-Jabbār gives an excerpt from a letter, which we will discuss below, written in Syriac by a Nestorian Metropolitan against the Jacobites. Also important is ʿAbd al-Jabbār's frequent reference to the church title *jāthālīq* (from Gk. καθολικός).¹⁷ This form of the term appears above all in Nestorian texts, being influenced by the Eastern Syriac (Chaldean) *gāthālīq*.¹⁸ In the Nestorian church it was used to refer to the Metropolitan (*muṭrān*) who had authority above all of the other Metropolitans, and it is clearly in this sense that ʿAbd al-Jabbār uses the term in his *Confirmation*.¹⁹

Furthermore, the text is filled with clues that ʿAbd al-Jabbār had contact with a Syriac speaking community, such as the East Syrian Church, and not one that spoke Arabic.²⁰ A few of these clues: On page 100 of the *Confirmation*, ʿAbd al-Jabbār refers to Jesus as *yāshūʿ*,²¹ and then explains: "*Yāshūʿ* is Syriac for Jesus (*ʿĪsā*)." On page 146, ʿAbd al-Jabbār supports an argument by referring to "the books, written in Syriac, of the church (*bīʿa*) present in the districts of *Ahwāz* and elsewhere in the districts of Iraq." On 207, he quotes a Syriac expression when describing Christian monks. At least once he refers to Paul as *Fawlūs*, which likely corresponds to the Syriac *Pawlūs*, in lieu of the Arabic *Būlus*,²² just as he refers to Pontius Pilate as *Filāṭus* (cf. Syr. *Pīlātūs*) instead of

16 *K. Ṭabaqāt al-muʿtazila*, Ed. S. Diwald-Wilzer (Beirut: Dār al-maktabat al-ḥayya, 1987), 112.

17 e.g. *Tathbīt* 120, 174, 175, 202, 203 etc.

18 In Melkite and Jacobite literature the title is usually referred to as *kāthūlik*. See G. Graf, *Verzeichnis arabischer kirchlicher Termini* (Louvain, Imprimerie Orientaliste, 1954), 95 and cf. 33.

19 The East Syrian church designated its highest Metropolitan as *jāthālīq/gāthālīq* from at least the sixth century, "um die von den Nestorianern beanspruchte Gleichberechtigung ihres Oberhauptes mit den übrigen Patriarchen zu demonstrieren." *Kleines Wörterbuch des christlichen Orients*, Ed. J. Aßfalg and P. Krüger (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1975), 162. "Katholikos" as a religious title was also used occasionally by the Jacobite and Melkite Churches, but only those in the East Syrian context (i. e. Iran and Iraq), that were likely influenced by Nestorian practice. Other non-Syriac speaking churches also used the term *katholikos*, such as the Armenians and Georgians. See *Kleines Wörterbuch*, 162.

20 In addition to my observations, see those of S. Pines on the Syriacisms of the *Confirmation* in his "Studies in Christianity and in Judaeo-Christianity Based on Arabic Sources" *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 6 (1985), 131.

21 Read for *yāsūʿ* as printed in the edition.

22 cf. 98. The name is also found written with the emphatic form "ṣ". See Graf, *Verzeichnis*, 26.

the typical Arabic *Bilāṭus*.²³ On a number of occasions ‘Abd al-Jabbār uses phrases that are peculiar to the Eastern Syriac used by the East Syrian Church. Among these is the word that he gives as *fāthūra*.²⁴ This comes from the Syriac liturgical term *pethūrā*, which is used exclusively in the East Syrian Church to refer to the eucharistic feast.²⁵ Likewise on 99 ‘Abd al-Jabbār refers to a Christian theologian as *Yāwānis*, an Eastern Syriac/Nestorian form of the name John.²⁶

In light of this evidence, I have no doubt that ‘Abd al-Jabbār wrote the *Confirmation* in Rayy, having been influenced by East Syrian Christianity. What, then, can we know about Rayy from independent sources that would add to our contextualization of the *Confirmation*? Long before ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s arrival in 367/977, Rayy was an important center of the East Syrian church, known in Syriac sources as *Bēth Rāzīqāyē*.²⁷ M. Le Quien, author of the encyclopedic catalogue of the Eastern church, *Oriens Christianus*, lists the city among the Metropolitan seats of the East Syrian church. Le Quien, however, erroneously attributes the foundation of the city to the Seleucids:

Hanc Seleucus Nicator instauravit et auxit, ex quo illius conditor putatus fuit: Alfarangi aevo urbs maxima erat, plusquam parasangam integram in longum, et dimidiam in latum patens, ait Golius, eleganter aedificata, et gemino intus rivo et aquaeductibus gaudet.²⁸

In fact, Rayy, was an important city long before the Seleucid era. Zoroastrians see the origins of Rayy with the origins of the world: ancient *Raghā* was one of the twelve sacred spots created by Ahura Mazda in Zoroastrian cosmology.²⁹

23 cf. 94, 99.

24 This should be read rather than the *fātūra* that is given in the text. *Tathbūt*, 93.

25 See Graf, *Verzeichniss*, 82, who refers to M. ‘Amrī, *De patriarchus nestorianorum*, Ed. H. Gismondi. 2 Vols. (Rome: n.p., 1896), II:94.

26 Cognate with the Syriac *yū’annīs* or *yūhanīs*. See L. Costaz, *Dictionnaire syriaque-français* (Beirut: Imprimerie catholique, 1963), 409.

27 The following section will hopefully form a balance to B. Spuler’s conclusion that Christianity only flourished in two areas of Iran: Fārs and Transoxania. See B. Spuler, *Iran in früh-islamischer Zeit* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1952), 212.

28 “Nicator the Seleucid established [Rayy] and enriched it. Thus he is considered its founder. According to al-Farghānī it was a great city, more than a parasang in length and a half parasang in width. Golius said that the city was elegantly built, blessed by its double canal and aqueducts.” Le Quien, 2:1291-2. Nicator refers to Demetrius II (125 BC), the Seleucid ruler of Syria who engaged in a number of wars with the Persian Parthian Empire. See R. M. E., “Demetrius II,” *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford, 1996), 450. al-Farghānī is the third/ninth century astronomer Abū ‘l-‘Abbās Aḥmad al-Farghānī, known to Europe as Alfarangus. Golius is Jacob Golius (1667), the Dutch orientalist who published an Arabic edition and Latin translation of al-Farghānī’s *Jawāmi‘ ‘ilm al-nujūm wa-l-ḥarakāt al-samāwiyya*, published posthumously in 1669. See H. Suter and J. Vernet, “al-Farghānī,” *EI*², 2:793 and “Golius,” *La grande encyclopédie*, 31 Vols. (Paris: H. Lamirault, 1886), 18:1178-9.

29 Bosworth, “Rayy,” 471. Yāqūt mentions that Rayy is referred to in the *tawrāt* (Old Testament) as “one of the gates of the Earth, the storehouse of creation (*matjar al-khalq*).” Abū ‘Abd

Later (a bit after the creation of the world) Rayy became an important city in Persian Media, known to the Greeks as *Ῥάγα*.³⁰

The Christian presence in Rayy appeared quite early and spread quickly. Already in AD 410 an East Syrian Bishop had been installed in the city.³¹ This is the date of the East Syrian synod of Isaac, when we hear that the bishops of *Bēth Madāyē* and *Bēth Rāziqāyē* were among those expected to later accept the definitions of the council.³² The first bishop of Rayy whose name has reached us is David, who attended the synod of Dādīshō' in 424.³³ He is followed by Joseph, in 486, at the Synod of Acace.³⁴ In 544, we find the signature of Daniel (d. 554), bishop of *Bēth Rāziqāyē*, at the Synod of Joseph.³⁵

Finally, in the year 161/778 or approximately 184/800,³⁶ the Nestorian Metropolitan Timothy I elevated Rayy to the seat of a metropolitan, a position that it would hold until the thirteenth century.³⁷ Le Quien identifies the first "Rāzī" Metropolitan as Abibus. His jurisdiction, and that of his followers, included not only Rayy, but also two important cities to its south: Qūm, the nerve center of Shī'ī Islam, and Qāshān.³⁸ We hear of two of Rayy's metropolitans in the ninth century: Thomas, who held the position in 238/853, and Mark, who was named metropolitan in 279/893.³⁹ Unfortunately, the Metropolitan of Rayy during 'Abd al-Jabbār's sejour there remains unknown to us.

Nevertheless, there is no reason to believe that the East Syrian communities had shrunk dramatically by the year 385/995, when 'Abd al-Jabbār wrote his *Confirmation*. H. Busse calculates that during Būyid times (334/945-447/1055), there were thirty Nestorian bishoprics and thirteen metropolitan seats within

Allāh al-Yāqūt, *Mu'jam al-buldān*, 5 Vols. (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-'ilmiyya, n. d.), 3:134. In fact, Raghā receives mention only in the deuterocanonical/apocryphal biblical books, in an entirely different context. Most likely, some confusion with the Zoroastrian cosmology took place here.

30 *Synodicon Orientale*, 669. Yāqūt is impressed at the ancient ruins that he finds at Rayy, commenting: "There are standing buildings which show that it was a great city. There are also ruins in the rural areas (*rustāq min rasātīq*) of Rayy," Yāqūt, 3:134.

31 J. M. Fiey. "Les communautés syriaques en Iran des premiers siècles à 1552," *Commemoration Cyrus, Actes du Congrès de Shirāz* (Tehran: 1974), 281. See also Fiey, "Médie Chrétienne," 378. Both reprinted in J. M. Fiey, *Communautés syriaques en Iran et Irak des origines à 1552* (London: Variorum, 1979); J. M. Fiey, *Oriens Christianus Novus*, 124; A. van Lantschoot, "Bēth Raziqaye," *Dictionnaire d'histoire et de géographie ecclésiastiques*, 27 Vols. (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1935), 8:1238.

32 See *Synodicon Orientale*, 34 (French Translation, p. 273). cf. Fiey, "Médie Chrétienne," 378.

33 See *Synodicon Orientale*, 43 (French Translation, p. 285). cf. Fiey, "Médie Chrétienne," 379.

34 See *Synodicon Orientale*, 60 (French Translation, p. 307). cf. Fiey, "Médie Chrétienne," 379.

35 See *Synodicon Orientale*, 109 (French Translation, p. 366). cf. Fiey, *Oriens Christianus Novus*, 124.

36 The first date is that given by Le Quien, (2:1291) and the second that of Fiey ("Médie Chrétienne," 380).

37 Fiey, "Médie chrétienne," 380. cf. H. Putman, *L'église et l'Islam sous Timothée I* (Beirut: Dar

their princedoms, hardly reflective of a community fading away.⁴⁰ J. M. Fiey reports that of all of these metropolitans seats, Rayy was in the fifth (or perhaps even in the second) rank. The metropolitan of Hamadān, for example, was below that of Rayy in the East Syrian Church hierarchy.⁴¹

Our evidence here also helps clarify the relationship between the Christianity of Rayy and the *Confirmation*. For we see that it is always the East Syrian (Nestorian) church that is of importance in both cases. We have no reports of any West Syrian (Jacobite) Christian community in Rayy at all. Le Quien gives no mention of any West Syrian church in the region. Fiey locates the closest West Syrian bishopric in Tabrīz (Adharbayjān) to the West. To the East he finds no noteworthy presence of Jacobite churches closer than Herat and Zarang (Sijistān).⁴² This is no surprise. It was above all Nestorian missions that christianized Iranian and Turkish lands.

Moreover, by the beginning of the fourth/tenth century, the East Syrian church had become essentially the state-sponsored form of Christianity in all of the Būyid lands. It was the ‘Abbāsīd caliph al-Ṭā’ī who chose Mārī II, the Nestorian Katholikos in ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s time, and he did so against the will of the bishops. Not surprisingly, Mārī came from a wealthy family from Mossul with influence in the caliphal courts.⁴³ Meanwhile, actual state administration was in the hands of the Būyids. At first, they followed the ‘Umayyad and ‘Abbāsīd practice of employing Christians in high places within the state hierarchy.⁴⁴ Christians rose to positions heretofore unheard of, even leading contingents of the Būyid armies.⁴⁵ In 368/979, ‘Aḏūd al-dawla (d. 372/983),

al-machreq, 1975), 65.

38 Fiey, “Médie chrétienne,” 380.

39 Fiey, “Médie chrétienne,” 381.

40 Busse, *Chalif und Grosskönig*, 453. In 1979 Fiey estimated that the Christians of Iran were approximately 170,000, of which 135,000 were Armenians, out of a total population of 34 million. The 2001 population of Iran was estimated around sixty-six million, while that of the Christians has undoubtedly declined due to a high rate of emigration. The Christian community, then, is much less than one percent of the Iranian population and faces a very uncertain future.

41 Fiey, “Médie Chrétienne,” 380.

42 Fiey, “Les Communautés syriaques en Iran des premiers siècles à 1552,” 281 and “Chrétientés syriaques du Horāsān et du Segestān,” *Le Muséon* LXXXVI (1973), 96-102.

43 Busse, *Chalif und Grosskönig*, 458.

44 “Other decrees excluded non-Muslims from public office. On this point the official doctrine of Islam is unambiguous: the Qur’ān itself had established such exclusion by numerous injunctions not to take ‘the infidels as associates’. However, the facts are almost continually at odds with the precepts of the first caliphs, for the conquerors – being far-seeing politicians – understood the value of administrative continuity.” Y. Courbage and P. Fargues, *Christians and Jews under Islam*, Trans. J. Mabro (London: Tauris, 1997), 24-5.

45 For a list of the most important Christians within the Būyid administration, see Spuler,

the only one of the Būyids to unify their various princedoms, named a Christian as chief vizier over his realm: Naṣr b. Hārūn.⁴⁶

At the same time, other social currents brought with them significant dangers to the Christian community, not always a “protected minority”.⁴⁷ At the same time that the Christian elite were being used for their skills in government administration, others were suffering not only the discriminatory measures of *al-shurūt al-‘umariyya*,⁴⁸ but occasional outbursts of rage against them. In 361/972, the Būyid vizier Abū l-Faḍl demanded that all worship in churches be ceased.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, we have various reports of many Christians leaving (and being deported from) Islamic lands, while Muslim mobs ransacked churches and convents. In 391/1001 the Būyids arrested the Metropolitan John VI in Baghdād, demanding a huge sum for his release.⁵⁰

Thus it becomes clear that the anti-Christian polemic of ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s *Confirmation* was written in a time and place when interactions between Christians and Muslims were frequent and often intense. The passages that I have excerpted below, then, are not abstract or theoretical reflections of a theologian speculating about Christianity. They are reports and anecdotes of a Muslim intellectual and judge, who was reacting to the Christianity that he

211, n. 2. cf. also B. Landron, *Attitudes Nestoriennes vis-à-vis de l’Islam* (Paris: Cariscrypt, 1994), 91ff.

46 Busse, *Chalif und Grosskönig*, 464. Naṣr b. Hārūn was preceded as a Christian in this post by the Nestorian Faḍl b. Marwān, who was appointed chief vizier under the caliph Mu’taṣim (r. 218/833–227/842). See B. Landron, “Les relations originelles entre chrétiens de l’Est (Nestoriens) et Musulmans,” *Parole de l’orient* 10 (1981–2), 222, and Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist* (Tehran: Dār al-masīra, 1988), 141, who reports that Faḍl was also a vizier under Ma’mūn. Spuler identifies this as one of the few occasions when Christians were able to re-build churches that had been destroyed. Spuler, 212.

47 This phrase, long used by Orientalists to translate the Arabic *ahl al-dhimma*, is wrong on two counts. First, these groups were not always minorities, but rather formed the great majority of the Islamic world for several centuries. Second, to call them “protected” is a bit like calling the accused “saved” by an executioner who stills his hand, since the only potential aggressors from which the Islamic authorities were protecting them were the Islamic authorities themselves. “Tolerated non-Muslims” is a much more accurate phrase.

48 The “Conditions of ‘Umar,” attributed to the ‘Umayyad ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (d. 101/720). These included discriminatory measures such as wearing distinctive dress, prohibitions on weapons, mounts, certain employment, building new churches or rebuilding old ones and on any outward sign (from crosses to bells) of Christianity. The Conditions have been applied with different degrees of consistency and strictness to the present day, where they are cited as justification for the policies of the Islamic governments of Saudi Arabia (and other Gulf countries) and Sudan. See C. E. Bosworth, “The Concept of *Dhimma* in Early Islam,” *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The Functioning of a Plural Society*, (New York and London, 1982) 1:45ff.

49 Busse, *Chalif und Grosskönig*, 466.

50 Busse, *Chalif und Grosskönig*, 467.

found around him. Whether his reports about that Christianity are historically valuable is a question that I will leave to the reader.

A. A Passage Regarding a Christian Scholar

The first passage that we will consider comes in the context of ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s response to a Christian argument relating to Qur’ān 5:116: “God said, ‘O Jesus son of Mary, did you say to the people, ‘Take me and my mother as two gods apart from God?’” ‘Abd al-Jabbār is aware (through discussion with Rāzī Christians?) that Christians used this verse to demonstrate the fallibility of the Qur’ān, since they do not consider Mary, but rather the Holy Spirit, to be the third person of the Trinity. ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s first response to this argument is to specify that the Qur’ān does not actually declare that Christians have Mary in their Trinity, but simply poses a question to Jesus about this issue. He then goes to argue that, anyway, the Christians do deify Mary *de facto* if not *de jure*. It is in the course of this second step that ‘Abd al-Jabbār relates the following anecdote:

This is demonstrated in the books, written in Syriac, of the church (*bī‘ā*) present in the districts of *Abwāz* and elsewhere in the districts of Iraq. Some of this is translated in a letter written by ‘Abd Yasū‘ b. Bahrīz,⁵¹ the bishop (*usquf*) of Ḥarrān and al-Raqqā and who became after that the Metropolitan (*muṭrān*) of Mawṣil and the Jazīra to a Jacobite priest (*qīss*) who was called Bādawī,⁵² “You do not deny that the pure Virgin is a god, as you see her, but a person as we see her.”

The details which ‘Abd al-Jabbār includes in this passage, regarding the identity of these two characters, seem to indicate that we are dealing with more than the creative imagination of a polemicist or a popular anecdote. In fact, from what we know of other sources it seems that ‘Abd al-Jabbār has given us a valuable insight into an actual intra-Christian dialogue between a Nestorian and a Jacobite. Ibn Baḥrīz was indeed a Nestorian Metropolitan (of the early third/ninth century) according to both Christian and Muslim sources, having gained the attention of both al-Jāḥiẓ (255/869) and Ibn al-Nadīm (385/995).⁵³ The latter provides us with the most revealing information about him:

51 Read *Bahrīz* for *Bahrīn*, cf. Pines, *Jewish Christians*, 37, n. 138.

52 Read *Bādawī* for *Bādūs* cf. Ibn al-Nadīm, 26 and Stern, “Apocryphal Gospels,” 38, n. 1 (and pace Pines who reads the name “Bādūsī,” See *Jewish Christians*, 37, n. 138).

53 On Ibn Baḥrīz see J.-M. Fiey, “Ibn Baḥrīz et son portrait,” *Parole de l’Orient* 16 (1990-1), 133-7, and G. Graf, *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur* (Rome: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1947), II:119. Fiey’s article contains the excerpt regarding Ibn Baḥrīz in Jāḥiẓ’s *K. al-Bayān wa-l-tabyīn*.

Among their judges in religious law (*sharī'a*) and legal opinions (*fatāwā*) is Ibn Bahrīz, whose name is 'Abd Yastū'. He was first the Metropolitan of Ḥarrān and then he became the Metropolitan of Mawṣil and Ḥazza.⁵⁴

Fiey, by cross-referencing Christian sources, rightly derives that Ibn Nadīm should have identified Ibn Bahrīz not as the *muṭrān* of Ḥarrān, but as its Bishop (*usquf*), since this city was not a Metropolitan Seat. He also concludes that Ibn al-Nadīm was the only source that provides us with this information. Clearly he was not familiar with the *Confirmation*, which provides us with a second source, one which confirms Fiey's supposition about Ibn Bahrīz's position in Ḥarrān. Yet this is not the most important point to be taken from Ibn al-Nadīm. For when he goes on to describe the literary corpus of Ibn Bahrīz, Ibn al-Nadīm singles out one work in particular:

Among [Ibn Bahrīz's] letters and books is the book to the Jacobite priest⁵⁵ known as Bādawī, in response to two books which came to [Ibn Bahrīz] from him on the faith. In it⁵⁶ is an invalidation of the oneness of the hypostasis as the Jacobites and Melkites maintain it. Ibn Bahrīz was, in regards to wisdom, close to Islam.⁵⁷

Thus Ibn al-Nadīm confirms the existence of Ibn Bahrīz's book, which 'Abd al-Jabbār speaks about as a letter to Bādawī. In 'Abd al-Jabbār's *Confirmation* we have both the only known excerpt from this work, albeit brief, as well as an indication that it was originally a Syriac and not an Arabic work.⁵⁸ We can infer, too, that Ibn Bahrīz was well-known and, based on Ibn al-Nadīm's last comment above, respected by Muslims.⁵⁹ It seems clear that 'Abd al-Jabbār

54 Read for *Harra* cf. Fiey, "Ibn Bahrīz et son portrait," 137. Ḥazza is equivalent to Irbil, a town to the east of Mawṣil in Mesopotamia.

55 Read *ilā l-qass* for *al-marqus*.

56 Read *fibi* for *fihimā*.

57 Ibn al-Nadīm, 26. The Nestorians are often described in Muslim writings as the closest to Islam in their monotheism. In fact, this idea was so prevalent that 'Abd al-Jabbār feels compelled to refute it elsewhere in the *Confirmation*, "Let it be said to them, if the Nestorians say about Christ that which Muslims say, why has this been rejected in reports and not passed on in knowledge, where the *tathlith* appears. How is it that the Nestorians return to the statement of their brothers, the Melkites and Jacobites, about Christ?" *Tathbūt*, 96.

58 Ibn Bahrīz was known to have written in both languages. Fiey assumes that this treatise was in Arabic, likely due to the treatment of it by Ibn al-Nadīm. See "Ibn Bahrīz et son portrait," 134-5.

59 In commenting on the *Confirmation*, S. Pines suggests that part of the reason for the close relationship between the Nestorians and Muslims was due to the presence within the Nestorian churches of a Jewish-Christian community, that is Jews who maintain that the Mosaic commandments are still binding but who acknowledge Jesus as a prophet. Pines also cites a report that Nestorius "enjoined upon the Christians in opposition to Paul to follow the example of Jesus in observing the commandments of the Mosaic Law and to have taught that Jesus was not a God but a man inspired like the prophets by the Holy Ghost. The fact that Nestorius was denounced by the Council of Ephesus and by various Catholic polemicists [sic] as a Jew does not, as it seems to me, account for these statements. A reason for the latter could be

knew of Ibn Bahrīz from channels independent of Ibn al-Nadīm. For one thing, they were contemporaries. ‘Abd al-Jabbār composed the *Confirmation* the same year that Ibn al-Nadīm died (385/995) and it is very unlikely that Ibn al-Nadīm’s *Fihrist* had reached ‘Abd al-Jabbār before that time. More importantly, ‘Abd al-Jabbār provides some information that contrasts with that of Ibn al-Nadīm. He describes Ibn Bahrīz as the *usquf* of Ḥarrān and al-Raqqā first, while Ibn Nadīm considers him the *muṭrān* of Ḥarrān alone. According to ‘Abd al-Jabbār, Ibn Bahrīz later became *muṭrān* of Mawṣil and the Jazīra, while Ibn al-Nadīm maintains that he became *muṭrān* of Mawṣil and Ḥazza. Finally, ‘Abd al-Jabbār reports that knows that the work is present in the churches of Ahwāz and Iraq, and he alone speaks of it as a Syriac letter.

‘Abd al-Jabbār is clearly the more accurate and direct source for the treatise of Ibn Bahrīz. This does not mean, however, that we can consider the passage above as a direct quote from the latter’s letter to Bādawī. Indeed, that possibility must be ruled out if we are to believe ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s claim that this letter was in Syriac. Even if he seems to have some familiarity with this language,⁶⁰ we have no reason to believe that ‘Abd al-Jabbār could read Syriac, and every reason to assume that a Muslim-born scholar like himself could not. Thus the question of where ‘Abd al-Jabbār got this material must remain unanswered, but the fact that it is there at all is quite remarkable.

B. Passages on Christian Practice

To very briefly summarize the polemical tactics of ‘Abd al-Jabbār in his *Confirmation*: he seeks to show how the Christians have changed the Islamic religion of Christ. One of his means for attaining this goal is the use of reports on Christian liturgical or social practices, which somehow demonstrate that those practices do not have their origin in the life and teaching of Christ, but rather in the arbitrary and deceitful whim of Christian leaders. One of the reports that ‘Abd al-Jabbār puts to use to this end relates the practice of

found in the hypothesis referred to above, according to which the Nestorian community may have contained Jewish Christians.” Pines *Jewish Christians*, 43. I have great respect for Pines as a scholar, and am tempted to think that he had some information that he did not publish, which proved this contention. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that he provides very little here or elsewhere to back up such an impressive claim.

60 ‘Abd al-Jabbār reports the Syriac form of Jesus’ name when he quotes John 1:1 and gives the Arabic translation for his Muslim readership: “[The Christians] say, ‘Our scholars, and the one who is the exemplar for all of our sects, said, ‘Jesus (*yashū*)’ was the Word in the beginning, and the Word was with God and God was the Word.’ *Yashū*’ is Syriac for Jesus (*Isā*).” *Tatbhūt*, 100. Elsewhere, ‘Abd al-Jabbār reports a Syriac phrase that Christians use to describe monks. See *Tatbhūt*, 207.

Christian fasting. He argues that the origins of the fast are in Roman paganism, and that the Christians have arbitrarily changed and re-changed the fast since then. In the midst of this argument 'Abd al-Jabbār summarizes the differences on the matter between different Christian sects:

Now the Byzantines (*al-rūm*) are the basis of these three Christian sects. Then the Jacobites, the companions of Jacob, branched off. Then after the Jacobites the Nestorians, the companions of Nestorius [branched off]. They differ regarding the fast. Those who are in Iraq do not fast for half of every day like the Byzantines. They – I mean those who are in Islamic countries – break the fast⁶¹ after the [Muslim] afternoon prayer [*ṣalāt al-ʿaṣr*] (p. 164).

Now it is no surprise to see 'Abd al-Jabbār divide the Christians into this tripartite scheme. This is indeed a model seen, with some variation, throughout Muslim writing on Christianity through this period.⁶² What is a surprise, and what, frankly, I have no explanation for, is 'Abd al-Jabbār's description that Christians in Iraq did not break their fast at midday but at the *ṣalāt al-ʿaṣr*. Might this be simply 'Abd al-Jabbār's, or another Muslim's, confusion in seeing Christians gather to eat in the afternoon during fasting seasons when in fact their fast ended at noon? I do not think so. First, he makes it quite clear that he is aware of Christians who break their fast at noon (the Byzantines, *al-rūm*), and differentiates between the two groups. Second, if this had been simply the mistaken observation of a Muslim, who noticed the Christians gathering to break the fast when the *mu'adhdhin* sounded the call to prayer, would he not have associated this with *ṣalāt al-ḡuḥr* (noon prayer)? It seems that Nestorians (and possibly Jacobites as well) with whom 'Abd al-Jabbār was familiar did indeed break their fast in mid-afternoon.

The possibility 'Abd al-Jabbār should be taken at his word for this unusual report is increased when we turn to a second report that strikes me as still more unusual and yet almost certainly credible. This report comes within the context of the same general argument, that the origin of Christian doctrine and practices is the Christians themselves and not Christ. To prove this, he reports the following anecdote:

This is among the things that they do nearby, and in Islam [i. e. the Islamic world], in the 'Abbāsīd state. This is like what the Bishop of Samarqand did, when he forbade his people [to eat] fowl (*firākḥ*), for he claimed that the Holy Spirit descends in this dove. So they received this from him and made it religion (175).

In my opinion, there is no real reason to doubt the accuracy of this account. We know that Samarqand was in fact the seat of a bishop from the list of

⁶¹ Read *yafṭurūna* for the *yanḡurūna*.

⁶² See G. S. Reynolds, "The Ends of *al-Radd al-Jamīl* and its Portrayal of Christian Sects," *Islamochristiana* 25 (1999), 45–65.

Eastern Syrian Church dioceses made by Elijah of Damascus in the year 900.⁶³ The fact that 'Abd al-Jabbār would be aware not only that the bishop of this specific city forbade the consumption of fowl is revealing, and even more so is his knowledge of the justification for such a decree. That Christians would not eat fowl (although it is not exactly clear what would be covered by *firākḥ*) due to the account of Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan shows that 'Abd al-Jabbār had some inside information. Finally, this account is written in a matter of fact tone, not in the scornful tone that he uses elsewhere. Thus it should be considered more legitimate than other passages where 'Abd al-Jabbār is clearly seeking to defame Christian practice.

In the latter category we may include 'Abd al-Jabbār's account of the Christian sacrament of confession. Here 'Abd al-Jabbār is continuing the thread of argument that he began above, drawing it out to specific examples of the greed and corruption of the Christian clergy. The effect of this, he hopes, is to show to the reader that the Christian leaders were indeed capable of corrupting Jesus' Islamic teaching, since they are guilty of similar acts of deception today. Among these acts is the ritual which they force Christians to undergo in order to receive forgiveness for their sins:

A remarkable thing in their religion is that the sinner says to the priest and the monk, "Make for me forgiveness and repentance and bear my sins." Then [the priest] sets a payment for this one according to his extent of wealth or poverty. Then the priest opens up his garment, takes the payment and then says to the sinner, "Come now and mention to me your sins, one by one, until I know them and bear them." So, whether this [person] is a man or woman, well-off or a vagabond, he begins to mention what he has done one by one until he says, "This is all of it." Then the priest says to him, "[The sins] are great, yet I have borne them and forgiven you. He might also gather up the garment by its sides, place it on his back, and say, "What could be heavier than the sins in this garment!?"

Among what is handed down about them and well known about them is that the women confesses her sins to a priest, saying, "A man penetrated me on such and such a day." So he inquires how many times and she says how many. Then he says to her, "Inform me if this man is Christian or Muslim." She might say, "Muslim," which he considers greater and will consider the payment [for forgiveness] additional. If she does not add to it he becomes angry and bursts out, saying, "The Muslims have fornicated with her and she wants me to forgive her! Just give such and such [money]." So she gives it to him, and adds to it, to make him content. This is their religion that they consider strict. They claim that it is the religion of Christ. It could not be that this is his (God's blessing be upon him) religion.

It has been said to one of their priests, "What kind of repentance is this?" He said, "There is no way [that we could] could not ask them about their sins and nourish them with forgiveness, for if we did not do that and did not take money from them, the churches would be impoverished" (190-1).

63 See Fiey. "Les communautés syriaques en Iran des premiers siècles à 1552," 290-1.

This account appears, at first glance, to give us a remarkable view of how the sacrament of Confession was administered in the East Syrian Church during 'Abd al-Jabbār's time. Once again, 'Abd al-Jabbār provides with interesting details, such as the way in which the priest would gather his garment upon his back, symbolizing the sins which he has taken upon himself (as Christ took the sins of the world on his back in the form of the Cross). And yet we would do well to look closely at the tone in which 'Abd al-Jabbār reports this anecdote.

This account combines two prevalent themes of Islamic anti-Christian polemic: greed and fornication. Elsewhere 'Abd al-Jabbār reports several anecdotes about the sexual deviancy of Christians and especially the Christian clergy, which read much more like stories out of Boccaccio's *Decameron* than the sober reports given above.⁶⁴ He reports similar anecdotes about the effect of Christian greed.⁶⁵ Anyone who has spent time in the Islamic world, particularly areas where there are significant Eastern Church Christian communities, is aware that these themes are ubiquitous in conversation among Muslims about Christians and their clergy. I will spare the reader the accounts that I have heard from Muslims in Syria and Lebanon about what actually takes place behind the doors of the monastery, the convent, or indeed within the confessional. Suffice it to say that 'Abd al-Jabbār's account here is consistent with

64 Among them is the following account of the practices of nuns: "Part of [the Christians] conduct is that the women who worship in convents, and who are confined to churches and worship, come to the single men and monks. They go out to the fortresses, where there are single men. [The monks] declare to them that they are lawful, for the purpose of the face of God, the other realm and having mercy upon single men. Whoever of these women does so is thanked and praised for this act. It is said to her, 'Christ will not forget your [act of] kindness and compassion.'" *Tatbhūt*, 170-1.

65 Notice 'Abd al-Jabbār's account of the split between the Christians and the faithful (Muslim) followers of Jesus, which led to the composition of the corrupted Christian gospels. It was Christian lust for power which was the corrupting factor: "Now after [Christ], his companions were conducting their prayers and feasts with the Jews and the Israelites in their synagogues, altogether. Then there was a conflict among them regarding Christ. The Romans were ruling over them. The Christians were complaining about the Jews to the kings of the Romans, showing them their weakness and requesting their compassion. So [the Romans] had compassion on them. Much of this went on, and the Romans said to them, 'There is a contract between us and the Jews, that we will not change their religions. Yet if you go out from their religions, separate yourselves from them, pray to the east as we do, eat what we eat, and permit what we permit, we will aid you and make you mightier. Then the Jews would have no way over you and you would become stronger than them.' They said, 'We will do it.' The [Romans] said, 'Go, bring your companions and your book.'

So their companions came, and [the Christians] informed them of what took place between them and the Romans, saying, 'Bring the Gospel and come up so that we might go to [the Romans].' But the [companions] said to them, 'You have done wretchedly! It is not permitted for us to give the gospel to the unclean Romans. By agreeing with the Romans, you have left the religion.' So a severe conflict fell between them." *Tatbhūt*, 152-3.

more bawdy polemical accounts and so must be treated with extreme caution as evidence for Christian practice. It is of more use in reflecting how Muslims of his time spoke about the Church. In fact, the *Confirmation* is perhaps most useful for its reflection of popular Muslim-Christian discourse. On this level it also contains some remarkable narratives that reflect how Christians themselves spoke of their Church.

C. Christian Miracle Accounts in the *Confirmation*

Towards the end of his section against the Christians in the *Confirmation*, ‘Abd al-Jabbār relates a number of anecdotes which Christians use to legitimize their religion. Each anecdote includes within it some miraculous episodes that the Christians see as evidence that God is with them. ‘Abd al-Jabbār (like Gibbon and Voltaire) sees the Christian belief in such superstitious foolishness as proof that, on the contrary, God cannot be with them:

Now what convicts them in this matter is the Christian situation. [They claim that] there are signs and miracles in their worship, which are not cut off in any age. The Melkites claim this for their worshipers, just as the rest of [Christian] sects do. They claim to witness [these] in every era and period, despite some of them declaring others of them unbelievers.

Yet there is no one among them who has seen any of this. They are simply claims whose mentioning, remembrance and feasts came before. In fact, they commit apostasy by thinking that what is claimed for Moses, Aaron and Jesus (peace be upon them) is similar to that which is claimed for monks (208-9).

To ‘Abd al-Jabbār, the Christian use of miracle accounts is “among the greatest stratagems of the leaders of the Christians.”⁶⁶ By teaching them to rely on such accounts they cover up the dark secrets at the origin of Christianity. Islam, on the other hand, has no need of such stratagems: “There is no question for us of this, for we prohibit that anyone after the prophets [could have] a sign or a miracle. So we do not claim signs or miracles. Rather [the sign], as everyone knows who has heard the reports, is this Qur’ān, and that which came with it.”⁶⁷ Such then, is ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s motivation for recording the miracle stories which he has received from the Christians. While to the latter they verify Christianity, to him they nullify it.

What remains, then, is to give the translation of the most remarkable of these accounts. I must admit, quite candidly, they I have no idea if parallels to these accounts could be found somewhere in Christian (presumably Syriac) literature, as my own field is Islamics. I think that the reader will agree with

66 *Tathbūt*, 202.

67 *Tathbūt*, 181.

me that these must be authentic records of popular Christian accounts. Whether similar accounts existed in writing, and not only in the oral form in which they likely reached ‘Abd al-Jabbār, is a question that I must leave to the reader.

Account 1: Father Mark

Someone else spoke about a monk who was with his friend, a man called Father Mark who performed many acts of worship. [Father Mark] relied on God and cast himself into the sea. He said, “Let God do with me as He wishes. If He wishes He will make me drown and if He wishes He will save me and cast me wherever He wishes upon His land.” [The monk] said, “I did not have the courage to do what [Father Mark] did. So I stayed in my place after him, for a long time [filled with] longing at his parting from me. Then whatever was in me of longing for him called upon me to do what he had done. If I drowned, then I would have been delivered from loneliness. So I did it and remained in the sea for some time. Then God cast me to a land that I did not know and on which there was no plants that an animal could eat.

I began to walk upon it and my eye fell upon a person who was standing and praying. I made towards him and [and saw that] it was my companion Father Mark. So I said to him, “O holy one! For how long have you been here?” He said, “Since I parted from you and God cast me to this land.” I said to him, “Where do you live when there are no plants that animals could eat?” He said, “At evening when I have concluded my prayers I find a grilled, hot fish on a plate, two loaves of bread and a bowl of honey. So I have breakfast with this and the plate is taken up. I do not see who takes it up or who puts it down.” I said to him, “This is the extent of your nourishment, and if I shared in it with you, it would become critical for you. So how can I work when this land is desolate? It has no [fresh] plants and or dried out plants [*yabs*].”

He said, “I do not know, but if you wish to reside with me and to share with me in what comes to me, then do it.” So I resided [with him] and when it was evening, behold, there were two plates, two fish, two loaves⁶⁸ and two bowls. One of these was for me and the other for him. So he said to me, “Provision has come to you as it came to me.” So I stayed with him for many years. Then he got sick and designated me to bury him and ordered me to depart to you after burying him so that I might inform you of the report about him, so that your regard for your religion might increase. If not for his order I would not have parted from that place (202-3).

68 Following the logic of the account, of course, this should be four loaves.

Account 2: The Bishop of Khurāsān

Another of the monks said to them, "Announce the good news to the Christian community, for your religion is the truth. I have seen such wonders that I know its soundness." They said to him, "What kind of thing have you seen?"

He said: "It is nothing that [happened] to me but rather to another one. I was in the group of Metropolitan so and so. He said to me, 'My brother, it has reached me that the Bishop of Khurāsān eats meat. So make your way to him and say to him, 'Did you not know that a bishop should not eat meat?' So I made my way to him. When I entered unto him, he had in his hands a frying pan filled with birds that had been fried and were hot, which he was eating. He said to me, 'Eat!' I said to him, 'the Father Metropolitan has sent me and says to you, 'Did you not know that a bishop should not eat meat?'' Then he said to me, 'Thus the Father said to you?' So I said to him, 'Yes.' Then he raised his hand and said to me, 'We do as the Father said.' Then he said to those birds who were in the frying pan, '*Kish!*'⁶⁹ and they all flew away and he lifted up the frying pan."

They believed him, recorded this and wrote it down (203-4).

Account 3: The Jewish Convert

A monk in Iraq unexpectedly entered in among some strangers. They said to him, when he entered into the church, "O holy one, who are you and where are you from?" He said, "Pray for me and exempt me." So they consulted him and he said, "My sin is great and my scandal is excessive, so do not ask me about anything." But they implored him with their questions and he said, "On the condition that you forgive me."

He said, "I was a Jewish man who severely loathed the Christians and Christ. I heard them say in the Gospel that Christ said, 'Who is a pure Christian can say to a tree, 'stand upon the waves of the sea and do not leave [that place]' and it will stand [there].'⁷⁰ I did not believe this until I came to the king and said to him, 'I am a Jewish man. You have said that Christ said to you such and such. If this is sound and I see it with my eyes, then I will immediately become a Christian.' So the king directed himself to the multitude and they brought to him an old man with a weak build, wearing monastic garb. [The king] said to him, 'This man is Jewish and has said so and so, so bring this [sign] forth.'

So the old man came to me and said, 'O man, fear God! If you are obstinate,

69 An utterance used to put birds or insects to flight, still used in colloquial Eastern Arabic.

70 cf. Lk 17:6.

then go in peace and do not injure us. If what you say is true, and from a sincere intention, then let me know.' So I swore to him that my intention was sincere. He said to me, 'Go to the desert and look at any tree that you wish and mark it. Then come back to me and let me know what the mark is'."

So I went and marked a great tree. I returned to him and let him know [what the mark was]. He said to me, 'Come to me tomorrow so that I might show you your tree on the wave of the sea as you proposed.' So I came to him the next day. He took me by the hand and brought me to the sea. He showed me the tree upon which I marked standing upright upon a wave of the sea. So I became a Christian. Now I journey through the land, crying about my sins and the passing of my days."

So they believed him and wrote down what he said. Both men and women were among those who studied in the church and heard him (204-5).

Account 4: Father George

Another monk came to them, crying. They said to him, "Who are you and what made you cry?" He said, "Pray for me because my affliction is great." It was said to him, "Mention it, my son." So he said, "I do not comprehend my situation and I do not know what to say." They said to him, "In any case, mention your affliction and let us know of your state."

So he said, "Did Father George not die?" It was said to him, "Who is George?" So he said, "The one of such and such a monastery and such and such a hermitage." They said, "We do not know him," although there might have been one of them who said, "I have heard of him." So [the visiting monk] said, "Has [news of] his signs and miracles reached you?" They said, "Speak to us of it⁷¹ and mention it to us." So he said, "I could not mention it you, since you are not Christians but rather opposed to the Christians. If you were Christians you would know him and know his signs and proofs." So they asked him to mention it but he declined and refrained.

Yet they continued to ask him until he informed them that such and such a king sent for and summoned [Father George], and then said to him, "Return from this religion and I will give [wealth] to you, honor you and make you a partner in my reign," yet he declined. The king imprisoned him in a secure, constricted prison. Then he asked the prison guard about him, but [the latter] did not find him in the prison. The guard took every kind of abuse from the king, who said to him, "You let him go!" and he dispatched messengers seeking him. They found him in his hermitage and brought him to the king.

71 Read *ḥaddithnā bihi* for *ḥadhdhithnā bihā*.

[The king] said to [Father George], "Inform me about the prison guard, is it he who let you go?"

So he said, "No, Christ brought me out. He opened the doors for me, and blocked [the guards] from seeing me." So the king said to him, "Now I will imprison you in the prison, so tell Christ to let you go." So he imprisoned him in a secure prison, behind locked doors of iron. Then he sought him and did not find him. So he sent [messengers] to his hermitage and there he was. He brought him back and said to him, "Who let you out?" [Father George] said to him, "Christ." So he returned him to the prison, bound him and weighed him down with iron, increasing the security. Then he sought him but did not find him in prison, yet the doors and the locks were as they were, and he found the bonds. So he sent out [messengers] seeking him, found him in the hermitage and brought him back.

The king was furious with what had taken place with him and how he was embarrassed time and again. So he ordered that he be beheaded and buried. So on the following day, the day of his burial, they found him at his hermitage. This was told to the king. So he sent out and brought [Father George] before him. He cut him into pieces, carried him and buried him. But when it was the next day he found [Father George] in his hermitage. So the king sent [messengers] and brought him. He apologized to [Father George] and became a Christian.

So the monk said, "All of this occurred to [Father George] while I was with him and witnessed what the king did to him. Yet for something like this I do not cry nor magnify my affliction. More severe than this is your ignorance and negligence. It is as though you are not Christians and have not heard of Christianity." He cried and they believed him and apologized to him for their negligence and ignorance about this man and what happened to him (205-6).⁷²

Conclusion: A New Source on the Eastern Church?

I imagine that the reader by now has quite clearly seen the advantages and the perils of using an Islamic polemic to reach a new insight on the practices and traditions of the Eastern Church. Yet I am inclined to believe that for the

72 This is the only one of the above accounts which 'Abd al-Jabbār takes the trouble to refute. After reporting several different anecdotes, he returns to the story of Father George, relating why even the Christians find the story incredible: "One of them said, 'If we were sincere with ourselves we would know that this is a lie and has no basis. For Christ, the chief of George, was chained up (Lit. "tasted the bitter iron," *dhāqa murra l-ḥadīd*) once, and did not return and did not accomplish something similar. So how could George accomplish this, when he does not measure up to [Christ] in patience and vision?' So he made the others laugh." *Tathbūt*, 209.

most part 'Abd al-Jabbār has given us good reasons to conclude that his *Confirmation* should be considered a legitimate source for studies of eastern Christianity. My belief in this is strengthened by the scholarship of S. Pines, who has done some quite detailed philological research to show the influence of Syriac Christianity upon the *Confirmation*.⁷³

For our part, we have seen that 'Abd al-Jabbār's most trustworthy, and most valuable, reports are those which describe some type of an anomaly within the usual discourse or practice of the Christian community. Thus it is with the excerpt from Ibn Bahrīz accusing a Jacobite of deifying Mary, or the account of the bishop who forbade his people to eat fowl. While 'Abd al-Jabbār has an eye for the unusual mostly due to his desire to undermine Christian apologetical arguments, we have seen that this need not rule out the historicity of the account. In other cases, such as the account of confession in the Christian churches, there is no reason to trust 'Abd al-Jabbār's authority on the matter. Here he seems to be just another polemicist who, like the Hollywood producer today, lets his imagination run wild about what happens behind closed church doors.

Yet perhaps the most unusual and important reports that 'Abd al-Jabbār provides for us are the final accounts of Christian miracle stories. It seems to me that there is no reason to doubt that these were indeed popular tales that circulated in the Christian community, who perhaps brought them up to Muslims to justify Christianity. Modern day equivalents are not hard to find. In January of 2001 I was travelling with a Lebanese Maronite family to visit the shrine devoted to the Lebanese saint Charbel (*Dayr Mār Sharbil*). As we climbed up the steep green mountains we passed above a new white mosque, with loudspeakers prominently displayed, that sat in the valley below the shrine. One of the daughters in the family turned to me and said, "every time that the shaykh of this mosque begins to speak against the Christians, Saint Charbel shuts off his loudspeakers."

Like the saints' tales of eastern Christians today, 'Abd al-Jabbār's accounts seem to be precisely the type of popular hagiographic tales that otherwise do not make it into official or formal church writings. I am not aware of any equivalents or antecedents to these tales in Christian literature, and would be

73 Pines took up the study of the *Confirmation* with great eagerness, hoping to find therein proof not only of Judaeo-Christian groups, but also of a Hebrew version of the gospels. His first work, mentioned above, is *Jewish Christians of the Early Centuries of Christianity According to a New Source*. Pines then went on to write: "Notes on Islam and on Arabic Christianity and Judaeo-Christianity," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 4 (1984), 135-152; "Studies in Christianity and in Judaeo-Christianity Based on Arabic Sources" *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 6 (1985), 107-139; and "Gospel Quotations and Cognate Topics in 'Abd al-Jabbār's *Tathbūt*," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 9 (1987), 195-278.

happy to hear from any readers who are. Nevertheless, it seems safe to conclude that in 'Abd al-Jabbār's *Confirmation* we have a noteworthy account of popular Christian piety in the eastern Islamic world, from the most unlikely of sources.