The earliest Christian intellectual on record to enjoy a regular entrée to the highest levels of the Abbasid elite in Baghdad was undoubtedly Patriarch Timothy I (727-823) who for forty-three years (780-743) served as the major hierarch of the so-called ‘Nestorian’ Church of the East, first in Seleucia-Ctesiphon and then in Baghdad. While the patriarch was no doubt fluent in Arabic, he wrote in Syriac. And among the many works ascribed to him, most of which have not survived to modern times, some fifty-nine letters are still extant, of the approximately two-hundred he is known to have written altogether. While they are addressed to friends, mostly church officials, they are more than personal correspondence, being on the order of public letters, or letter-treatises, perhaps best thought of as essays. They discuss a number of liturgical, canonical and theological topics, and several of them have to do with issues of Muslim/Christian interest, including letters in which Timothy describes in some detail the responses he has given to questions put to him by Muslims or inspired by Muslim concerns. By far the most well-known of these is the patriarch’s account of his debate with the caliph al-Mahdī (775-785) on the beliefs and practices of the Christians.

Patriarch Timothy’s account of his defense of Christian doctrine and practice in the majlis of the caliph al-Mahdī, sometimes listed among his works as Letter LIX, was destined to become one of the classics among the Christian apologies of the early Islamic period. It circulated in its original Syriac in a fuller and in an abbreviated form, and it was soon translated into Arabic, in which language the account of Timothy’s day in the caliph’s court has enjoyed a long popularity, extending well into modern times. But it is not the only one of the patriarch’s letters which takes up what we might call Islamic issues. Several others discuss questions which were obviously posed with Muslim challenges in mind. Several cases in point are: a letter (XXXIV) on the proper understanding of the title ‘Servant of God’ as an epithet for Christ; a letter in defense of the doctrine of the Trinity (XXXV); and a letter against the opinions of those who demean the majesty of Christ (XXXVI). Another little known letter (XL), which the patriarch addressed to...
his former academic colleague Sergius, di-
rector of the school of Bashosh and soon to
be the bishop of Elam, presents a somewhat
detailed account of Patriarch Timothy’s col-
loquy with an interlocutor whom he met one
day at the caliph’s court; Timothy says the
man was a devotee of the philosophy of Ar-
istotle. But the course of the conversation
which the patriarch reports, on the ways to
know the one God, the three persons of the
one God, the doctrine of the Incarnation and
the significance of various Christian reli-
gious practices, reads much like an account
of a conversation with a Muslim mutakal-
lim, rather than a philosopher.

The mention of Aristotle and of philoso-
phy calls to mind the fact that Patriarch
Timothy was called upon by Muslim pa-
trons to arrange for the production of Arabic
translations of Greek logical and scientific
texts, often from intermediary translations
into Syriac. No less a personage than the
caliph himself called upon the patriarch to
arrange for a translation of Aristotle’s
Topica into Arabic, and Timothy discussed
the undertaking in two very interesting let-
ters which have survived, in which the
reader gains a lively sense of the multifac-
eted processes involved in the enterprise. In
this connection, and in connection with the
beginnings of Christian involvement in the
Abbasid translation project, what John Watt
has recently written about Patriarch Timo-
thy’s translation is noteworthy. He says:
“The earliest unambiguous evidence of inter-
est in Aristotelian philosophy in the upper
levels of Abbasid Muslim society is the
commission of al-Mahdī to the East Syrian
Catholics Timothy I for a translation of Ar-
istotle’s Topics from Syriac into Arabic.”

This interest on the part of the Abbasid
elite in Arabic translations of the logical
works of the Greek philosopher Aristotle,
and in Greek mathematical, scientific and
medical texts by other writers, ushered in a
whole new era for Christian intellectual life
in Baghdad. And since the Abbasid caliph’s
capital was located in the historical heart-
land of the Assyrian Church of the East, it is
no surprise that so-called ‘Nestorian’ Chris-
tians, including Patriarch Timothy himself,
found their way into Baghdad to take advan-
tage of the opportunities offered by the new
intellectual movement. Soon other Chris-
tians too, ‘Jacobites’ and ‘Melkites’ among
them, would appear on the intellectual scene
in the Islamic capital. Some were physi-
cians, some were philosophers, and some
were logicians, mathematicians, copyists or
translators. All of them contributed some-
thing to the newly flowering culture of the
early days of the first flourishing of Islamic
civilization. But in no society-wide enter-
prise did these ‘Nestorian’ and other Chris-
tians take a more prominent role than they
did in the famed translation movement. For,
as Dimitri Gutas has rightly noted, the vast
majority of the translators of Greek and
Syriac texts into Arabic were Christians.

As a matter of fact, for some generations
previously many Christian scholars had been
engaged in a translation movement of their
own of texts from Greek into Syriac, and
latterly from Greek and Syriac into Arabic.

Interest in Greek learning had been
widespread in both the ‘Jacobite’ and the so-
called ‘Nestorian’, Syriac-speaking commu-
nities from the sixth century onward. The
story begins back in the days of John Philo-
ponos (ca. 490-ca.570), a ‘Jacobite’ Chris-
tian student of the Neoplatonist Ammonius,
son of Hermias, in Alexandria. Philoponos
functioned both as a philosopher and as a
defender of Christianity. It was one of
Philoponos’ students in Alexandria, Sergius of Resh’ayna (d.536), a fellow ‘Jacobite’ from the environs of Edessa, who later switched his ecclesial allegiance to the ‘Melkites’, who became the first-known link between the enthusiasts for Aristotle in Neoplatonist Alexandria and the Syriac-speaking communities in northern Syria.17 In Syria, the study of the works of “the Philosopher” and of other Greek thinkers always involved translation into Syriac as the first step in the enterprise. From the time of Sergius of Resh’ayna onward, until well into Islamic times, the fortunes of Aristotle and Greek philosophy and science grew steadily in the Syriac-speaking world, initially especially among the ‘Jacobites’. One thinks in this connection of scholars such as Severus Sebokht (d.666/7), Athanasius of Balad (d.696), Jacob of Edessa (633-708), George, Bishop of the Arabs (d.724), and Theophilus of Edessa (d.785), to name a few of them.18

In the meantime, among the East Syrians and the so-called ‘Nestorians’, interest in Aristotle and the Greek sciences did not lag far behind that of the ‘Jacobites’. Paul the Persian (fl. 531-578), a younger contemporary of Sergius of Resh’ayna who likewise had connections with Alexandria, cultivated a strong interest in Aristotelian thought, and although in the end he became a convert to Zoroastrianism back home in Persia, at the court of Kusrua Anūshirwān (r.531-579), he seems nevertheless to have successfully championed Aristotlean and Greek philosophy among the Syriac-speaking, East Syrians in his homeland.19 Subsequently, it was in the ‘Nestorian’ school system, in centers such as Nisibis,20 al-Ḥira, the monastery of Dayr Qunnā21 and Jundisābūr22 that Greek learning flourished. By the mid-eighth century, ‘Nestorian’ scholars such as the well-known members of the Bukhtīšū family, with their connections with Jundisābūr, Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq (808-873), who hailed from the ‘Nestorian’ capital of the Lakhmids, al-Ḥira, and Abū Bishr Mattā ibn Yūnus (d.940), from the flourishing monastery of Dayr Qunnā, not far from Baghdad, who became “the founder of the Aristotelian school in Baghdad early in the tenth century,”23 all soon came to be among the dominant Christian scholars in the Graeco-Arabic translation movement in early Abbasid times.

It was within this context of the Graeco-Arabic translation movement of Abbasid times that a number of Christian intellectuals involved in the translation enterprise came to the fore in their several communities with a new approach to the Christian encounter with the Muslims. Unlike their predecessors, who were concerned primarily in the Islamic milieu with composing apologetic texts in Syriac and Arabic in response to Islamic challenges, Christian translators and scholars such as Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq (808-873) in the ninth century, Yaḥyā ibn ‘Adī (893-974) in the tenth century, and Elias of Nisibis (d.1046) in the eleventh century, to name only those with some name recognition in the modern west, turned their attention also to philosophical, social and ethical questions. In particular, they sought a theoretical way, in tandem with contemporary Muslim thinkers, to commend a philosophical way of life, the cultivation of virtue and the pursuit of happiness, in a way that would promote a measure of convivencia in the inter-religious, Islamo-Christian atmosphere in which they lived. They were undoubtedly inspired in this undertaking by the works of early Muslim philosophers such as Yaʿqūb ibn Ishāq al-Kindī (ca.800-867) and Abū Naṣr al-Ṭārībī (ca.870-950). This new line of Chris-
tian thinking sought to promote a reason-based, social ethic for the world in which Christians and Muslims lived, which would be open both to the claims of the Christian and the Islamic scriptures, and which would also foster the acquisition of personal and public virtues on the part of the leaders of society, whose charge it was, they argued, to work for the common good of everyone in the body-politic, especially the scholars, ascetics and religious teachers of both the church and the mosque. In what follows we shall briefly consider the contributions of Ḫūnayn, Yahlāyān, and Elias to this new undertaking in the Christian response to the pressures of life in the Islamic world.

II

Unlike Patriarch Timothy, who for all his accomplishments as a Christian apologist was primarily a churchman engaged in ecclesiastical affairs, Ḫūnayn ibn Ishāq was a professional scholar who circulated in the highest levels of Baghdad’s learned elite. While he remained dedicated, like Patriarch Timothy, to the task of the systematic defense of the veracity of Christian doctrine and practice, and made major contributions to Christian apologetic literature in Arabic as well, Ḫūnayn was also engaged wholeheartedly in the scientific, medical, and philosophical interests of the contemporary Muslim intellectuals.

/language= en

Ḫūnayn ibn Ishāq is well known to historians as the founder and central figure in a ninth-century Baghdadi school of translators of Greek medical and scientific texts. In his day, he was also celebrated for the doggedness with which he studied the Greek language and pursued manuscripts from city to city, and perhaps even beyond the borders of the caliphate into the territory of the Romans. As a noted physician, Ḫūnayn was a familiar presence in the intellectual circles of the caliph’s court from the time of al-Ma’mūn (813-833) to that of al-Mu’tamīd (869-892), enjoying a particularly high-profile career during the days of the caliph al-Mutawakkil (847-861), whose sometime personal physician he was. Ḫūnayn was one of the first Christians whose stories are widely told in the Arabic annals of Muslim learning in Abbasid times, by both medieval and modern authors. In short, Ḫūnayn ibn Ishāq was a public intellectual of record.

Modern scholarship on Ḫūnayn and his works has largely focused its attention on his professional activity, his translations of logical, philosophical, medical and scientific texts, and on some of his more colorful personal exploits, the knowledge of some of which is even said to come from his own pen. Relatively little attention has been paid to Ḫūnayn’s own ideas, either in the realm of philosophy or of theology. And yet there is ample evidence that these were of the greatest importance to him. Like his somewhat older Muslim contemporary, the philosopher al-Kindī (ca.800-ca.867), of whom Gerhard Endress has said that for al-Kindī “philosophy was to vindicate the pursuit of rational activity as an activity in the service of Islam,” so one might say of Ḫūnayn that for him the cultivation of science and philosophy was to promote the claims of reason in service of both religion and public life.

Compared to other contemporary Christian intellectuals, Ḫūnayn did not write much on religious topics that has survived, but what he did write spoke to the major topics of the day, both Christian and Islamic. It is notable that, unlike other Christian writers of his own time and later, he did
Syrian Christian Intellectuals in the World of Islam

not engage in the church-dividing, inter-confessional, Christian controversies then currently flourishing; he did not, for example and so far as we know, write polemical tracts against the doctrinal views of the ‘Melkites’ or the ‘Jacobites’, or in support of the Christological teaching of his own, so-called ‘Nestorian’ church. Rather, in works which we know for the most part only by title, Ḥunayn addressed himself to issues such as why God created man in a state of need (muhājjan), how one grasps the truths of religion, how to understand God’s fore-ordainment of the affairs of the world (al-qadar) and the profession of monotheism (at-tawhīd), and what are the criteria according to which the true religion might be discerned. The latter was a particularly important topic for both Muslims and Christians in Ḥunayn’s lifetime, as we shall see.

In addition, in some sources Ḥunayn is said to have composed a history of the world from Adam to the time of the caliph al-Mutawakkil (d.861), including the kings of Israel, the Roman and Persian kings up to the time of Muḥammad, and the Muslim caliphs up to his own time. Unfortunately, this book has not survived. However, one should not underestimate the apologetic and even the polemic agenda of such books of history in the ‘sectarian milieu’ of the time, when Muslim authors from Ibn Ishāq (d. ca. 767) and Ibn Hishām (d.834) to al-Ya’qūbī (d.897) were presenting Muḥammad and his prophetic claims in terms of just such bibli-cally inspired, historical narratives. Ḥunayn may well have been the first Christian to write such a history from a Christian perspective in Arabic in the Islamic milieu, an enterprise which would not be taken up again by an Arab Christian writer until the time of the ‘Melkite’, Eutychios of Alexandria / Saʿīd ibn Baṭrīq (877-940).31 Later still, Elias bar Shināyā of Nisibis (975-1046), another Christian writer whose works we will discuss below, like Ḥunayn a member of the so-called ‘Nestorian’ Church of the East, carried on this same tradition of historical writing in Arabic, in his Chronography (Kitāb al-Azminah).32

Luckily, one of Ḥunayn’s principal contributions to Christian apologetics in the Islamic milieu, his discussion of the reasons (al-asbāb) for which people might consider any given religion to be true or false, has survived in at least two forms, with some variation between them. In one form, the text was preserved by the medieval Coptic scholar, al-Muʿtamān ibn al-ʿAssāl (fl. 1230-1260), who included it in his magisterial Summary of the Principles of Religion, together with a commentary on it by the twelfth century Coptic writer, Yuḥannā ibn Mīnā, who, according to Ibn al-ʿAssāl, gathered his material “from the books of the scholars (ulamāʾ) of the Christian sharīʿah.”33 The other form of the text is included in Ḥunayn’s contribution to a Christian apologetic work in Arabic which presents itself as the correspondence between Ḥunayn and a Muslim friend of his at the caliph’s court, Abū Ṭāsī ibn al-Munajjim (d.888), who had summoned him and their younger ‘Melkite’ colleague at the court, Quṣṭā ibn Lūqā (d.ca.912), to embrace Islam.34 It seems to have been the case that contemporary and later Christian apologists, as we shall see below, made use of Ḥunayn’s discussion of these matters in their own further and rather original elaborations of the negative criteria, which they claimed are indicative of the true religion. They argued that the true religion is that one of the contemporary options which is not accepted for any one or all of the six or seven, unworthy and
therefore negative reasons for which people might accept a religion.\footnote{35}

Finally we must briefly discuss what is perhaps the most significant of Hunayn’s works from the point of view of highlighting the new element in the intellectual culture of the Christian scholars of Baghdad from the ninth to the eleventh centuries. The work is Hunayn’s \textit{Adāb al-falāṣīfah}, or \textit{Nawādir al-falāṣīfah}, as it is sometimes called, a composite work, perhaps put together in the abbreviated form in which it has survived by one of Hunayn’s disciples, the otherwise unknown Muhammad ibn ‘Alī al-Anṣārī, whose name appears as editor in the two extant manuscripts of the single recension of the text that has survived.\footnote{36} Most commentators on this work have characterized it as belonging to a well-known and popular genre of the time, the collection of gnomic, aphoristic sayings attributed to the ancient philosophers and wise men, including Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Alexander the Great, Galen, the Persian Luqmān, and, in Hunayn’s case, Solomon, son of David.\footnote{37} This characterization is certainly true as far as it goes; Hunayn’s text is one of a number of Greek and Arabic compilations of wisdom sayings attributed to the ancient sages. The individual aphorisms, which in the ensemble have been the focus of most scholarly attention so far, can indeed be traced from one compilation to another and the contents of the several collections can be compared with one another to show a continuing tradition in the collection of gnomic sayings. But each compilation can also be studied in its own right, with attention paid to each compiler’s particular interests and concerns. Often the aphorisms are quoted within the context of an overarching narrative framework which expresses the principal concern of the compiler of each individual work. In Hunayn ibn Ishāq’s \textit{Adāb al-falāṣīfah}, the narrative speaks of the founding of philosophy, of its various branches, of the coming to be of ‘houses of wisdom’ among various peoples at the instigation of kings, not only among the ancient Greeks, but also among Jews, Christians and Muslims, and of the sages who transmitted what Hunayn consistently speaks of as ‘knowledge’ (\textit {'ilm}) or ‘wisdom’ (\textit {hikmah}), and ‘disciplinary practice’ (\textit {adab}). For him, the pursuit of \textit {'ilm} and \textit {adab} constitutes the philosophical way of life; it will bring happiness and harmony for both individuals and society as a whole.\footnote{38}

In the context of the burgeoning Christian intellectual life in Arabic in the ninth century, Hunayn’s \textit{Adāb al-falāṣīfah} gave voice to a new line of thinking which would be developed even further by Christian intellectuals in the next generations, as we shall see. In addition to the customary apologetic concerns, it involves the appropriation of the Late Antique ideal of the philosophical way of life, as commended by the Neoplatonic Aristotelians of Athens and Alexandria in the sixth Christian century, as part and parcel of the Christian intellectual agenda in the caliphate. Now Christian thinkers would be taking part in a conversation with contemporary Muslim intellectuals who were similarly developing an interest not only in the improving literature of the old ‘mirror for princes’ tradition, but in moral development, the acquisition of virtues, and the beginnings of a political philosophy,\footnote{39} which would eventually bear fruit in such works as the philosopher al-Fārābī’s \textit{Principles of the Opinions of the Inhabitants of the Virtuous City},\footnote{40} and in the growth in the tenth and eleventh centu-
eries of what modern commentators have called Islamic humanism.  

III

A generation after the time of Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq, the Christian logician and translator of the works of Aristotle and his commentators, Abū Bishr Mattā ibn Yūnus (d.940), a ‘Nestorian’ from the monastery of Dayr Qunnā, became one of al-Fārābī’s two Christian teachers of logic and philosophy, the other one being Yuḥannā ibn Ḥaylān (d.910). Abū Bishr was also the teacher of one of al-Fārābī’s own star pupils, the ‘Jacobite’ Christian, Yahyā ibn ‘Adî (893-974). Modern scholars claim Abū Bishr as the real “founder of the Aristotelian school in Baghdad early in the tenth century.” As such he is often remembered as the defender of philosophy and of the universal validity of Aristotelian logic against the counter claims of contemporary Muslim mutakallimūn in a debate with their spokesperson, Abū Saʿīd as-Sirāfī in the majlis of the caliph’s vizier in the year 937/8. Then in the tenth century, Abū Bishr’s student, Yahyā ibn ‘Adî, became for a time Baghdad’s most notable Christian intellectual and, like Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq in the previous century, Yahyā was one of the major proponents of the philosophical way of life as a guarantor of interreligious harmony and of logic and philosophy as the most important tools for the Christian theologian and apologist in the Islamic milieu.

By the mid-940’s Yahyā ibn ‘Adî had become a major figure in a new generation of intellectuals in Baghdad. While he earned his living as a professional scribe, he was also for a while one of the leading exponents of the ‘Peripatetic’ school of thought founded by his teacher Abū Bishr in the caliph’s capital city. He attracted numerous disciples of his own, both Christian and Muslim, not a few of whom went on to become eminent scholars in their own turn. Because of this obviously successful scholarly career, Yahyā and his circle of intellectual associates have come to be seen by later historians as important participants in the cultural revival during the Buyid age that Joel Kraemer has described as the humanistic renaissance of Islam in its fourth century. And it is for this reason that bibliographers both medieval and modern have made every effort to keep track of Yahyā’s works. In the tenth century his friend, the Muslim bio-bibliographer of culture in the world of Islam, Muḥammad ibn Ishāq ibn an-Nadīm (d.995) recorded Yahyā’s works and discussed his many scholarly accomplishments in his famous reference work called simply the Fihrist, or ‘the catalog’; and in 1977, Gerhard Endress published a very helpful, analytical inventory of all the known works of Yahyā ibn ‘Adî.

In addition to his work as a translator and as a philosopher and logician, who translated many Greek works of Aristotle and his commentators from Greek and Syriac into Arabic, Yahyā also wrote original works in philosophy and theology. Like Ḥunayn, his concerns included issues of public morality, the ethical value of the Christian practice of celibacy, and the larger question of the human pursuit of happiness and the avoidance of sorrow. Of particular interest in this connection are his treatise on the improvement of morals, Tahdhīb al-akhlāq, and his colloquy on sexual abstinence and the philosophical life. But of course, in addition to his philosophical work Yahyā was also a prolific writer in the more
traditional areas of Christian theology and apologetics. While many of Yahyā’s theological works have received considerable attention from modern scholars, especially those in which he addressed the traditional topics of Christian theology and apology in the Islamic milieu, this has not been the case with his ethical texts and his ideas about the philosophical way of life. Yet it is in them in particular that we can follow in more detail his engagement with other public intellectuals in Baghdad in his day.

In his *Reformation of Morals*, Yahyā ibn ‘Adī promoted the cultivation of virtue ethics toward the realization of an ideal which he called simply ‘humanity’ (*al-insāniyyah*), by which he meant not ‘humanism’ in the modern sense of the term, but, following his teacher al-Fārābī’s understanding of the word, he meant “the quality that human beings have in common, or human nature; ... being truly human, in the sense of realizing the end or perfection of man qua man, often synonymous with the exercise of reason.” Yahyā in fact viewed the cultivation of the life of reason as the very summit of human perfection. He speaks of mankind’s distinguishing virtue and defining form as the rational power or soul, and according to Yahyā its perfection consists in the acquisition of what he calls ‘true science’ (*al-‘ulūm al-ḥaqiqiyyah*) and ‘godly wisdom’ (*al-hikmah al-ilāhiyyah*), or as he sometimes also put it, “the acquisition of science (*al-‘ulūm*) and knowledge (*al-ma‘ārif*) in act,” this being the virtue, he says, which “brings one closest to God.” Yahyā’s clear avowal of his devotion to the life of reason as the highest human good raises the question of his thought on the relative claims of reason and revelation in the exposition of Christian doctrine. This issue was in fact one which posed considerable difficulties for the new Christian intellectuals of Abbasid Baghdad, as well as for those Muslims of the time who were engaged in the serious study of philosophy.

In the *Colloquy on Sexual Abstinence*, Yahyā ibn ‘Adī entered into a debate with contemporary Muslim scholars about the place of sexual abstinence among the spiritual exercises proper for the philosophical life. In fact, the issue of acceptable sexual behavior and sexual morality more generally was one of the major, divisive issues between Muslims and Christians, albeit that for the most part it figured in the earlier controversial texts only among the polemical barbs which Christian writers aimed at the Muslims and it had no place in the more doctrinal discussions. Yet on the practical level this issue remained a major one, especially sexual abstinence for religious reasons, and the concern of the new Christian intellectuals for cultivating public and private morality offered them the opportunity to discuss this matter in a forthright way and on the basis of a shared interest in philosophy. As we shall see, it was in the generation after Yahyā ibn ‘Adī that the ‘Nestorian’ Elias of Nisibis (975-1046) addressed this same issue in some detail in his *Risālah fī faḍilat al-‘afāf*.

**IV**

In his own time, Yahyā ibn ‘Adī became the central figure of a philosophical circle in Baghdad which included Muslims as well as Christians of all denominations among his colleagues and disciples. Some of them, like the ‘Jacobite’ ‘Īsā ibn Zur‘a (943-1008), followed closely in Yahyā’s wake. He became a public, Christian intellectual like his...
master, with an interest in science, philosophy and the systematic defense of Christian doctrines against the challenges of Muslims and Jews, as well as being himself an ardent apologist for the orthodoxy of his own church’s ‘Jacobite’ Christology. But one of the most accomplished Christian intellectuals of the eleventh century in the Islamic milieu was undoubtedly the ‘Nestorian’ Elias Bar Shinaya, the bishop of Nisibis (975-1046).

Although he was one of the most creative and productive of Christian authors in the Arabic language, Elias of Nisibis has not received nearly as much attention from modern scholars as his works deserve. His bibliography includes a world chronicle, as we mentioned above, numerous treatises, letters and commentaries on all the major topics of interest to Christians, and most of them seem to have enjoyed a wide circulation in medieval times. Born in the year 975, Elias was ordained a priest in the year 994. After a number of years of study in the monastic communities of northern Mesopotamia, notably in and around Mosul, he was consecrated bishop of Bayt Nûhadrâ in the year 1002. Then, on December 26, 1008, Elias was nominated the metropolitan of Nisibis for the ‘Nestorian’ Church of the East, and from this date, until his death on July 18, 1046, Elias was actively engaged in the task of commending Christian doctrine and practice in Arabic, in response to the multiple challenges of Islam.

Undoubtedly, Elias’ most notable work in connection with Christian/Muslim controversy is the one entitled Kitāb al-majālīs. It is a compendium of Christian apologetics, cast in the literary form of seven accounts of as many conversations on Christian doctrines and other matters between Elias and the vizir Abū l-Qāsim al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī al-Maghribī (981-1027), a notable scholar in his own right, who was in the service of the Buwayhid emir of Diyārbakr and Mayyāfāriqīn, Naṣr ad-Dawlāh Aḥmad ibn Marwān, when Elias was metropolitan in nearby Nisibis. The sessions are said to have been held in Nisibis in July of the year 1026, with subsequent meetings in December 1026 and June 1027. In the ensemble, this work, which is still not completely published in a modern critical edition, is a masterpiece of popular, Christian controversial literature in Arabic; it seems to have had a wide circulation among Arab Christian readers well into modern times. But for the present purposes, two other works of Elias of Nisibis will claim our attention, the aforementioned Treatise on the Virtue of Chastity and his book On Dispelling Anxiety. In these texts Elias joins the ranks of the Christian intellectuals in the caliphate who in dialogue with their Muslim contemporaries promoted the exercises of the philosophical way of life as a humane program for interreligious harmony in the body politic.

Elias of Nisibis’ Kitāb dafʿ al-hamm, the Book on Dispelling Anxiety, is in the form of an extended essay of twelve chapters, dedicated to the same vizir, Abū l-Qāsim al-Maghribī, with whom Elias had been in conversation in the sessions reported in the Kitāb al-majālīs. As a matter of fact, Elias mentioned his work on the text of ‘Dispelling Anxiety’ in his correspondence with the vizir al-Maghribī, a circumstance which has allowed Samir Khalil Samir to conclude that Elias was busy composing the treatise in August of the year 1027, but that when the vizir died in October of that year the text was still unfinished. In Samir’s judgment, Elias fin-
ished the work in November or December of 1027.61

Immediately upon the modern publication of Elias’s treatise on ‘Dispelling Anxiety’ in 1902, a colorful controversy developed among scholars about its authenticity as a work of Elias of Nisibis; some, led by the formidable Louis Cheikho, were convinced that its true author was Gregory Abū l-Faraj Bar Hebraeus (1226-1286) and that the text attributed to Elias was but the Arabic version of Bar Hebraeus’ well-known Syriac work, The Book of Laughable Stories.62 In fact, as Samir Khalil Samir has shown, Cheikho and his associates were misled on this point by a careless copyist’s gloss on a list of Bar Hebraeus’ works copied in the sixteenth century. Now, due to Samir’s detailed studies, the attribution of the Kitāb daf’ al-hamm to Elias of Nisibis is once again secure.63

In the introduction to the Kitāb daf’ al-hamm, Elias explains that he was inspired to compose this work as a result of his meditations on the themes raised by the Muslim philosopher Ya’qūb ibn Ishāq al-Kindī (ca. 800-ca.867) in his widely-read and very influential essay called, Risālah fī ḥilālah li daf’ al-ahzān, or ‘The Art of Dispelling Sorrows’.64 As a matter of fact, a number of other Christian thinkers had also read al-Kindī’s work before Elias and at least two of them also wrote works of their own in Arabic on the same subject. Their principal purpose was to introduce Christian religious themes into the consideration of the best means of dispelling anxiety.65 Elias explains that he composed his treatise on the subject at the insistence of the vizir al-Maghribī, who had requested that he address himself to the topic of the rational management of human anxieties. The point to emphasize in the present context is that in his Kitāb daf’ al-hamm, Elias of Nisibis, at the request of a Muslim notable, wrote in response to a work on the same topic by a Muslim philosopher, and that in his work Elias, like al-Kindī, appeals to reason as the rightful arbiter not only of one’s personal behavior but of public morals as well.

Similarly, in his Treatise on the Virtue of Chastity, Elias addresses himself to a subject broached originally by a Muslim author, this time the famed essayist, Abū ‘Uthmān ‘Amr ibn Bahr al-Jāḥīz (777-868). In July 1026, at the time of his first session in the majlis of the vizir al-Maghribī, Elias addressed the new treatise to his own brother, Abū Sa’īd Manṣūr ibn ʿĪsā, who was a physician in the entourage of the emir Naṣr ad-Dawlah of Diyārbakr.66 Abū Sa’īd had read a passage in the famous book Kitāb al-ḥayawān in which al-Jāḥīz spoke of a well known eunuch, Abū l-Mubārak as-Ṣābī by name, who had boasted that throughout his long life, in spite of his emasculation, he never ceased to be aroused by the longing for women. In his book, al-Jāḥīz recalled the story to support his contention that lifelong sexual continence is impossible. Furthermore, he argued that such a practice is against God’s will. He said,

God, who is most compassionate toward His creatures and most just toward His servants, is too exalted to encumber them with foregoing anything He had bestowed on their hearts and confirmed.67

Disturbed by this argument, Abū Sa’īd wrote to his brother, the metropolitan of Nisibis, for guidance in regard to al-Jāḥīz’ seeming anti-Christian contention and Elias responded with the treatise, ‘On the Virtue
of Chastity’. In it he argued systematically, with an appeal to reason and to historical human experience that the virtue of chastity is both possible and even preferable for anyone who would lead a life of reason and the pursuit of wisdom. With this treatise Elias entered a controversy already underway among Muslim philosophers about the requisite degree of the suppression of the natural appetites that could be considered consistent with one’s determination to acquire knowledge and to practice virtue, which is to say, to live the philosophical life. For example, one finds this discussion most eloquently put already in Abū Bakr Muḥammad ar-Rāzī’s (850-925) Kitāb as-sīrah al-falsafīyyah.68 Here ar-Rāzī defends himself against a charge leveled against him by his adversaries to the effect that his lifestyle was not characterized by a sufficient degree of asceticism and the requisite suppression of the appetitive and irascible desires necessary to qualify him as a true philosopher and disciple of Socrates. Like Yahyā ibn ‘Adī before him, Elias entered this discussion and argued that the doctrines and practices of Christianity are actually more likely to dispose a person to the life of reason than any other religious allegiance.

V

The new Christian intellectuals of Baghdad in early Abbasid times, who came to prominence in the heyday of the translation movement, made an unprecedented bid to participate in the intellectual life of the larger Islamic society of their day. It was the translation movement itself which provided them with the opportunity. Heretofore, modern scholars have certainly recognized the fact that the opportunity was one which allowed Christians like Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq and his associates to hire out their translation services to Muslim patrons who bought their contributions to Islamic scientific and philosophical interests.69 But historians have been slower to recognize that these same Christian translators were also building on earlier traditions in their own communities. They used their skills not only to translate, but also to employ philosophical and logical thought in support of their faith commitments and to commend the philosophical life itself as a fruitful development which might provide the social possibility for harmony between Christians and Muslims in the caliphate.

According to Gerhard Endress, “The undisputed master of philosophy for the Christian schools of late Hellenism as well as for the Muslim transmitters of this tradition, was Aristotle: founder of the paradigms of rational discourse, and of a coherent system of the world.”70 This was certainly a point of view shared by a medieval Syriac-speaking chronicler from the ‘Jacobite’ community about the role of Aristotle among his fellow ‘Jacobites’ long before Islamic times. At the point in the anonymous Syriac Chronicon ad Annum Christi 1234 Pertinens at which the chronicler comes to the discussion of what he calls the ‘era of the Greeks’, by which he means the time of Alexander the Great (356-323 BC) and his Seleucid successors in the Syriac-speaking frontier lands between the Roman and Persian empires, he has this to say about Aristotle and the importance of his works for the Christians:

At this time, Aristotle, ‘the Philosopher’, collected all the scattered kinds of philosophical doctrines and he made of them one great body, thick
with powerful opinions and doctrines, since he separated the truth from falsehood. Without the reading of the book of logic [mîlîthâ] that he made it is not possible to understand the knowledge of books, the meaning of doctrines, and the sense of the Holy Scriptures, on which depends the hope of the Christians, unless one is a man to whom, because of the excellence of his [religious] practice, the grace of the Holy Spirit is given, the One who makes all wise.\textsuperscript{71}

In Abbasid times there were more Christian thinkers interested in the philosophies and sciences of the Greeks than just those Aristotelians among the ‘Jacobites and the ‘Nestorians’ who took their texts and commentaries from the Alexandrian tradition. And there were more Muslims whose philosophical and scientific interests reached well beyond a single-minded devotion to Aristotle. Nevertheless these were the Christian and Muslim philosophers who shaped the intellectual milieu in which Ḥūnayn ibn Ishāq and Yahyā ibn ‘Adī pursued their careers. And just as the Muslims among this generation of philosophers wanted “to vindicate the pursuit of rational activity as an activity in the service of Islam,” so did Ḥūnayn and Yahyā and their Christian associates intend to vindicate with the same philosophy the doctrines and practices of the Christians and the Christology of the ‘Nestorians’ and the ‘Jacobites’ respectively.\textsuperscript{72}

What one notices as different in the works of Ḥūnayn ibn Ishāq, Yahyā ibn ‘Adī, and Elias of Nisibis, by comparison with the works of earlier and contemporary Christian apologists and theologians who wrote in Arabic, is their venture beyond the range of the logical works of Aristotle. The \textit{Organon} and Porphyry’s \textit{Eisagoge} had long been used by Christians in the explication of the terms of their various doctrinal formulae and the systematic defense of their several theologies. Ḥūnayn, Yahyā and the others moved beyond the \textit{Organon} into a larger Aristotelian, philosophical frame of reference which put a premium on the philosophical life itself, on the primacy of reason and the pursuit of happiness not only personally and individually but socially and politically as well. This was a new philosophical horizon for Christians in the east, which under the impetus of the translation movement seems to have opened in the Baghdad intellectual milieu with the importation of Neoplatonic thought into the world of Arabic intellectual tradition with the importation of Neoplatonic thought into the world of Arabic intellectual tradition. Perhaps its most eloquent marker is the so-called \textit{Theology of Aristotle}, a paraphrase of portions of Plotinus’ \textit{Enneads}, which also included some commentary and a collection of wisdom sayings.\textsuperscript{73} Its likely origins in its Arabic dress are probably to be sought in the circle of the Muslim philosopher al-Kindī and his Syrian Christian translators and associates. But the Muslim scholar whose person and works most readily embodied the new intellectual profile was undoubtedly the ‘Second Master’ (after Aristotle himself), Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (ca.870-950).\textsuperscript{74} Among Christian intellectuals, Yahyā ibn ‘Adī inherited al-Fārābī’s mantle.

The Muslim religious establishment came ultimately to distrust the philosophers. In the time frame of our considerations, this distrust was expressed most notably in Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī’s (1058-1111) \textit{The Incoherence of the Philosophers},\textsuperscript{75} where his contempt for what he perceived to be the arrogant rationalism of the Muslim philosophers in matters of religious belief and practice is abundantly clear.\textsuperscript{76} But among Christians as well, not everyone was
happy with the new direction in Christian intellectual culture which the Baghdad scholars introduced into their world.\textsuperscript{77} Evidence for this displeasure is recorded in a work of the late Mu’tazili scholar, ‘Abd al-Jabbâr al-Hamdhânî (d.1025). In the course of his own remarks against the influence of the philosophers, he mentioned Ḥunayn ibn Ishâq and Yahyâ ibn ‘Adî by name, along with the names of other prominent Christian translators of originally Greek texts into Arabic, whom he accused of helping to subvert the faith of the Muslims by the introduction of the books of Plato, Aristotle and others into Islam. He says these Christian translators were few in number and he says that “they hide under the cover of Christianity, while the Christians themselves do not approve of them.”\textsuperscript{78} What is more ‘Abd al-Jabbâr names a Christian source, the otherwise unknown Yûhanna al-Qass, a lecturer on Euclid and a student of the Almagest, who, according to ‘Abd al-Jabbâr, offered this criticism of the Christian translators:

Those who transmitted these books left out much of their error, and the worst of their coarseness, out of a sense of solidarity with them, and to spare them. They gave them, as it were on loan, Islamic meanings and interpretations which they did not have.\textsuperscript{79}

Obviously, Yûhanna al-Qass did not approve of the solidarity which the Christian philosophers associated with the translation movement felt for Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. How widely this feeling was shared among other Christians of the time is impossible to know at this remove. What we do know is that some modern commentators on the works of the likes of Ḥunayn, Yahyâ and their colleagues have perceived problems with the relationship between the claims of faith and reason in their thinking. Nevertheless, all are agreed that some prominent Christian intellectuals of Baghdad from the ninth to the eleventh centuries did think for a season that on the basis of reason and the philosophical life, a measure of peaceful convivencia between Christians, Muslims and Jews could be attained in the World of Islam they all shared.
NOTES


5 See Albert van Roey, “Une apologie syriaque attribuée à Élie de Nisibe,” Le Muséon 59 (1946) 381-397.

6 See Putman, L’église et l’islam.


12 See Sebastian P. Brock, “Two Letters of the Patriarch Timothy from the Late Eighth Century on Translations from Greek,” Arabic Sciences and Philosophy 9 (1999) 233-246.


14 See Gutas, Greek Thought, Arabic Culture, p. 136.


It is notable that we find scant reference in Christian texts in Syriac and Arabic composed in this period to the works of contemporary Jewish scholars in the same Islamic milieu of Baghdad. For example, in addition to some Arabophone apologetic and polemic writers of the earlier period, Sa’adah Yûsuf al-Fayyûmî (882-942), who was a contemporary of noted Christian thinkers such as Abû Bishr Mattâ ibn Yûnus (d.940) and Yahyâ ibn ‘Adî (893-974), wrote his famous *Book of Beliefs and Practices* in this period, a book which discussed many of the same topics we find in the works of his Christian coevals, but they make no mention of it. See Samuel Landauer (ed.), *Kitâb al-amânhâ wa l’itiqâdûn von Sa’ada b. Jûsuf al-Fajjuma* (Leiden: Brill, 1880); Samuel Rosenblatt (trans.), *Saadia Gaon: The Book of Beliefs & Opinions* (Yale Judaica Series; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948).


Already in the Syriac-speaking tradition, in the context of the doctrinal controversies of the fifth and sixth centuries, historians and chronographers were producing texts in this vein, a development which may well have inspired Muslim authors to buttress their religious claims in the same manner. See, e.g., the studies of Witold Witakowski, The Syriac Chronicle of Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahrê: A Study in the History of Historiography (Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, Studia Semitica Upsaliensia, 9; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1987); Jan J. van Ginkel, John of Ephesus: A Monophysite Historian in Sixth-Century Byzantium (Groningen: Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, 1995).

This tradition continued among Syriac-speaking Christians well into the Middle Ages, with such works as the Chronicle of Michael the Syrian, the Chronicon ad annum 1234, and the Chronicle of Bar Hebraeus.


Syrian Christian Intellectuals in the World of Islam


49 Kraemer, Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam, p. 10, n. 14, defining al-Fārābī’s understanding of the term.

50 Yahyā ibn ‘Adī, following the Neoplatonic tradition he inherited, distinguishes three faculties or powers (quwāt) in the human soul, which powers he says “are also named souls: the appetitive soul, the irascible soul, and the rational soul.” Ibn ‘Adī, The Reformation of Morals, 2.1, p. 14.

51 See, e.g., Ibn ‘Adī, Traité sur la continence, 1.3-4, 65.4, PP. 14 & 37 (Arabic); 65 & 99 (French).

52 See Ibn ‘Adī, Traité sur la continence, 33.2-3 & 34.5-7, pp. 25 (Arabic); 81-82 (French).

53 Christian polemists often claimed that Muhammad and Islam encouraged licentious behavior. Typically the topic came up in discussions of the criteria for recognizing the true religion. See, e.g., the listings under this heading in Paul Khoury, Matériaux pour servir à l’étude de la controverse théologique islamo-chrétienne de langue arabe du VIIIe au XIIe siècle (4 vols., Religionswissenschaftliche Studien, 11/1-4; Würzburg: Echter Verlag; Altenberge: Telos Verlag), vol. 1, pp. 190-300. See the motif also discussed in Jason Zaborowski, The Coptic Martyrdom of John of Phaniōtē: Assimilation and Conversion to Islam in Thirteenth-Century Egypt (The History of Christian-Muslim Relations, vol. 3; Leiden: Brill, 2005), esp. pp. 11-31.


55 See Kraemer, Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam, pp. 104-139.

56 See Georg Graf, Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur (vol. II, Studi e Testi, 133; Città del Vaticano: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1947), pp. 252-256; Cyrille Haddad, ‘Īsā ibn Zur’a: Philosophar arabe et
apologiste chrétien (Beirut: Dar al-Kalima, 1971); Kraemer, Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam, pp. 116-123.


58 See the brief excursus on the vizir and his background in Samir Khalil Samir, “Bibliographie du dialogue islamico-chrétien: Élie de Nisibe (liyyā al-Naṣīḥī) (975-1046),” Islamo-christiana 3 (1977), p. 259; the article is included in Samir, Foi et culture en Irak. See also the excursus on the emir Naṣr ad-Dawlah in Samir Khalil Samir, “Note sur le médecin Zāhid al-‘Ulamā’, frère d’Élie de Nisibe,” Orients Christianus 69 (1985) 168-183, particularly pp. 181-183; reprinted in Samir, Foi et culture en Irak, no. V.


60 The full Arabic text is published in Constantin Bacha, Kitāb dāf’ al-hamm li liyyā al-Naṣīḥī mutrān Naṣīḥīn (Cairo: Maṭba‘ah al-Ma‘ārif, 1902).


65 The full Arabic text is published in Constantin Bacha, Kitāb dāf’ al-hamm li liyyā al-Naṣīḥī mutrān Naṣīḥīn (Cairo: Maṭba‘ah al-Ma‘ārif, 1902).


67 See Samir, “Note sur le médecin Zāhid al-‘Ulamā’.”

68 Al-Jāḥiz, Kitāb al-ḥayawān (vol. I; Cairo: Maktabat Muṣṭṭāf, 1938), p. 128.

69 Charles E. Butterworth (trans.), “Abū Bakr Muhammad ibn Zakariyyā’s The Book of
66 See Gutas, Greek Thought, Arabic Culture, esp. 136-141.
68 I.-B. Chabot (ed.), Anonymi Auctoris Chronicon ad Annum Christi 1234 Pertinentes (CSCO, vols. 82 & 109); Paris: J. Gabalda, 1920 & Louvain: Imprimerie Orientaliste L. Durbecq, 1952, vol. 81, pp. 104-105 (Syriac), vol. 109, P. 82 (Latin). It is interesting to note the similar line of thinking voiced about the science of logic in Sergius of Resh’ayna’s still unpublished introduction to Aristotle’s Categories: “Without all this neither can the meaning of writings on medicine be grasped, nor can the opinions of the philosophers be known, nor indeed the true sense of the divine scriptures in which the hope of our salvation is revealed—unless a person receive divine power as a result of the exalted nature of his way of life, with the result that he has no need of human training. As far as human power is concerned, however, there can be no other course or path to all the areas of knowledge except by way of training in Logic.” Quoted from Becker, Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom, p. 147, who in turn quoted the passage from Sebastian Brock, A Brief Outline of Syriac Literature (Moran Etho, 9; Kottayam, Kerala: Saint Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, 1997), p. 204.
74 Interestingly, even prior to the rise of Islam, and in the very early Islamic period, there was some tension among the East Syrians between the academic philosophers in the ‘Nestorian’ school system and the more spiritually inclined scholars of the monastic communities. See Becker, Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom, pp. 178-194.