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Anti-Christian polemic in early Islam: A translation and analysis of
Abū ‘Uthmān ‘Amr B. Baḥr al-Jāḥiẓ’s risāla:
Radd ‘alā al-Naṣārā (A reply to the Christians)

Charles D. Fletcher

The Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University, Montreal
July 2002

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of
Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfilment
of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts.

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Abstract

Author: Charles D. Fletcher

Title: Anti-Christian polemic in early Islam: A translation and analysis of Abū ‘Uthmān ‘Amr B. Baḥr al-Jāḥiẓ’s risāla: *Radd ‘alā al-Naṣārā* (A reply to the Christians)

Department: The Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University

Degree: Master of Arts

This study intends to examine a ninth century anti-Christian polemic work written by the great Muslim littérateur al-Jāḥiẓ. The historical background of the treatise is presented within the contexts of the early ‘Abbāsīd regime (750-900), the Christian communities of the time, the impact of the translation movement, the rise and development of polemic discourse between Muslims and Christians, and the life and works of al-Jāḥiẓ. The study provides the manuscript background of the letter along with a translation supplemented by the work of Joshua Finkel. The analysis of the work is limited to one section, which reflects al-Jāḥiẓ’s most original contribution to anti-Christian Muslim polemic. The actual analysis is focused thematically in order to better ascertain al-Jāḥiẓ’s portrayal of Christians before his Muslim readers.

Résumé

Auteur: Charles D. Fletcher

Titre: Polémique anti-Chrétienne au début de l'Islam: une traduction et analyses du Abū 'Uthmān 'Amr B. Baḥr al-Jāḥiẓ's risāla: *Radd 'alā al-Naṣārā*
(Une réfutation aux Chrétiens)

Département: Institut des Études Islamiques, Université McGill

Diplôme: Maîtrise des Arts

Cette thèse a comme but l'étude de la polémique anti-Chrétienne exposée par le grand écrivain du IX^e al-Jāḥiẓ. Le contexte historique de ce traité est le début de la période des Abbassides (750-900), celui des communautés chrétiennes de l'influence du mouvement de traduction, de l'augmentation et du développement du discours polémique entre chrétiens et musulmans, de la vie et de l'œuvre d'al-Jāḥiẓ. L'étude du travail est limitée à une seule section qui reflète la contribution la plus originale apportée par les musulmans à la polémique chrétienne. L'étude actuelle suit la thématique afin de mieux comprendre la description des chrétiens qu'al-Jāḥiẓ fait pour ses lecteurs musulmans.

Acknowledgments

“Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed”
Proverbs 15:22

The idea for this thesis was originally just a rough ill-shaped and nebulous plan. It developed and took form through the encouragement, support and counsel of many. Appreciation and thanks are due to my supervisor Dr. Eric Ormsby for his diligence and wise advise; to Dr. Wael Hallaq and Ahmad Obiedat who partially checked my translations of which any remaining errors are wholly my responsibility; to the Library staff of Wayne St. Thomas, Steve Millier, Salwa Ferahian and Adam Gacek; to the fine ladies of the office Dawn Richard and Ann Yaxley whose abilities to organise and guide students through the labyrinth of administration surely deserve at least honorary degrees; and to the Institute of Islamic Studies for the granting of a Fellowship.

This acknowledgment of gratitude would remain incomplete without the respect and honour I owe to my parents for their encouragement, support and interest throughout my varied academic life. Lastly, thanks and appreciation are words too limited for expression to my best friend who is my constant counsellor and who taught me knowledge should lead to wisdom and life.

Transliteration

This thesis makes use of the following table for the transliteration of Arabic words and names as is used by the Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University.

b	=	ب	z	=	ز	f	=	ف
t	=	ت	s	=	س	q	=	ق
th	=	ث	sh	=	ش	k	=	ك
j	=	ج	ṣ	=	ص	l	=	ل
ḥ	=	ح	ḍ	=	ض	m	=	م
kh	=	خ	ṭ	=	ط	n	=	ن
d	=	د	ẓ	=	ظ	h	=	ه
dh	=	ذ	‘	=	ع	w	=	و
r	=	ر	gh	=	غ	y	=	ي

Short vowels: a = ' i = ِ u = 'ُ

Long vowels: ā = اَ ī = يَ ū = وَ

Diphthong: ay = اِ يَ aw = اِ وَ

Chapter 1

Introduction

The history of early Muslim-Christian interaction is characterised by a series of polemic monologues and dialogues, which, while relatively unfashionable to a modern secular audience, nevertheless continues today.¹ The desire to enter into a dialogue where the goal is mutual understanding is a relatively recent phenomenon. The style and method of early Muslim-Christian communication, with certain exceptions, has been polemical with various apologetic purposes. These can be broadly classified as positive and negative apologetics.²

The desire to defend against accusations by providing answers to the questions asked is defined as negative apologetics. The object is to show that the questioner's accusations are unfounded. An example of this would be early Arabic Christian apologists³ who wrote primarily for domestic purposes to protect and prevent Christians from converting to Islam by providing answers to Islamic challenges and questions.

¹ For example, the works of the Muslim Ahmat Deedat are basically polemical in nature. Edward Said points to various "Western" and "Orientalist" writings and attitudes, which can be polemical, but Said expands this beyond polemical thought and argument to cultural opinions expressed in a variety of mediums. See his "Introduction," in *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books), 1-28.

² The idea of positive and negative apologetics does not imply good or bad and there is no value judgment attached to these two terms. According to Ron Nash, "In negative apologetics, the major objective is producing answers to challenges to religious faith. The proper tack of negative apologetics is removing obstacles to belief.... In negative apologetics, the apologist is playing defense. In positive apologetics, the apologist begins to play offense. It is one thing to show (or attempt to show) that assorted arguments against religious faith are weak or unsound; it is a rather different task to offer people reasons why they should believe. The latter is the task of positive apologetics." Ron Nash, *Faith and Reason*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988), 14-15.

³ John of Damascus (d. circa 752 A.D.) in the section "Islam" in his *On Heresies* shows how various Muslim accusations can be countered and goes on to warn his readers of pitfalls and traps which the Muslims used on the Christians and shows how such problems can be avoided. See N.A. Newman ed. *Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue*. (Hatfield: Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute, 1993), 134. See also John W. Voorhis. "John of Damscus on the Muslim Heresy," *Muslim World* 24 (1934), 391-398; and Daniel J. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam*. (Leiden: Brill, 1972).

Positive apologetics is concerned not primarily with defending a position, but with questioning an opponent's position. Both types of apologetic are found in polemic treatises and debates from the Umayyad and early 'Abbāsīd periods of Islamic Civilisation through to the medieval period until today.

This study intends to examine one ninth century polemic work written by the great Muslim littérateur al-Jāḥiẓ. After providing an historical context for the period in which al-Jāḥiẓ wrote, a complete English translation of his treatise *Radd 'alā al-Naṣārā* (A reply to the Christians) will be presented,⁴ followed by a selective analysis of his arguments and perceptions of Christians. As with any study there are certain limitations. There will be no attempt to comprehensively analyse al-Jāḥiẓ's treatise, for example, his comments about the Jews. This study will remain focussed on the main thesis of the *risāla* (letter) which is a refutation of the Christians. Aside from mentioning some basic comparisons, it is also beyond the scope of this study to relate this treatise to other polemic works written by Muslims of this period. Nor will there be any attempt to analyse the treatise in relation to the other works of al-Jāḥiẓ. There is difficulty even in offering a chronology of his works, as Pellat has mentioned,⁵ although language, style and various literary devices could be compared within similar genres of Jāḥiẓ's literature. This study is intended to be an introduction to this one polemic work, particularly as the *risāla* will be presented in translation. Before commencing with the historical background, it is first appropriate to provide a brief survey of current scholarship in this field.

⁴ Joshua Finkel, "A Risāla of Al-Jāḥiẓ," *Journal of American Oriental Society*, No. 47, (1927), 311-334 translated a portion of the *risāla* into English. This thesis translates the rest of the document into English.

⁵ Charles Pellat. *Life and Works of al-Jāḥiẓ*. trans. D.M. Hawke (Berkeley: University of California, 1969), 10.

The main scholar associated with al-Jāḥiẓ is Charles Pellat who has written numerous works including translations of the various genres of *adab* (literature) by al-Jāḥiẓ.⁶ Any study on al-Jāḥiẓ must include the contributions of Pellat as indeed is the case in this study. In the area of Arabic literature, O. Rescher's *Abriss der arabischen Literaturgeschichte*⁷ while incomplete began the process of collecting classical Arabic *adab* as did C. Brockelman.⁸ In addition, Joshua Finkel's Arabic publication of *Three Essays of Abū 'Othman 'Amr Ibn Baḥr al-Jāḥiẓ* provides the basis for the translation of the *risāla*: "*Radd 'alā al-Naṣārā*".⁹ Beyond al-Jāḥiẓ and his writings, of which only one treatise of al-Jāḥiẓ deals specifically with Muslim-Christian polemic, there is an equally important group of scholars concerned with Muslim-Christian apologetic and polemic in the Umayyad and 'Abbāsid periods which are important to this study. At the turn of the last century, A. Mingana edited numerous Arabic works in some cases providing translations,¹⁰ which have formed the basis for many studies, as has G. Graf's *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur*.¹¹ Within the last fifty years, work on early Arabic

⁶ A partial listing of Charles Pellat's books and articles which are particularly relevant to this study are: *Life and Works of al-Jāḥiẓ*; *Le Milieu Basrien et la Formation de Gahiz*. (Paris: Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient Adrien Maisonneuve, 1953); "DJĀḤIẒ," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam New Ed. Vol 2*, Bernard Lewis et al eds. (Leiden: Brill, 1965), 385-387; "Gahiziana III. Essai d'inventaire de l'œuvre Gahizienne," *Arabica* III (1950), 147-80; "Nouvel essai d'inventaire de l'œuvre gahiziene," *Arabica* XXXI (1984), 117-164; "Al-Jāḥiẓ," in *'Abbasid Belles-Lettres* (The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature) edited by Julia Ashtiany et al (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 78-95.

⁷ O. Rescher. *Abriss der arabischen Literaturgeschichte 2 Vol.* (Stuttgart, 1925-33). See Vol. 2, 274-296.

⁸ Carl Brockelman. *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur 2 Vol. and suppl. I-III.* (Leiden: 1943-49). See Vol. 2, 152, 342; Suppl. I, 239-247.

⁹ Al-Jāḥiẓ. *Three Essays of Abū 'Othman 'Amr Ibn Baḥr al-Jāḥiẓ* (d. 869) edited by J. Finkel (Cairo: Salafiyah Press, 1926). Much more will be said regarding the text and translation of the *risāla* later in this thesis. See also I.S. Allouche, "Un Traité de Polémique Christiano-Musulmane au IXe Siècle," *Hespéris*, 26, (1939), 123-155.

¹⁰ A. Mingana "The Apology of Timothy the Patriarch before the Caliph Mahdi, Woodbrooke Studies 2," *Bulletin of John Rylands Library* 12, (1928), 137-298. Reprinted in N.A. Newman ed. "The Dialogue of the Patriarch Timothy I with Caliph Mahdi," in *Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue*. (Hatfield: Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute, 1993), 163-265. Mingana's life has been summed up by S.K. Samir, *Alphonse Mingana 1878-1937*, Birmingham 1990 (Occasional Paper No.7).

¹¹ G. Graf. *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur 5 Vols.* (Città del Vaticano: Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana, 1944-1953).

Christian apologetics has been carried on by Sidney H. Griffith,¹² Wadi Haddad,¹³ S. Rissanen,¹⁴ A. Charfi¹⁵ and S.K. Samir¹⁶ among others. Early Muslim apologetic work appears less well studied perhaps because it became bound to theology, philosophy and *fiqh*.¹⁷ However, D. Thomas,¹⁸ A. Abel¹⁹ and E. Platti²⁰ have produced works on Abū 'Īsā al-Warrāq; M.N. Swanson²¹ on Ibn Taymiyya and T. Pulcini²² on Ibn Ḥazm. This is by no means an exhaustive list of scholars, but merely an introduction to some of the work that has been completed and some of the writers who will undoubtedly be seen in future works on early Muslim-Christian interactions as well as inter-faith communication especially within the sixth-tenth century period of the Christian communities under Islam.

¹² Sidney Harrison Griffith has written many works including: "Theodore Abu Qurrah's Arabic Tract on the Christian Practice of Venerating Images," *Journal of American Oriental Society*, No.105, (1985), 53-73; "'Melkites', 'Jacobites' and the Christological Controversies in Arabic in Third/Ninth Century Syria," in *Syrian Christians under Islam*. ed. David Thomas (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 9-55; "Faith and Reason in Christian Kalām: Theodore Abū Qurrah on discerning the true religion," in *Christian Arabic Apologetics during the Abbasid Period (750-1258)*. Samir Khalil Samir & Jorgen Nielsen eds. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), 1-43.

¹³ Wadi Z. Haddad. "Continuity and Change in Religious Adherence: Ninth Century Baghdad," in *Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands: Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries*. Michel Gervers and Ramzi Jibran Bikhazi eds. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1990), 33-53; "A Tenth-Century Speculative Theologian's Refutation of the Basic Doctrines of Christianity: Al-Bāqillanī (d. A.D. 1013)," in *Christian-Muslim Encounters*. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad & Wadi Z. Haddad eds. (Florida: University Press of Florida, 1995), 82-94.

¹⁴ Seppo Rissanen. *Theological Encounter of Oriental Christians with Islam During Early 'Abbāsīd Rule*. (ABO, Finland: ABO Akademi University, 1993).

¹⁵ Abdelmajid Charfi. "La fonction historique de la polémique islamochrétienne à l'époque Abbasside," in *Christian Arabic Apologetics during the Abbasid Period (750-1258)*. Samir Khalil Samir & Jorgen Nielsen eds. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), 44-56.

¹⁶ Samir Khalil Samir. "The Prophet Muhammad as Seen by Timothy I and Some Other Arab Christian Authors," in *Christian Arabic Apologetics during the Abbasid Period (750-1258)*. Samir Khalil Samir & Jorgen Nielsen eds. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), 172-191.

¹⁷ Dimitri Gutas. *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*. London: Routledge, 1998.

¹⁸ David Thomas. *Anti-Christian polemic in early Islam Abū 'Īsā al-Warrāq's "Against the Trinity"*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); "Two Muslim-Christian debates from the early Shi'ite tradition," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 33 (1988), 63-65.

¹⁹ Able, A., *Le Livre pour la réfutation des trois sectes chrétiennes*. (Brussels, 1949).

²⁰ Emilo Platti. "Yahyā b. 'Adī and his refutation of al-Warrāq's treatise on the Trinity in relation to other works," in *Christian Arabic Apologetics during the Abbasid Period (750-1258)*. Samir Khalil Samir & Jorgen Nielsen eds. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), 172-191.

²¹ Mark N Swanson. "Ibn Taymiyya and the Kitāb al-Burhān: A Muslim Controversialist Responds to an Ninth Century Arabic Christian Apology," in *Christian-Muslim Encounters*. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad & Wadi, Z. Haddad eds. (Florida: University Press of Florida, 1995), 95-107.

²² Theodore Pulcini. *Exegesis as Polemical Discourse: Ibn Ḥazm on Jewish and Christian Scriptures*. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998).

More general works on Muslim-Christian encounters have been written and edited by a variety of writers. Jacques Waardenburg has written articles and edited two books devoted to this topic.²³ William Montgomery Watt and Hugh Goddard along with Camila Adang have added works to this corpus although Adang is more concerned with Muslim-Jewish interactions.²⁴ This is a growing field of inquiry particularly as current Muslim-Jewish and Christian interactions, the latter often couched in terms such “the West” or “Orientalists”, become more visible within the conflicts between Muslims and others. These encounters are not new. The major difference is that this study focuses on a period of history when Islamic Civilisation was in the ascendancy and controlled a great deal of territory whereas current interactions are seen by some Muslims as a fight against domination by non-Muslims.

The importance of al-Jāḥiẓ’s work is twofold. First, the work is extant, although abridged by a copyist a century after al-Jāḥiẓ. Similar works such as al-Warrāq’s *Radd ‘alā al-Thalāth Firaq min al-Naṣārā* are mediated through a refutation and thus reconstructed, although the confidence of the reconstruction is high and the work is extremely valuable. The second importance of al-Jāḥiẓ’s work is that his style and approach differ markedly from other early Muslim polemicists, for he engages in more than theological disputes by expanding his refutation to include sociology, history, psychology and even some folklore. Thus, it is hoped this translation and study will add to the spectrum of inquiry into the field of early Muslim-Christian interactions.

²³ Jacques Waardenburg. “The Medieval Period: 650-1500,” in *Muslim Perceptions of other Religions: A Historical Survey*. ed. Jacques Waardenburg (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 18-69.

²⁴ W. Montgomery Watt. *Muslim-Christian Encounters: Perceptions and Misperceptions*. (London: Routledge, 1991). Hugh Goddard. *Muslim Perceptions of Christianity*. (London: Grey Seal, 1996); “Christian-Muslim Relations: a look backwards and a look forward,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* Vol. 11 No. 2 (July 2000), 195-212; and *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000). Camilla Adang. *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Bible: From Ibn Rabbān to Ibn Ḥazm*. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996).

Chapter 2

Historical background and context

The man al-Jāḥiẓ, his writings and the *risāla* (letter) being examined in this study are set in an historical environment which not only shapes and informs the contents of this letter, but also provides the immediate context in which to grasp some of the intentions of al-Jāḥiẓ. To this end the early ‘Abbāsīd period will be briefly examined particularly the impact of the translation movement upon Islamic apologies and the roles of the Caliphates of al-Ma’mūn (813-33) and al-Mutawakkil (841-61). This will be followed by a survey of the identity and nature of Christian communities in the regions of Baghdad, Baṣra and in the East in general to determine who exactly al-Jāḥiẓ was attempting to refute. Before completing this historical background with a detailed picture of the life and works of al-Jāḥiẓ, a brief review will be presented on the history of previous Muslim-Christian polemics, which may have influenced al-Jāḥiẓ’s effort.

The early ‘Abbāsīd period (750-861 A.D.)

The period under review is complex, yet very important to the development of Islamic thought, law, ḥadīth,¹ politics, polemics and numerous other issues. For the purposes of this study, the review will be limited to the political and theological climate of the young ‘Abbāsīd dynasty as seen in its rise to power and the associations with both Shī’ites and the Mu’tazali. In this survey, a more detailed examination will be made on the period under al-Ma’mūn and al-Mutawakkil. It was under the ‘Abbāsīd caliphs in

¹ Ḥadīth is a report of a saying or action of the Prophet, or the collection of such reports. The collection of Hadith during this period resulted in the most widely authoritative official Sunni collection by al-Bukhārī (d. 870).

general that polemics took shape and developed and al-Jāḥiẓ was both an inheritor of the early Christian-Muslim polemic writings and a participant in that polemic discourse.

Fall of the Umayyad Dynasty

The rise of the ‘Abbāsids followed a period of general public dissatisfaction with the Umayyad dynasty. This was fuelled, in part, by the growing alienation of the *mawālī*² due to inequality with Arab Muslims and the perceived movement away from traditional Islam as interpreted by the ‘Alids,³ the traditionalists and the rising collection of rationalist thinkers later known as the Mu’tazilites.

There are many reasons for the fall of the Umayyad dynasty. Hugh Kennedy groups these reasons under two broad categories, ideological and regional.⁴ Ideologically, the Umayyads were unable to offer the leadership that many Muslims desired. The dynasty was essentially secular and Muslims, especially in Persia, felt that only charismatic Islamic leadership could re-establish rule based on the Qur’ān and the Sunna.⁵ The popular refrain that only a person from the Prophet’s family could answer the need for authority in leadership became associated with the growing dissent against the Umayyads.

In addition, regional issues signified the weakness of the regime. Power had been centralised in Syria since the reign of ‘Abd al-Malik and Muslims of Persia were largely excluded thus creating a sense of alienation. This was particularly seen with the unequal

² *Mawla* (pl. *Mawālī*) as used here it refers to non-Arab converts to Islam.

³ ‘Alid refers to the descendants of ‘Alī, cousin and son in law of the prophet. The term ‘Alid is applied to the Shi’īs.

⁴ Hugh Kennedy. *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*. (London: Longman, 1986), 116.

⁵ Sunna is received custom, particularly associated with Muḥammad and is embodied in the ḥadīth.

status of non-Arab Muslims to Arab Muslims, which became one more powerful element for use by the Umayyad opposition.⁶

With the death of the Caliph Hishām (125/743), Umayyad rule underwent a succession of rebellions. The Khārijites rebelled in Mosul and elsewhere. The ‘Alids and the ‘Abbāsids sought to undermine the Umayyad authority which was often mixed with religious overtones. The Umayyads were portrayed as betraying true Islam with the opposition promising reforms to relieve oppression and remove the privileges of the elite.⁷ Marwān II (127-32/744-750) almost succeeded in regaining control for the Umayyads, but a rebellion in Khurāsān extinguished these hopes.⁸

Before discussing the rise of the ‘Abbāsids, something should be mentioned about the situation of Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians. During the Umayyad period there was very little anti-Muslim rebellion by the People of the Book.⁹ It seems these religious groups accepted their position under the Umayyads and it was not until the increase in the number of conversions to Islam in the early ‘Abbāsid period that strong opposition developed toward Islam.¹⁰ One reason for such passivity could in part be attributed to the nature of the communities before the onset of Islam. Monophysite Christians in Syria and Egypt, Christians under the Sāsānian Empire (Nestorians) and the Jews everywhere were

⁶ Laura Veccia Vaglieri. “The Patriarchal and Umayyad Caliphate,” in *The Cambridge History of Islam: The Central Islamic Lands Vol. I*. Holt P.M. et al eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 101. Vaglieri comments that the discrimination against non-Arab Muslims was seen as an incorrect observance of the Qur’ān and Sunna, which became seen as one more example of Umayyad indifference to the Islamic faith.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 102.

⁹ The People of the Book refer to the Christians and the Jews and later the Zoroastrians were added to this group. Qur’ān 2:87-113.

¹⁰ Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*., 117. This theme will be revisited later in this thesis.

demilitarised¹¹ and under pressure from the ruling regimes. The rise of new rulers was in some cases welcomed as Hodgson writes:

Jews found a much more favourable position than they had had under the Byzantines, at least; it was not only economic but political openness which permitted an increase in their commercial activity. Even the position of the relatively favoured Nestorian Christians temporarily improved over against the Zoroastrian aristocracy, at least until the aristocrats turned Muslim. The Monophysite Christian establishments of Egypt, Syria and Armenia profited immediately and immensely from the withdrawal of the privileged Greeks. Quite apart from a general championing of piety as understood in the Abrahamic tradition, the Muslims seem to have favoured the viewpoint of the Monophysites on particular issues – notably the relative repugnance to be found among Monophysites to religious statues and to figural art, which perhaps sprang from their more general hostility to the richer churches which could better afford such attractions.¹²

Generally, the secular nature of the Umayyads tended to place little direct religious pressure on these groups to convert to Islam except for the efforts of ‘Umar II (717-720) and his successors.¹³ In Christian tradition ‘Umar II is seen as a persecutor.

Occasionally Muslims had encouraged or forced dhimmīs (non-Arab non-Muslim subjects) to convert, especially in the case of individuals or families whom it was important to attach to the Arab cause. Now conversion became government policy extended to all non-Arabs. ... Even while scrupulous justice was extended to them, within the terms of the Arab conquest, Christians were made to feel inferior and to know ‘their’ place. It is likely that some of the humiliating sumptuary laws that later were sometimes imposed on the wealthier dhimmī non-Muslims (and fictively ascribed to the first ‘Umar) were sanctioned by ‘Umar II: that Christians and Jews should not ride horses, for instance, but at most mules, or even that they should wear certain marks of their religions in their costume when among Muslims.¹⁴

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Hodgson, Marshall G.S. *The Venture of Islam: The Classical Age of Islam*. Vol. I (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1974), 306.

¹³ Ibid., 305

¹⁴ Ibid., 269. For a detailed discussion of ‘Umar II and his relation to non-Muslims see A.S. Tritton *The Caliphs and their non-Muslim Subjects: A Critical Study of the Covenant of ‘Umar*. (London: Frank Cass & Co. LTD., 1930). See also the article by H.A.R. Gibb, “The Fiscal Rescript of ‘Umar II,” *Arabica* Vol. 2, (1955), 1-16.

The non-Muslim religious communities under the Umayyads, particularly the Christians, did engage in forms of apologetic in order to counter attempts at converting Christians to Islam, but it was not until the ‘Abbāsids that this grew into a wider engagement between Muslims and Christians. This is will be dealt with in more detail later when discussing the historic development of Muslim-Christian debates and polemics.

The rise of the ‘Abbāsids

The early period of ‘Abbāsīd rule was characterised by political tensions, heresies, and the needs and challenges of building a new regime with a strong mix of ethnic groups who were entering into Islam. Their rule was theocratic in nature and this was seen in the use of honorific titles (*alqāb*) upon ascension to the throne.¹⁵ The ‘Abbāsīd government was influenced by Persian traditions of divine rulership and statecraft.¹⁶ The first century of rule saw frequent revolts by the ‘Alids and the piety-minded¹⁷ who considered the ‘Abbāsids at best a compromise. Indeed, the ‘*ulamā*’ were shocked by the ‘Abbāsīd use of *alqāb* such as “the shadow of God on earth” which mirrored Sāsānian traditions of divinely ordained authority and power.¹⁸ This perhaps was precipitated in part by the regime’s need to justify itself in the eyes of its subjects and to counter claims by their opponents.¹⁹ The transfer of the capitol from Damascus to Baghdad further solidified Persian influence both materially and culturally²⁰ and granted greater influence to the *mawālī*. This influence was seen with the selection of the Persian

¹⁵ C.E. Bosworth, *The New Islamic Dynasties: A chronological and genealogical manual*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 7. See also Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: The Classical Age of Islam*. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1974), 280.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Piety-minded was a term coined by Hodgson to refer to all the various groups opposed to the rule of Marwānī (Umayyads) whose opposition embodied itself in idealistic religious attitudes. From these groups emerged religious specialists known as the ‘*ulamā*’. See Hodgson. 250-51.

¹⁸ Hodgson, 280.

¹⁹ Pellat, *Life and Works*., 11.

²⁰ Bosworth, 7.

Khālīd al-Barmakī as vizier by the Caliph al-Manṣūr. Future viziers were drawn from al-Barmakī's descendents to develop and direct the administration of the 'Abbāsīd empire until the reign of Hārūn al-Rashīd (803 A.D.).²¹ Sāsānīd Persian traditions and government models became favoured over Arab tribal traditions under the 'Abbāsīds.

Within the early development of 'Abbāsīd rule, society displayed periods of openness to new ideas for pragmatic reasons and periods of suspicion.²² Both of these periods influenced and shaped Muslim-Christian polemic. The translation movement, which was established to obtain for Muslim use foreign knowledge and understanding, is but one example of the pragmatic openness to new ideas expressed by the 'Abbāsīds.²³ It was during this time that Islamic theology began to develop a distinctive character.²⁴ Principles and methods of thought on such topics as the attributes of God, his justice and the nature of revelation were developed by such thinkers as Bishr ibn al-Mu'tamir and Abū al-Hudhayl al-'Allāf and lasted for centuries.²⁵

During this period Mu'tazilite principles were at their zenith and set the tone of acceptable belief.²⁶ The influence of the Mu'tazilites became so great that almost anyone who was involved in theological discourse was regarded as a Mu'tazilite unless there was conscious effort to be disassociated such as with Ibn Kullāb and Ibn Ḥanbal.²⁷ In addition, the Shī'ites also followed many of the Mu'tazilite ideas in their thought, one example of which was the polemic work of Abū 'Īsā al-Warrāq.²⁸ However, it must be

²¹ Bernard Lewis, *The Middle East*. (London: Phoenix Giant, 1995), 77,78.

²² Thomas, *Anti-Christian Polemic*., 4.

²³ More will be said regarding the translation movement later in this thesis.

²⁴ Thomas, *Anti-Christian Polemic*., 4.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 10. Al-Warrāq is said to have refuted al-Jāhīz's writings on the imamate.

noted in this period there was no unified school of Mu'tazilites. Even those associated with this name would not necessarily have agreed with its later definition.

Early 'Abbāsid society, while experiencing periods of openness also experienced periods of suspicion due in part to the Mu'tazilites. Some of their religious ideas and concepts became incorporated into the state policy under al-Ma'mūn who in 833A.D. implemented the *miḥna* (inquisition) in which anyone holding an official position was required to accept the createdness of the Qur'ān. Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal and others fell victim to the *miḥna* as they maintained the doctrine of the eternity of scripture.²⁹

Thus, there was a degree of openness in 'Abbāsid society, but these were mainly pragmatic measures particularly in administration and the sciences.³⁰ At the same time, the 'Abbāsid regime sought to define the borders of acceptable doctrine in order to unify the Muslim empire. This led to measures such as the Caliph al-Mahdī's persecution of the *Zandaqah* (Manicheans) and al-Ma'mūn's *miḥna*.³¹ This illustrates the less open side. For example Dirār ibn 'Amr was outlawed as a *Zindīq* in the eighth century. Hishām ibn al-Ḥakam and possibly Bishr al-Marisi were forced into hiding and Bishr ibn al-Mu'tamir was thrown into prison.³² Al-Jāḥiẓ was an ardent supporter of Mu'tazilite thought until it became politically expedient to submerge and obscure his ideas in his writings with the change in state policy under the Caliph al-Mutawakkil.

While Islam was internally struggling to determine doctrine, theology and practice, it was also attempting to define itself externally before non-Muslim religions via polemics. Polemical discourse between Muslims and Christians was not unknown during

²⁹ Ibid., 5.

³⁰ Ira Lapidus. *A History of Islamic Societies*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 71,72.

³¹ Ibid., 88

³² Thomas, *Anti-Christian Polemic*., 5.

the Umayyad period as will be seen later, but such discourse increased and developed in the early-mid ninth century. According to Waardenburg there were three general reasons why polemic writings increased during the ninth century.³³ First, writings were encouraged by the Caliphal policy of establishing a unified Islamic state. Second, Islam was stressed as the religious ideology of the ‘Abbāsid state and third, there was increasing state interference in religious matters. This is seen under al-Ma’mūn in the *miḥna* where doctrine was imposed as state policy in order to bring unity, which of course eventually failed.³⁴ It was also seen under al-Mutawakkil with the abandonment of the *miḥna* and a return to Orthodoxy³⁵ and a policy of discrimination against Christians and Jews. The ‘Abbāsid rulers were concerned not only with doctrinal expression and Muslim unity, but also a stricter definition of the rules and the limits for non-Muslim minorities such as Jews and Christians could enjoy under the *dhimmi* status.

The impact of the Translation Movement

The translation movement is so significant to the development of Islamic polemic that it requires some attention. The impact of this movement will be seen within the context of the need for polemic within Islam, as the ‘Abbāsids struggled for internal political control, and outside of Islam, as Muslims sought to engage non-Muslims.

Among the scholars associated with the translation movement is Dimitri Gutas whose seminal work *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture* has become indispensable to the summary presented here.³⁶ The movement initiated by the second ‘Abbāsid Caliph al-Manṣūr began an extraordinary two-century process of translating Greek works into

³³ Waardenburg, 42.

³⁴ Walter M. Patton. *Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal and the Miḥna*. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1897).

³⁵ Hodgson, 488; Lewis, 79. Orthodoxy refers to the main stream Sunnī views as expressed by the ‘*ulamā*’ and the traditionalists.

³⁶ Dimitri Gutas. *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*. (London: Routledge, 1998).

Arabic. From the middle of the eighth century to the end of the tenth century almost all non-literary and non-historical secular Greek books were available in Arabic.³⁷ Not only was this movement supported by the state, but also the elite of ‘Abbāsid society participated in commissioning translations. Far from being a haphazard attempt at translation, the work was rigorous and scholarly applying strict philological measures under the famous Ḥunayn ibn Isḥāq and his associates.³⁸ For the movement to have lasted so long and to have garnered such support and interest reflects the needs and desires of the early ‘Abbāsid society. There are a variety of complex reasons for the rise of the translation movement and only a cursory attempt will be made to address this issue primarily in the context of polemics. In essence, the translation movement fundamentally altered Muslim-Christian apologetics by providing the Muslims with the breadth and depth of Greek learning and thought which saw the rise of *kalām* and the Mu’tazilites.³⁹ The Muslims now had access to ideas and methodologies previously the domain of primarily the Christians.

According to Gutas, the rise of the translation movement reflected the nature of early ‘Abbāsid society and political needs.⁴⁰ Al-Manṣūr’s ‘Abbāsid dynastic ideology was a combination of Zoroastrian Imperial ideology and political astrology. With the founding of the new eastern capitol of Baghdad, a new societal structure developed as the impetus for freedom to explore new streams of knowledge – political, scientific, medical and astrological.⁴¹ The presence of many Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians in Baghdad

³⁷ Ibid., 1.

³⁸ Hodgson, 412.

³⁹ Gutas, 2.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 29-34.

⁴¹ Ibid., 189.

encouraged this exploration. Unlike the Umayyads who had maintained a pre-Islamic Arab tribalism, the ‘Abbāsīd revolution brought a new focus.

But along with the Umayyads out went also *Arab* culture as a political and ideological focus: because it excluded by its very nature those not born Arabs, it could not serve the perceived requirements of the ‘Abbāsīd dynasty to form coalitions with and please political partners of different ethnic backgrounds; what was substituted was *Arabic* culture, based on the language, in which everybody could participate.⁴²

Al-Manṣūr fashioned an imperial ideology which saw the ‘Abbāsīd dynasty as pre-ordained by the stars and God to succeed all other empires. It is not difficult to see that such an ideology of ‘rule by God’s decree’ would be popular with a regime struggling for legitimacy as the early ‘Abbāsīds faced. Accompanying this ideology were two important concepts.⁴³ First, under the ‘Abbāsīds there was to be no discrimination based on the origins of Muslims. Thus, non-Arab Muslims would have, in theory, greater access to power and privilege. The second concept, which is important to our discussion, is that Islam became a proselytising religion. There had been indirect socio-economic incentives to become Muslim such as the reduction of taxes and increased opportunities, but with the ‘Abbāsīds came an increase in conversions.

Proselytism implies that one religion is true and others are not. This activity worked in two ways.⁴⁴ First, it was applied within Islam. There were debates over the correct version of Islam with attempts to win opponents to one or the other side. Sometimes this was simply imposed such as the *miḥna*, but the first priority was often to settle the questions of the internal faith and practice of Islam. The second aspect deals with proselytism outside of Islam. Non-Muslims of course would resist conversion

⁴² Ibid., 191.

⁴³ Ibid., 63.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 64.

attempts, as the implication is that their belief was untrue and that a loss of adherents would lead to a loss of political power.

Under al-Manṣūr, ‘Abbāsid power and political control was consolidated which set the stage for internal and external religious confrontations.⁴⁵ This was seen under al-Manṣūr’s successor, his son al-Mahdī (775-785). It is known that al-Mahdī commissioned the translation of Aristotle’s *Topics*⁴⁶ which was completed by the Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I with the help of the Christian secretary of the governor of Mosul, Abū Nūh in 782 A.D. on the basis of a Syriac copy in consultation with the Greek.⁴⁷ The question follows why this particular work was selected near the onset of the translation movement. *Topics* must have held some importance to the needs of al-Mahdī. Aristotle’s work deals with the art of systematic argumentation known as dialectics.

Its stated aim is to develop a method that would enable one to debate for or against a thesis on the basis of commonly held beliefs; accordingly, it provides rules of engagement concerning the question and answer process between two antagonists, the interrogator and his respondent, and it lists at great length test cases – about three hundred of them – that provide approaches to arguments, or their topics (the *topoi*).⁴⁸

It appears al-Mahdī desired this work and supported the translation movement in order to help deal with the political and social opposition rising out of the increasing conversion due to proselytism. It is reported that:

Al-Mahdī devoted all his efforts to exterminating heretics and apostates... Al-Mahdī was the first Caliph to command the theologians who used dialectic disputation (*al-ḡadaliyyīn*) in their research to compose books against the heretics and the other infidels The theologians then produced demonstrative proofs against the disputers (*mu’ānidīn*),

⁴⁵ Hodgson, 289.

⁴⁶ Aristotle. *Aristotle Topics Books I and VIII*. Translated with a commentary by Robin Smith, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977).

⁴⁷ Gutas, 61.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 62.

eliminated the problems posed by the heretics, and explained the truth in clear terms to doubters.⁴⁹

There seemed plenty of reason to warrant aggressive efforts as various groups resisted 'Abbāsid dominance. Persian national groups, the Manicheans, Bardesanites and Marcionites struggled with the 'Abbāsids during the first 'Abbāsid century. Judaism and Christianity also reacted to these proselytising implications. For example, the Melkites faced certain pressures. As the Greek language gradually fell into disuse among the populations of Syria-Palestine in favour of Arabic, the Melkites eventually moved to Arabic even for liturgical purposes.⁵⁰

Jewish and Christian groups found that they needed to defend and explain themselves to maintain or even regain their rights and positions. One result was a dramatic increase in Arabic Christian apologetic writings against Islam in the first 'Abbāsid century.⁵¹ This is seen in the number of inter-faith disputations and apologetic – polemic treatises written in Arabic. Caspar lists 27 pages of known Muslim-Christian polemic works between the eighth and tenth centuries!⁵²

Christians had written polemic and disputation literature for centuries as a form of communication in inter-church faith conflicts. Melkites, Monophysites and Nestorians debated issues particularly after the Fifth Ecumenical Council in A.D. 553.⁵³ The history of interaction developed into a dialogue form of disputation reminiscent of Aristotle's *Topics*. It is no surprise then that a similar format ensued between Christians and Muslims. Although the Christians and the Jews were less of a political threat than the

⁴⁹ Ibid., 65.

⁵⁰ Gutas, 66.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Caspar, R. et al eds. "Bibliographie du dialogue islamo-chrétien," *Islamochristina*, Vol I (1975), 125-181.

⁵³ Gutas, 67.

various Manichean sects (*Zandaqah*) who could appeal ideologically to the many in the ‘Abbāsid administration who were of Persian background, they did present a strong intellectual challenge with their experience in disputation.⁵⁴ The record of the first Muslim to defend Islam in debate with a Christian was al-Mahdī himself who seemed to have read and employed *Topics*. Further, it is interesting that the debate occurred with Timothy I, the one who had translated *Topics* for the Caliph. According to Timothy I, the Caliph initiated the debate.

Let it be known to your wisdom, O God-loving lord, that before these days I had an audience with our victorious King [al-Mahdī], and according to usage I praised God and His majesty. When, in the limited space allowed to me, I had finished the words of my complimentary address, in which I spake of the nature of God and His Eternity, he did something to me, which he had never done before; he said to me: “O Catholicos, a man like you who possesses all this knowledge and utters such sublime words concerning God, is not justified in saying about God that He married a woman from whom He begat a son. – And I replied to his Majesty: “And who, O God-loving King, who has ever uttered such a blasphemy concerning God?” – And our victorious King said to me: “What then do you say that Christ is?”⁵⁵

From this brief excerpt, a few comments can be made. First, Timothy had spoken before the Caliph on previous occasions and second, he seemed surprised that the Caliph engaged him in disputation. Gutas pointed out that al-Mahdī asked a provocative, even insulting, question,⁵⁶ which was not a direct quote from the Qur’ān,⁵⁷ but rather a paraphrase. By not quoting the Qur’ān, al-Mahdī was allowing Timothy to safely answer

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ A. Mingana. “The Apology of Timothy the Patriarch before Caliph Mahdi Woodbrooke Studies 2,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, vol. 12 (1928), 137-298 reprinted in N.A. Newman ed. *Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue*. (Hatfield: Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute, 1993), 175.

⁵⁶ Gutas, 68.

⁵⁷ Qur’ān 6:101 “The Creator of the heavens and the earth – how should He have a son, seeing that He has no consort?” Pickthall Translation. *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur’ān*. Translated by M.M. Pickthall, (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab Allubnani, 1950).

without directly opposing the Qur'ān. Timothy obviously knew the Qur'ān and understood he was free to engage the Caliph in debate.

The translation movement provided the intellectual resources for the development of inter-faith polemics and debates during the first two 'Abbāsid centuries. The fact that an 'Abbāsid Caliph commissioned the translation of *Topics* and engaged in its application through debate showed the acceptance of the use of disputation in religious-political debates. The time of al-Mahdī was full of political struggles and the quest for 'Abbāsid legitimacy rested on religious or theological positions which needed to be defended against opponents. Excellence in disputation became politically significant and the first Islamic schools set up by jurists taught dialectic and jurisprudence (*fiqh*).⁵⁸

What this indicates is that during this early 'Abbāsid period, political activity, and more significantly, political activism, in Islamic society were expressed through dialectical argumentation of theological questions.⁵⁹

It is clear that polemical works were a constant feature of 'Abbāsid intellectual defence and challenge. It is no surprise that al-Mutawakkil would employ this genre nor that al-Jāhiz would make use of it in some of his works.

Al-Ma'mūn (813-833 A.D.) to Al-Mutawakkil (847-861 A.D.)

By the time the Caliph al-Ma'mūn ascended to power, the 'Abbāsid dynasty had been in power for over half a century and still was plagued with dissension and division.⁶⁰ Various groups and interests continued to threaten the unity of the empire. There were the secretaries (represented by the *adīb*), the Shī'ites, the '*ulamā*', the

⁵⁸ Gutas, 69.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Hodgson, 475, 478.

Sunnites, and the Arabs all seeking to shape and direct the government.⁶¹ The Persian tradition of secretaries had developed into the *adīb* who supported the absolutist type monarchy of the ‘Abbāsids much as a continuation of the Sāsānian traditions.⁶² The ‘*ulamā*’, on the other hand, whether Jamā’i Sunnī or Twelver Shi’i sought to minimise ‘Abbāsīd power.⁶³ Al-Ma’mūn satisfied neither *udabā*’ nor ‘*ulamā*’. Politically he sought to support the imperial court ideal with an officially recognised establishment through which Muslims could unite. Religiously he wanted unity and this could only work if he reached some understanding with the Shar’i ‘*ulamā*’ which would in turn compromise the power of the absolute monarchy.⁶⁴

Al-Ma’mūn chose to oppose the more extreme views of the Ḥadīth collectors, whom Hodgson called “Ḥadīth folk”, and support the Mu’tazilis in theological doctrine.⁶⁵ The Ḥadīth folk developed doctrines, which tended to identify the Qur’ān very closely with God. Thus, the Qur’ān was uncreated. They stressed the accessibility of divine law to every Muslim satisfying the Shari’ah ideals of social equality and individual dignity, but this was not necessarily suitable to the idea of absolute monarchy. The Mu’tazilī *mutakallimūn* opposed elevating the Qur’ān to a position of almost a second god which introduced an unnecessary mystery into Islam and was contrary to the reasonableness of the faith. Ultimately religious authority depended upon the outcome of the Muḥadīth-Mu’tazilite controversy. Al-Ma’mūn adopted the Mu’tazilite position and enforced the dogma of the created Qur’ān in (212/827), instituting the *miḥna* to persecute

⁶¹ Watt, W. Montgomery. *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1985), 34.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Hodgson, 478.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 480.

his opponents. This policy continued until the Caliph al-Wāthiq (227-32/842-847).

However, because the populace tended to favour the traditionalists, the government came to rest upon an intellectual elite rather than the masses.⁶⁶

The period under al-Ma'mūn was characterised by cultural advancement, greater sympathy for the desires of non Arab Muslims, a championing of the superiority of 'Alī, Mu'tazilite orthodoxy and persecution of traditionalism as represented by Aḥamd b. Ḥanbal (164-241/780-851). In terms of Muslim-Christian polemic, it was the rise of the Mu'tazilites who became important.

... the Mu'tazilīs had been the most zealous in defence of Islam against its various non-Muslim opponents and (perhaps partly for that reason) the readiest to rely on deductive reasoning for their doctrine rather than on the letter of ḥadīth reports. It was the Mu'tazilīs who had taken the lead in the campaign against the Manicheans.⁶⁷

The period also marked the emergence of al-Jāḥiẓ as a writer favoured and utilised by the government. As the 'Abbāsids moved away from the *imāmate* as a source of legitimacy⁶⁸ and as the Shī'ī rebellion of 814-815 in Kūfa and Baṣra threatened with wide appeal even in Mecca was defeated,⁶⁹ al-Ma'mūn was open to intellectual defences against the Shī'īs. It was at this time that al-Jāḥiẓ made his fortuitous appearance. His works on the *Imāmate* and the '*Uthmāniyya* appears to have gained the attention of al-

⁶⁶ Ibid., 481.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 480. The Manicheans, founded by Mani two centuries after Christ and denied *dhimmi* status by the '*ulamā*', presented an attractive alternative to the Muslims. Manicheans communal spirit and piety appealed to the non-Arab Muslims of Iranian descent and thus was a threat to the rise of Islam. Hodgson commented: "It seems to have won many secret followers at court among persons who were officially Muslims. The danger it posed was at such a level that the earliest Muslim theology seems to have been developed partly for the sake of opposing the Manicheans intellectually." (290) The Arabic term for the Manicheans was *Zandaqah* which became applied to any socially abhorrent heresy.

⁶⁸ Watt, W. Montgomery. *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 33. The 'Abbāsīd claim to the caliphate had been based on the assertion that the imamate had passed from 'Alī to Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥanafīyya then to his son Abū Hāshim who in turn designated the first two 'Abbāsīd caliphs. By the time of the caliph al-Mahdī the basis for legitimacy shifted to the claim that the rightful successor to Muḥammad had been his uncle al-'Abbās. This move away from the Shī'īs created division.

⁶⁹ Hodgson, 475.

Ma'mūn, as al-Jāhiz himself mentioned in his *Al Bayān Wa'l-Tabyīn* stating that he wrote a number of works on the *imāmate* for the Caliph.⁷⁰

The other 'Abbāsid Caliph significant to Muslim-Christian polemic was al-Mutawakkil. Succeeding his brother al-Wāthiq, he was determined to assert the independence of the caliphate and to break the dominance of the Turkish military and bureaucracy.⁷¹ He executed the former vizier Ibn al-Zayyāt (d. 233/847), removed the Turkish military commander Aytākh (assassinated 235/849) and dismissed the chief Qāḍī Ibn Abī Duwād (237/851-2).⁷² He appointed a personal friend al-Faṭḥ b. Khākān as a new minister who was also a friend of al-Jāhiz.⁷³

Several other abrupt changes were introduced under al-Mutawakkil. He abandoned the 'Abbāsid Mu'tazilite policy thus ending the *miḥna*. Adherence to the Ḥanbalīs and other traditionalists was stressed as the Caliph appointed a new Qāḍī Yahya b. Aktham.⁷⁴ A decree forbidding polemics between various Muslim sects and the discussion of the traditional articles of faith was enacted essentially condemning dogmatic theology (*kalām*).⁷⁵ Political measures were taken against the Shī'ites who were seen as a threat to the 'Abbāsids as their intention was to erect a rival dynasty.⁷⁶ Finally, he set discriminatory policies against the Christians and the Jews.

The policies against the People of the Book are of interest here as they set the stage for further polemics and the place of al-Jāhiz in the campaign against Christians

⁷⁰ Matthias Zahniser. "Insights from the 'Uthmāniyya of al-Jāhiz into the religious Policy of al Ma'mūn," *Muslim World* 69, (1979), 8-9. More will be said about the works of al-Jāhiz later in this thesis.

⁷¹ Hugh Kennedy, "al-Mutawakkil 'Alā 'Ilāh," *The Encyclopaedia of Islam New Ed. Vol. 7*. C.E. Bosworth et al eds. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995) 777.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*, 169.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ D. Sourdel, "The 'Abbāsid caliphate," in *The Cambridge History of Islam: The Central Islamic Lands Vol. I*. P.M Holt. et al eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 126.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 127.

and Jews. Finkel mentioned that the Christians were active and influential having inherited the intellectual traditions and the commercial and industrial methods of the Greeks.⁷⁷ Christians were employed as physicians, scribes and in other high positions and came under increasing suspicion and jealousy with Byzantine raids into Muslim lands. They, thus, became a potential problem for the state.⁷⁸ Al-Mutawakkil responded by reviving the injunction of 'Umar and launching a literary campaign against them. He undertook to limit the influence of Christians and Jews in his government by introducing harsh measures. Lewis quotes a document of the time (235/850):

It has become known to the Commander of the Faithful that men without judgment or discernment are seeking the help of the dhimmis in their work, adopting them as confidants in preference to Muslims, and giving them authority over the [Muslim] subjects. And they oppress them and stretch out their hands against them in tyranny, deceit, and enmity. The Commander of the faithful, attaching great importance to this, has condemned it and disavowed it. Wishing to find favour with God by preventing and forbidding this, he has decided to write to his officers in the provinces and the cities and to the governors of the frontier towns and districts that they should cease to employ dhimmis in any of their work and affairs or to adopt them as associates in the trust and authority conferred on them by the Commander of the faithful and committed to their charge...⁷⁹

This shift in the status of the *dhimmīs* under al-Mutawakkil was not just limited to their positions within government, but extended into the practise of the *dhimmi* religions, particularly Christianity. Again Lewis writes that the Caliph:

gave orders that the Christians and the dhimmis in general be required to wear honey-colored hoods and girdles; to ride on saddles with wooden stirrups and two balls attached to the rear; to attach buttons to the caps of those who wear them and to wear caps of different color from those worn by Muslims; to attach two patches to the slaves' clothing, of a different color from that of the garment to which they are attached, one in front on the chest, the other at the back, each patch four fingers in length, and both

⁷⁷ Finkel. "A Risāla of Al-Jāhiz," 319.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Bernard Lewis. *The Jews of Islam*. (London: Routledge, 1984), 47-48.

of them honey-colored. Those of them who wore turbans were to wear honey-colored turbans. If their women went out and appeared in public, they were only to appear with honey-colored headscarfs. He gave orders that their slaves were to wear girdles and he forbade them to wear belts. He gave orders to destroy any churches which were newly built, and to take the tenth part of their houses. If the place was large enough it was to be made into a mosque; if it was not suitable for a mosque it was to be made into an open space. He ordered that wooden images of devils should be nailed to the doors of their houses to distinguish them from the houses of Muslims.⁸⁰

There is little evidence of any violent persecution of non-Muslims under al-Mutawakkil nor is it known how far or how long these restrictions were enforced. Sourdél commented that al-Mutawakkil

...issued decrees designated to ensure the strict application to Christians and Jews of the discriminatory status which was imposed on them by Muslim society but often disregarded. They were forbidden in particular to hold office under the administration, or to send their children to schools where they would learn Arabic, the object being to keep Christians and Jews strictly segregated from Muslims, while at the same time guaranteeing to them the liberties which they had enjoyed since the early days of Islam.⁸¹

It was in this atmosphere that al-Jāhīz and others were encouraged and some commissioned to write works against the Christians and the Jews. Such writing was not new under al-Mutawakkil, but rather a continuation of previous Muslim-Christian interaction. Before examining the development of this interaction, it is important to pause and look at the Christian communities of the time of al-Mutawakkil.

A survey of the Christian communities under the 'Abbāsids

The nature and identity of the Christian communities under the 'Abbāsids whom al-Jāhīz and others attempted to refute, originated well before the 'Abbāsids and indeed

⁸⁰ Ibid., 49. See also M. Perlmann, "Ghiyār," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam New Ed. Vol 2*. Bernard Lewis et al eds. (Leiden: Brill, 1965), 1075-1076. *Ghiyār* denotes the compulsory distinctive mark in the dress of the *dhimmi* under Muslim rule which can be traced back to Mutawakkil's enactments in 233/849.

⁸¹ Sourdél, 127.

before the advent of Islam. The development of the Church in the Middle East is a complex mixture of doctrinal controversy, politics, economics, ethnic, and cultural differences. This is not the place for an in depth examination of Church history, but in order to understand Muslim-Christian polemic it is necessary to provide an historical sketch of the various Christian groups that were present during the time of al-Jāhiz.⁸²

The divisions or schisms within Eastern and Western Christianity really began in the fifth century over the question of the relation of Christ's humanity to his divinity.⁸³ The Patriarch of Constantinople, Nestorius, supported a distinction between the divine and human natures of Christ to the point of undermining their unity in contrast to the Nicene Creed.⁸⁴

The "Nestorians" were interested in the earthly life of Christ and in his human relations as a model for Christian living. They objected to such phrases as "God dies," "God was born," and the "Mother of God"; they considered these terms blasphemous, confusing creator and creature.⁸⁵

The Third Ecumenical Council at Ephesus in 431 A.D., condemned the Nestorian doctrine as heretical. Adherents to his doctrine were forced to move east into north western Persia where the majority of Nestorian Christians who lived in Sasānian territories were converts from Zoroastrianism and thus were Persians and not of Syrian or

⁸² For more a more detailed examination of the Churches in the East, see John Joseph. *Muslim-Christian Relations and Inter-Christian Rivalries in the Middle East: The Case of the Jacobites in an Age of Transition*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983); John Joseph. *The Nestorians and their Muslim Neighbors: A Study of Western influence on their Relations*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961).

⁸³ Joseph. *Muslim-Christian Relations*., 3.

⁸⁴ Youssef Courbage & Philippe Fargues. *Christians and Jews under Islam*. trans. Judy Mabro (London: I.B. Tavis Publishers, 1992), 4.

⁸⁵ Joseph. *Muslim-Christian Relations*., 4.

Semitic origin.⁸⁶ The term “Nestorian” (*Naṣṭūrīyūn*) was adopted by the Muslims when referring to the Christians east of Syria and in Persia.⁸⁷

Under the ‘Abbāsids, the Nestorians enjoyed a favoured position. There are a variety of reasons for this favour, one of which was that the Nestorians unlike the other Christian groups were not tied to an external political authority.⁸⁸ In addition, political support for the ‘Abbāsīd regime was centred in the East and Persian elements were favoured by the Caliphs. The Nestorians moved their Patriarchate from Seleucia-Ctesiphon to Baghdad near the end of the eighth century and enjoyed wide influence.⁸⁹ Caliph al-Manṣūr employed the Nestorian Georgis bar Bokhisho as his official personal physician and succeeding Caliphs kept members of this Nestorian family as their physicians.⁹⁰ The Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I maintained access to the court and even engaged in discussions over religious differences with Caliph al-Mahdī.

At times civil authority over all Christians in the ‘Abbāsīd empire were given to him [the Nestorian Patriarch]. In a charter granted to the newly appointed Nestorian patriarch, the latter was empowered to act as head of the Nestorian Christians and the representative also of the Greeks, Jacobites, and Melkites in the Muslim lands.⁹¹

Around the time of the Church controversy with the Nestorian doctrine, the Egyptian school at Alexandria was emphasising the divinity of Christ at the expense of his humanity. Adherents to this position became known as Monophysites and the controversy led to the Fourth Ecumenical Council at Chalcedon in A.D. 451. The Monophysite position, like the Nestorian doctrine before it, was condemned as

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Joseph. *The Nestorians*., 4.

⁸⁸ Seppo Rissanen. *Theological Encounter of Oriental Christians with Islam During Early ‘Abbāsīd Rule*. (ABO, Finland: ABO Akademi University, 1993), 41.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 42.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Joseph. *The Nestorians*., 27.

heretical.⁹² However, the Monophysites remained powerful and influential which proved potentially dangerous to the Byzantines. Unlike the Nestorians who were generally geographical removed from Byzantium in Persia, the Monophysites remained strong in Syria and in Egypt. By the early seventh century, the Syrian Monophysites became known as Jacobites after Jacob Baradaïos (500-578 A.D.) who organised an independent Monophysite Syrian church.⁹³

The Jacobite church maintained an early association with the Arab tribes and thus, later, with the rise of Islam. The Christian Arab Ghassānids had established themselves as a pro-Byzantine and anti-Persian buffer state in Syria and the Banū Ghassān tribe became adherents to the Monophysites of Syria later known as the Jacobites.⁹⁴ The association was strong such that:

The Jacobite bishop of Hīra, capitol of the Lakhmid state, was called ‘bishop of Arabs,’ referring to those portions of the tribes, such as Tanūkh, Tayy, ‘Aqūla and Taghlib, who remained Christian.⁹⁵

Al-Jāhīz mentions these Arab tribes in his letter as a reason for the high respect Arabs had for the Christians.⁹⁶ The last Christian Arab tribe, the Banū Tanūkh, became Muslim around A.D. 780. The Jacobite church maintained a level of influence with the Muslim conquerors probably because like the Nestorians, they were seen as anti-Byzantine.

Under the Umayyads, the patriarch of the Jacobite Syrians became ‘one of the most influential leaders in Syria.’ The reason for the preferential treatment extended to the non-Chalcedonian Christians was more than

⁹² Joseph. *Muslim-Christian Relations*. 5. “The Declaration of Chalcedon stressed that Christ, in order to be saviour of humanity, had to be both man and God; he was “one person in Two Natures; he existed not only as One person resulting in two Natures,” but “in two Natures.” The famous definition read that the two natures were unmixed and unchanged, undivided and unseparated, since the distinction of the natures is by no means destroyed in the union; the quality of each nature is preserved and both are united in one person and one hypostasis.”

⁹³ Rissanen., 39

⁹⁴ Joseph. *Muslim-Christian Relations*. 6.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 7.

⁹⁶ See translation of letter, lines 93-120.

political; self-interest dictated it: these non-Muslim citizens were useful to the new conquerors as artisans, merchants, tax collectors, scholars, and physicians. A century later, under the Abbasids, it was the more numerous Nestorians who were favored over the other Christian sects.⁹⁷

The final group of Christians that emerged were known as Melkites.⁹⁸ The traditional definition of this group were Christians of Syria and Egypt who refused Monophysitism and by accepting the faith of the Council of Chalcedon remained in communion with the Imperial see of Constantinople.⁹⁹ Thus, considered as “Emperor’s men”, they became known as Melkites derived from the Arabic (*malik*).¹⁰⁰ Sometimes the Melkites were known as Chalcedonians referring to the Christological definition of that Council or as Maximinians after the monothetism of Maximus Confessor (580-662 AD).¹⁰¹ However, Griffith in a recent article argues that such definitions are inaccurate and incomplete.¹⁰² He notes that the term ‘Melkite’ first came into use in the east to designate an identifiable, socio-ecclesial group not simply as ‘Chalcedon’ but as anti-Jacobite and anti-Monophysite in theology. He supports this assertion by discussing the origins and use of the term by anti-Melkite writers such as the Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I and the Jacobite Ḥabīb ibn Khidma Abū Rā’īṭa. In any case, the ‘Abbāsids knew them as Melkites.

The Arab conquests deeply affected the Melkites as three of their four patriarchates fell under Arab control. Alexandria and Antioch were centres of theological work and Jerusalem was the symbol of Christian unity through pilgrimage. The

⁹⁷ Joseph. *Muslim-Christian Relations*. 10.

⁹⁸ Today, Melkites refer to Christians who broke from Greek orthodoxy to become Catholics in the 18th century. Thus Melkite no longer refers to the Greek Orthodox Church as it did during the ‘Abbāsid period. “Melkite” is used in this thesis to refer to the ‘Abbāsid period definition.

⁹⁹ Sidney H. Griffith, “‘Melkites’, ‘Jacobites’ and the Christological Controversies in Arabic in Third/Ninth Century Syria,” in *Syrian Christians under Islam*. ed. David Thomas (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 11.

¹⁰⁰ Rissanen, 37.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 36.

¹⁰² Griffith “‘Melkites’,” 11, 12.

monastery near Jerusalem, the *Lavra of Mar Saba*, remained an important centre for Melkite thought.¹⁰³ John of Damascus and Theodore Abū Qurrah belonged to this monastery and history has shown their importance to Christian thinking and apologetic.¹⁰⁴ The relationship of the Melkites to the Emperor in Byzantium needed revision under Muslim rule. Abū Qurrah argued against the Emperor's position to summon councils as non-Melkites had argued and went on to support religious autonomy from the Emperor perhaps in the hope that the Caliphs would leave the churches free from political attempts to enforce religious ideas.¹⁰⁵ In addition, of all the Christian churches, the Melkites were the first to adopt Arabic for liturgical use. Griffith writes:

By the end of the first half of the second/eighth century these 'Melkites' of the Islamic world were well on the way to the achievement of a communal identity of their own, an identity which was on the one hand signified by their early adoption of the Arabic language, and on the other hand highlighted in their expression of their religious ideas in Arabic by a distinctive theological discourse which was in many ways conditioned and shaped by the confessional vocabulary of Islam.¹⁰⁶

The Melkites were concerned with two theological challenges, the defence of Christian faith against Islam and the articulation in Arabic of the distinctive Christological position that set them apart from the other Christian churches (Jacobite and Nestorian) in the Islamic world. While they professed the conciliar faith of Byzantine orthodoxy, their culture and language set them squarely within the world of Islam. Griffith again adds:

... their religious identity came into full focus in the course of their controversies with Muslims on the one hand, and on the other with their Christian adversaries, in particular the Jacobites and Nestorians.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ Rissanen., 37.

¹⁰⁴ See Sidney Griffith. "Faith and Reason in Christian Kalām: Theodore Abū Qurrah on discerning the true religion," in *Christian Arabic Apologetics during the Abbasid Period (750-1258)*. Samir Khalil Samir & Jorgen Nielsen eds. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), 1-43.

¹⁰⁵ Rissanen., 38.

¹⁰⁶ Griffith "'Melkites'," 16.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 9.

Much more could be said regarding the Nestorians, Monophysites (Jacobites) and Melkites under ‘Abbāsid rule, but in summation during the time of al-Jāḥiẓ, the Nestorians were favoured and influential, but Melkites, Jacobites and Nestorians are all referred to his in treatise.¹⁰⁸ Previous refutations against all three groups had been already skilfully undertaken by his contemporary Abū ‘Īsā al-Warrāq who al-Jāḥiẓ most likely had read.¹⁰⁹

After having looked at the rise of the ‘Abbāsid regime in particular under al-Mutawakkil, the impact of the translation movement and the Christian churches in the East, attention now will be turned to survey the history of Muslim-Christian debates and polemics before commencing a study on the life and works of al-Jāḥiẓ.

Early Muslim-Christian debates and polemic

It is impossible here to provide a detailed history of Muslim-Christian interaction for that would exceed the purpose of this study. Instead, in order to place the work of al-Jāḥiẓ within the stream of Muslim-Christian polemic, a brief introduction will be made followed by a summary of the stages of the development of polemic and debate through to the fourteenth century as provided by Waardenburg.¹¹⁰

The history of Muslim-Christian interaction is varied displaying at times enmity, rivalry and competition, mutual influence, co-operation and collaboration and a host of attitudes and relationships. It has not always been polemical and caustic. Ibn Ishāq (d. 150/767) in his biography of Muḥammad indicates that after the experience in the cave on Mount Ḥirā (610), it was a Christian, Waraqa ibn Nawfal, who reassured Muḥammad

¹⁰⁸ See Translation, lines 237-247.

¹⁰⁹ David Thomas. *Anti-Christian polemic in early Islam Abū ‘Īsā al-Warrāq’s “Against the Trinity”*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 10-11.

¹¹⁰ Jacques Waardenburg. “The Medieval Period,” 18-69.

that it was a genuine call.¹¹¹ The story of the Christian monk Baḥīrā's encounter with Muḥammad is also seen as an affirmation for his prophethood.¹¹² Whether or not these stories are historically accurate, it does show a positive attitude toward Christians within nascent Islam.¹¹³ The first emigrants who left Mecca (615 A.D.) found refuge in the Christian kingdom of Abyssinia. Guillaume in his translation of the *Life of Muhammad* repeats the story of a Christian delegation from the town of *Najrān* (Yemen) that came to negotiate a treaty with Muḥammad.¹¹⁴ After discussions, which included politics and theology, the Muslims and Christians agreed to differ. A political agreement was reached in which Christians would continue to practice their faith in return for recognising Muḥammad's political authority over them and pay him taxes. As Islam developed after the death of Muḥammad, 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, the second caliph, issued a decree that Christians must leave Arabia and Jews from the Hijaz.¹¹⁵ The so-called Covenant or Pact of 'Umar, which was likely dated back to him by later Caliphs,¹¹⁶ guaranteed Christians and Jews their lives, their property and permitted them to worship freely, but covertly in

¹¹¹ Hugh Goddard, "Christian-Muslim Relations: a look backwards and a look forward," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* Vol. 11 No. 2 (July 2000), 195.

¹¹² The story of Baḥīrā is rather interesting because there are Christian and Muslim versions. The Muslim version sees the monk acknowledge the prophethood of Muḥammad whereas the Christian version sees that Muḥammad did not receive his message from God, but from a monk who tried to convert the Arabs to the worship of one God. Both of these versions were used for apologetic purposes for and against Muḥammad being a prophet. For a detailed inquiry see Barbara Roggema, "A Christian Reading of the Qur'ān: The Legend of Sergius- Baḥīrā and its use of Qur'ān and Sira," in David Thomas, ed. *Syrian Christians under Islam: the First Thousand Years*. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 200), 57-73.

¹¹³ Jane Dammen McAuliffe. *Qur'ānic Christians: an Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). The presentation of true Christians in the Qur'ān is foreign to the view Christians hold of themselves because the Qur'ānic view sees true Christians as those who accept Muḥammad as prophet.

¹¹⁴ A. Guillaume. *The Life of Muhammad*. (Oxford: University Press, 1955), 270-7.

¹¹⁵ Goddard, "Christian-Muslim Relations," 197.

¹¹⁶ See Tritton, A.S. *The Caliphs and their non-Muslim Subjects: A Critical Study of the Covenant of 'Umar*. (London: Frank Cass & Co. LTD., 1930).

return for the payment of the *jizya*.¹¹⁷ It was perhaps inevitable that confrontation would occur and this is seen in the Qur'ān.

Disagreements between Muslims and Christians began during the Medinan period when Muḥammad was confronted by Christian Arab tribes opposed to his expansion into Northwestern Arabia.¹¹⁸ The main accusations in the Qur'ān against the Christians are that they attribute to God a son;¹¹⁹ they consider Jesus as God;¹²⁰ and they venerate priests and other beings beside God¹²¹ and therefore are not true monotheists. One of the earliest records of Muslim-Christian interaction was the Dialogue of the Patriarch John I with 'Amr al-'As (639 A.D.).¹²² The discussion was not overtly apologetic, as each party knew little of the other's scripture.

During the Umayyad period, it was the Christians in Damascus who seem to have initiated confrontation and debate with the Muslims. As Waardenburg mentions, the reasons for Christian opposition is not difficult to see for it was a combination of self defence and the desire to maintain their cultural superiority.¹²³ At first, the Christians viewed Islam as a heresy and attempted to refute Muslims on elements of doctrine, law and ethics. Questions such as the Muslim position on the Word of God, the nature of revelation and prophecy, the unity of God, and the destiny of man and salvation were

¹¹⁷ Goddard, "Christian-Muslim Relations," 197.

¹¹⁸ Waardenburg, "The Medieval Period," 41.

¹¹⁹ Qur'ān 4:171; 9:30-31

¹²⁰ Qur'ān 5:17

¹²¹ Qur'ān 9:31

¹²² F. Nau "Un Colloque du Patriarche Jean avec l'émir des Agaréens et Faits Divers des années 712 à 716," *Journal Asiatique* (1915), 225-279 partially reprinted in N.A. Newman ed. *Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue*. (Hatfield: Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute, 1993), 7-46.

¹²³ Waardenburg, "The Medieval Period," 41.

asked of the Muslims.¹²⁴ Thereafter ensued the development of polemics and debate in the ‘Abbāsid period and the appearance of the work of al-Jāhiz.

As with theology, law, philosophy and Islamic civilisation, polemics developed over centuries and Waardenburg conveniently divides this development into four stages leading to the medieval period.¹²⁵ These really are broad categories designed only to provide a means to grasp the general flow of the maturing polemic between Muslims and Christians.

The first stage, lasting until the mid eighth century, saw Christians exert pressure upon the Muslims in three ways, socio-politically, culturally and religiously.¹²⁶ Politically, the early Muslim regimes maintained the pre-existing tax and administrative structures providing primarily Christians with position and power. Privileges granted to various Christian communities through treaties allowed a certain level of autonomy from the Muslims and generally the structures that were in place before Islam remained.

Cultural pressure revolved around access to and use of the Hellenistic and the Syriac cultural and intellectual past. This was seen in the sciences, medicine and philosophy. As was noted earlier, the translation movement was a successful attempt at appropriating this knowledge for Muslim use, but this was undertaken some years later by the ‘Abbāsids.

Religious pressures forced the Muslims to find answers to the questions the Christians asked. There was a need for Muslims to define themselves religiously and socio-politically in relation not just to Christians and other non-Muslims, but also amongst themselves. During the Umayyad period (661-750), the main issues of the

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 42-45.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 42.

Muslim-Christian debate were established. Muslims rejected the Trinity and accepted Qur'ānic Christology,¹²⁷ which meant no incarnation, no crucifixion and no resurrection in marked contrast to Christian faith. As for documents in the Umayyad period, there is the correspondence between the Caliph 'Umar II and the Byzantine Emperor Leo III (719/20 A.D.).¹²⁸ These seem to have been a series of letters in which 'Umar II encouraged Leo III to accept Islam while the latter refuted Islam. In addition, there is the more famous work, *Heresies*, written by John of Damascus (c. 730 A.D.) for Christians in which he examined the Umayyad period as a forerunner to the Anti-Christ.¹²⁹

Polemic literature, although begun in the Umayyad period, really developed under the 'Abbāsīd dynasty particularly in the middle of the ninth century. This second period (mid eighth to ninth century) is characterised by an increasing use of philosophy, Aristotelian logic and metaphysics. The Mu'tazilite movement had adapted this use of logic for a defence of Islamic doctrines.¹³⁰

In this second stage, it was the Muslims who took the initiative in disputative discourse. Waardenburg outlines this period like the first stage with an examination on three levels.¹³¹ First, socio-politically, the Muslims were challenging the Manichean and Iranian socio-political influence particularly as the 'Abbāsīds sought legitimacy for their rule. The downfall of the wealthy and influential Barmakid family under the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd in 803 reduced Iranian influence while showing political power rested with the

¹²⁷ Abdiyah Ahdul Akbar. *Christologies in early Christian thought and the Qur'ān*. Diss. (Illinois: Northwestern University, Evanston, 1953).

¹²⁸ A. Jeffery. "Ghevond's text of the Correspondence Between 'Umar II and Leo III," *Harvard Theological Review*, no. 37 (1944), 269-322 reprinted in N.A. Newman ed. *Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue*. (Hatfield: Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute, 1993), 57-132. See also Jean-Marie Gaudeul. "The Correspondence between Leo 'Umar," *Islamochristiana* No. 10 (1984), 109-157.

¹²⁹ John W. Voorhis. "John of Damascus on the Muslim Heresy," *Muslim World* 24 (1934), 391-398. Daniel J. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam*. (Leiden: Brill, 1972).

¹³⁰ Waardenburg, "The Medieval period," 43.

¹³¹ Ibid.

caliph.¹³² Al-Mutawakkil developed policies against the Christians to counter their prosperity, social and cultural influence even reviving and back dating the Edict of ‘Umar which sought to regulate the position of religious minorities in a discriminatory way. Al-Jāhiz reflects this perspective in his treatise with his portrayal of Christians as a social evil.

Secondly, on the cultural level, Islam still faced a culturally dominant Christianity, but this divide was rapidly disappearing as Muslims became more proficient in philosophy and the sciences, and as the number of converts to Islam increased from the Christian communities. During this period, the Arabs, with ethnic and linguistic pride, saw a growth and flowering of literature as well as *tafsīr* (Qur’ānic exegesis), *‘ilm al-Ḥadīth* (science of tradition), *fiqh* (jurisprudence), and *kalām* (scholastic theology).¹³³

Lastly, on the religious level, there was an increase in polemic, which mainly used philosophical-dialectic arguments. The first ‘Abbāsīd century saw the development of *‘ilm al-Kalām* which is defined by Griffith as:

The intellectual discipline that is devoted to the reasoned justification of the truths of the divine revelation and to the exploration of the implications of revealed truth for human thought in general.¹³⁴

Muslim practitioners of *kalām* (*mutakallimūn*) were at first interested in apologetics and polemics, but with the translation into Arabic of works of Greek logic and philosophy developed the science of *kalām* into an intellectual discipline on the basis of grammarians and grammatical theorists.¹³⁵ In contrast, *kalām* for Christian *mutakallimūn* was a method of intellectually defending the credibility of Christian doctrines in response to Muslim

¹³² Hodgson. 295.

¹³³ Waardenburg, “The Medieval Period,” 43.

¹³⁴ Griffith “Faith and Reason,” 1.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 2.

challenges.¹³⁶ Griffith continues, “The topical outlines of all the early Christian tracts in Arabic clearly show that the religious concerns of Muslims set the agenda.”¹³⁷ Topics for disputation revolved around the Qur’ānic injunctions regarding the Trinity and Christology, but secondary topics included issues of Christian life and practice such as the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist, the integrity of the Holy Scriptures, and the veneration of icons to name a few. So as Islamic *kalām* was maturing, Christian *mutakallimūn* were using forms of *kalām* to give an account of Christian doctrines, faith and practices in terms and methods appropriate to Muslim *kalām*.

In this milieu Christian religious thinkers found an opportunity for a development of doctrine that went beyond the initially apologetic mode in which it was rooted. Christian *mutakallimūn* actually adopted a way of presenting the traditional teachings of the Church in an Arabic idiom conditioned by the Islamic frame of reference in the midst of which they lived. In other words, Christian *kalām* was an exercise in what modern day commentators might call ‘inculturation’, a process in which the doctrinal development consisted in the exploration of new dimensions of Christian truth, when that truth was considered from a hitherto unavailable or unexplored frame of reference.¹³⁸

Perhaps the best example of the Christian use of *kalām* was by the Melkite Theodore Abū Qurrah. There is some argument that the Syrian encounter between Muslim and Christian theologians provided strong incentive for the development of Islamic thought with an apologetic tendency.¹³⁹

The development of Muslim-Christian apologetic and polemic during the early ‘Abbāsīd period was a combination of interrelated needs created within the respective

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 3.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 5.

¹³⁹ Waardenburg, 63. See C.H. Becker, “Christliche Polemik und islamische Dogmenbildung,” in his *Islamstudien*, Vol I (Leipzig: Quelle & Myer, 1924), 432-449. Becker was one of the first to draw connections of the development of Islamic theology and the questions raised by Christian Theologians. For the origins of *kalām* see also Armand Abel, “La polémique damascénienne et son influence sur les origines de la théologie musulmane,” in *L’Elaboration de l’Islam, Colloque de Strasbourg* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1960), 61-86.

religions as each sought to clarify doctrine and practice internally. These needs simultaneously emerged as each faith intellectually and religiously challenged the other. To adequately trace the growth and use of polemic is to watch the growth and development of a relationship using various means of interchange, one of which was disputation. Waardenburg writes:

There was a close connection between the intra-Muslim polemic against heresies and the polemic against other religions. Christians, for instance, were often compared with particular heretics within Islam like the Murji'ites and the Rāfidites, just as these Muslim groups could be attacked for having "Christianizing" tendencies.¹⁴⁰

Al-Jāhīz himself in his treatise compares Jews to the Rāfidites and the Jabriyah.¹⁴¹

There were numerous polemic exchanges between Muslims and Christians.

Among the classic Christian responses were the interchange between the Christian al-Kindī and the Muslim al-Hāshimī (215/830)¹⁴² and the discussions between the Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I and the Caliph Al-Mahdī.¹⁴³ From the Muslim side, there was Abū Yūsuf al-Kindī's (d. 250/864) work *Radd 'alā al-Naṣārā*.¹⁴⁴ Later, there was the work by the Shī'ite canonical author Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. 'Alī ibn Bābawayh al-Qummī (d. 381/991) who included two chapters on the relationship between Islam and Christianity in his *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*.¹⁴⁵ His methodology appealed to the authoritative statements of

¹⁴⁰ Waardenburg, "The Medieval Period," 43.

¹⁴¹ W.M. Montgomery. "DJABRIYYA," *The Encyclopaedia of Islam New Ed. Vol. 2*. Bernard Lewis et al eds. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1965) 365. Jabriyah was a name given by opponents to those whom they alleged held the doctrine of jabr, "compulsion," which saw that man does not act but only God.

¹⁴² Anton Tien. *Risālat 'Abd Allāh b. Ismā'il ilā 'Abd al-Masīh b. Ishāq al-Kindī wa-risālat al-Kindī ilā 'l-Hashimī*. (London, 1880, 1885, 1912 and Cairo, 1895, 1912). William Muir. *The Apology of al-Kindy, written at the court of al-Ma'mūn (circa. A.H. 215; A.D. 830), in Defense of Christianity against Islam*. (London: SPCK, 1882; 2nd ed. 1887) reprinted in N.A. Newman ed. *Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue*. (Hatfield: Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute, 1993), 365-545.

¹⁴³ See Goddard, "Christian-Muslim Relations," 196.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 32.

¹⁴⁵ Thomas, David. "Two Muslim-Christian debates from the early Shī'ite tradition," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 33 (1988), 53-65.

the Shi'ite Imāms and differed from his Sunnī contemporaries who appealed to rigorous reasoning. A number of other Muslim writers produced similar works such as Abū al-Qāsim 'Abdallāh b. Aḥmad al-Balkhī known as al-Ka'bī (d. 319/931) who included refutations in his *Awā'il al-Adilla fī Uṣūl al-Dīn*¹⁴⁶ and Abū 'Alī Muḥammad b. Abd al-Wahhāb al-Jubbā'i (d. 303/915-16) whose refutation was quoted by Abū al-Ḥasan b. Muḥammad 'Abd al-Jabbār (d. 1025).¹⁴⁷ The works of Abu 'Isā al-Warrāq¹⁴⁸ focussed on refuting the Trinity and the Christian communities of the Melkites, Jacobites and Nestorians while 'Alī b. Rabban al-Ṭabarī a Muslim convert from Christianity wrote *Radd 'alā al-Naṣārā* and his more popular *Kitāb al-Dīn wa al-Dawla* dealing with the validity of the Prophethood of Muḥammad from the Christian Scriptures.¹⁴⁹ There are many other writers who are not listed here,¹⁵⁰ but the purpose in mentioning these Muslim polemical works is to show that al-Jāḥiẓ was not alone in his refutation. The distinguishing feature of his work was not in its uniqueness for many writers produced refutations, but it was in his style and method for he provided a picture of the early social context in which Muslim-Christian encounters took place.

By the time of Abū 'Isā al-Warrāq and al-Jāḥiẓ, anti Christian polemic had become an integral part of theological discourse in Islam.¹⁵¹ The majority of theologians writing during the early 'Abbāsīd period participated in debates or wrote works dealing

¹⁴⁶ Thomas. *Anti-Christian Polemic.*, 41.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 38

¹⁴⁸ For the first part of al-Warrāq's work on the Melkites, Jacobites and Nestorians see Thomas. *Anti-Christian Polemic.*; for the second part on the Trinity see Able, A., *Le Livre pour la réfutation des trois sectes chrétiennes.* (Brussels, 1949).

¹⁴⁹ See 'Alī ibn Rabban al-Ṭabarī. *The Book of Religion and Empire: A Semi-Official Defence and Exposition of Islam written by Order at the Court and with the Assistance of the Caliph Mutawakkil (AD 847-861)* translated by A. Mingana (Manchester: The University Press, 1922).

¹⁵⁰ For a more comprehensive account see Thomas. *Anti-Christian Polemic.*, 31-50 and Hoddard, *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations*, 50-74.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 31.

with Christians. However, the Mu'tazilites found themselves in a difficult position because the very intellectual tools they employed to combat Christians led them to conclusions about Muslim doctrine the wider community would not accept.¹⁵²

Aristotelian logic was used to refute the Trinitarian divine substance and the divine nature of Jesus, but the same logic led to formulations of doctrine denying the existence of the attributes of God and the eternal character or 'uncreatedness' of the Qur'ān. From the time of al-Mahdī, *kalām* and public scholastic disputations were encouraged, but al-Mutawakkil ended this on the grounds that this was disruptive to the good order of society. "It was the public aspect of these controversies, and the high profile of non-Muslims in public disputes that aroused opposition and caused al-Mutawakkil to put an end to them."¹⁵³ This coincided with his edicts against the high social position of *dhimmīs* in public life. The official place of Mu'tazilia doctrine was ended under al-Mutawakkil and Ash'ari theology came to the fore.

The nature of polemic began to change as Muslim attitudes towards the Bible changed. Al-Jāhīz could write that the Torah and the Gospels were authentic, but this was not shared by other polemicists. Biblical texts were increasingly being used, but at the same time a kind of Muslim Biblical criticism emerged such as *naskh* (abrogation), *tahrīf* (corruption of the text) and *tawātur* (fallible transmission).¹⁵⁴ The Aristotelian logic of the Mu'tazilite *mutakallimūn* developed arguments around three issues, *naskh*, *tahrīf*, and prophethood. As the Mu'tazilites fell into disfavour, there was a shift in polemic away from *kalām*. *Tafsīrs* of the ninth and tenth centuries show increasing tendencies of

¹⁵² Waardenburg, "The Medieval Period," 43.

¹⁵³ Griffith, "Faith and Reason," 2.

¹⁵⁴ Waardenburg, "The Medieval Period," 43. *Tawātur* is not necessarily "wrong" but depends on fallible human transmitters which can produce errors.

polemics being waged through quotations of the New Testament and other Christian sources in support of Qur'ānic views.¹⁵⁵ Al-Jāhiz shows some of this tendency as he focussed on Qur'ānic views of Christ such as Jesus speaking from the cradle all the while attempting to refute Christianity on a social level.

The last two stages of polemic development, as outlined by Waardenburg, deal with periods after al-Jāhiz. In the third period, covering the tenth to twelve centuries, Muslim polemics matured into a more refined use of Jewish and Christian Scriptures as exemplified by Ibn Ḥazm (994-1064).¹⁵⁶ Ibn Ḥazm argued against the validity of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures concluding that they cannot be considered to have been revealed. On the Christian side the works of the Jacobite Yahya b. 'Adī (983-974)¹⁵⁷ were critical to the study of polemics primarily because he preserved many Muslim texts through quotation that were later lost such as by Ibn 'Isā al Warrāq and al-Kindī.¹⁵⁸

The final stage to be covered here is from the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries. Building on the previous centuries of Islamic polemic, Taqī al Dīn Aḥmad ibn Taymiyya's (d. 728/1328) *al-Jawāb as-ṣaḥiḥ li-man baddal dīn al-Masīḥ* (The correct reply to those who have changed the religion of Christ) argues that the Biblical text is a forgery in the historical sections only and that Christian exegesis is wrong with regard to the legislative aspects of the Bible which remain authentic.¹⁵⁹ The arguments used until

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 44.

¹⁵⁶ Pulcini, Theodore. *Exegesis as Polemical Discourse: Ibn Ḥazm on Jewish and Christian Scriptures*. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998). See also Āsī, Ghulām Ḥaider. *Muslim Understanding of other Religions: An Analytical Study of Ibn Ḥazm's Kitāb al-Faṣl fī al-Mīlāl wa al-Aḥwā wa al-Niḥāl*. Ph.D. diss. (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1986).

¹⁵⁷ A. Périer. *Petits traités apologétiques de Yahya Ben 'Adī: Un philosophe chrétien du Xe siècle*. (Paris, 1920).

¹⁵⁸ Waardenburg, "The Medieval Period," 43.

¹⁵⁹ Swanson, Mark N. "Ibn Taymiyya and the Kitāb al-Burhān : A Muslim Controversialist Responds to an Ninth Century Arabic Christian Apology," in *Christian-Muslim Encounters*. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad & Wadi Z. Haddad eds. (Florida: University Press of Florida, 1995), 95-107. Ibn Taymiyya. *al-Jawāb as-ṣaḥiḥ*

this period are in many ways current today as a compilation of centuries of refutations. The stages of polemic development between Muslims and Christians saw the use of proof texting scriptures to support various positions.¹⁶⁰ As the Christians learned Arabic, read the Qur'ān, wrote disputations in Arabic, and translated the Bible into Arabic, Muslims began to have access to the Bible. This knowledge on both sides led to an increased use of each other's scriptures. Finally, the introduction of *kalām* particularly through the translation movement led to more common ground in disputations and debates between the Muslims and the Christians.

Al-Jāḥiẓ by virtue of his place in history inherited the tools and knowledge of his predecessors in polemic discourse. However, he did not merely repeat the arguments of the past, nor was he primarily a theologian and a Mu'tazilite. He was above all an *Adīb* (litterateur) who wrote literature on a variety of subjects including refutations with a style that became associated with his name. It is to al-Jāḥiẓ, his life and works, that we now turn.

The life and works of al-Jāḥiẓ (160-255/776-869)

Abū 'Uthmān 'Amr B. Baḥr al-Kinānī al-Fuḡaymī al-Baṣrī al-Jāḥiẓ was born in Baṣra to an obscure family of *mawālī* who were clients of the Banū Fuḡaym, a branch of the Banū Kināna.¹⁶¹ Information concerning his family details and early life is vague and contradictory, but it seems clear that his family origins were African, possibly

li-man baddal dīn al-Masīh. Edited and translated by Thomas F. Michel, (Delmar, New York: Caravan Books, 1984).

¹⁶⁰ Wadi Haddad "A Tenth-Century Speculative Theologian's Refutation of the Basic Doctrines of Christianity: Al-Bāqillanī (d. A.D. 1013)," in *Christian-Muslim Encounters*. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad & Wadi Z. Haddad eds. (Florida: University Press of Florida, 1995), 83-84.

¹⁶¹ Pellat. *Life and Works*., 3. See also "DJĀḤIẒ," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam New Ed. Vol 2*. Bernard Lewis et al eds. (Leiden: Brill, 1965), 385.

Abyssinian, and that his ancestors had been slaves.¹⁶² Despite his *mawlā* status, Jāḥiẓ viewed himself as a member of the Arab community which he vigorously defended in his work *The Nābita: The Shu'ūbites*.¹⁶³

Jāḥiẓ seems to have inherited a swarthy complexion and his *nisba*, Jāḥiẓ, reflected his protruding or malformed eyes. By all accounts, he was unpleasant in appearance. His family background did not seem to favourably predispose him to learning and education. Pellat tenders the idea that much of Jāḥiẓ's education was accomplished through personal effort and intense curiosity.¹⁶⁴ Since he became one of the best known 'Abbāsid prose writers with a reputation to be able to write on virtually any topic, Jāḥiẓ must have received some form of education, formal or otherwise.

His early schooling was likely limited to Qur'ān school in the Banū Kināna quarter of Baṣra, which could not provide him with formal higher training.¹⁶⁵ However, the city itself would have provided a wealth of opportunity for a curious, independent young man of limited means who possessed an insatiable hunger for intellectual and factual knowledge. Indeed, the intellectual resources of his time would have been fully adequate to provide Jāḥiẓ with a broad culture.¹⁶⁶ Baṣra was a cantonment city founded by Arab conquerors about the same time as the rival city of Kūfa and was the centre of Islamic philology and the dialectical schools of the Mu'tazilia. It is not surprising that

¹⁶² Pellat. "Al-Jāḥiẓ," in *ʿAbbāsid Belles-Lettres* (The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature) edited by Julia Ashtiany et al (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 78.

¹⁶³ See Pellat. *Life and Works*., 85-86. Among the mawālī, a school of thought developed that clientship brought the same status as the tribe. Therefore, the mawālī were considered Arab because the tribe was Arab. The prophet said, "The client of a tribe is part of it" and "Clientship is kinship like natural kinship: the mawlā is not sold or given away."

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 3.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Pellat. "DJĀḤIẒ," 385.

Basra was the birthplace of Arabic prose considering that it also was a centre to collect Bedouin poems, proverbs and vocabulary. Pellat comments:

Arabs and non-Arabs, ascetics and vagrants, poets and prose writers, orthodox and Mu'tazilites, sailors and workmen, merchants and craftsmen, scholars and money-changers, bourgeoisie and aristocracy – all sorts rubbed shoulders in the Basra of the second century of the Hijra.¹⁶⁷

Like many of the idle young men of his time (*maṣjidiyyūn*), Jāḥiẓ would have been drawn to the mosque for discussions and to attend the public lectures of learned men. Here he learned philology, lexicography and poetry from scholars and philologists as Abū 'Ubaida, al-Aṣma'ī and Abū Zaid al-Anṣārī.¹⁶⁸ These scholars amassed material on ḥadīth, lexicography and ancient poetry, which became the nucleus of Arabic humanities.¹⁶⁹ All manner of topics were discussed and evidently Jāḥiẓ not only mastered the Arabic language, but was admitted into Mu'tazilite circles and other discussion groups. These groups would have engaged in discussions concerned with issues such as reconciling faith and reason, the politics of the legitimacy of the 'Abbāsid Caliphate and the social issues of the conflicts with Islamic sects and the claims of non-Arabs.

The instructive anecdotes, the commonsense arguments and the simple but logical ideas that he heard there must have helped to train his mind; they must also have opened new vistas for him and make him think afresh about accepted ideas and prejudices.¹⁷⁰

Jāḥiẓ also would go to the Mirbad, a space on the outskirts of town where caravans stopped, to observe the philological enquiries of scholars who would question the travelling Bedouin.¹⁷¹ Biographers customarily mention Jāḥiẓ learned grammar under Abū al-Ḥaṣan al-Akhfash, ḥadīth under Abū Yūsuf al-Qāḍī and others, and theology

¹⁶⁷ Pellat. *Life and Works*., 2

¹⁶⁸ Pellat. "Al-Jāḥiẓ," 78.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Pellat. *Life and Works*., 4.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

under Thumāma b. Ashras and especially Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm Sayyār al-Nazzām.¹⁷² He would not have had access to Greek translated works in Baṣra, but these he would have read in Baghdad. It was the city of Baṣra itself that provided Jāḥiẓ with the education that would serve his pen so well in the coming years.

It left its rationalist and realist imprint so clearly on him, that al-Djāḥiẓ might be considered not only one of its most eminent products of his home town, but its most complete representative, for the knowledge he subsequently acquired in Bagħdād did not modify to any noticeable degree his turn of mind as it had been formed at Baṣra; Baṣra is the continuous thread running through all his works.¹⁷³

Jāḥiẓ seemed the consummate wanderer spending his time learning and exploring the world of Baṣra. However, it is unknown aside from scant evidence and imaginative speculation as to what Jāḥiẓ actually did as a vocation before his literary career developed.¹⁷⁴ Perhaps for want of an income, Jāḥiẓ began to write. It is unknown when Jāḥiẓ moved to Baghdad, but it is there that his writing career developed. During the reign of al-Ma'mūn, Baghdad was attracting talented men, grammarians, poets and various thinkers from the provinces.¹⁷⁵ Many new ideas, issues and problems were coalescing in the city and creating opportunities from which a man like Jāḥiẓ could prosper. Aside from the Mu'tazilite theological ascendancy, the 'Abbāsids were concerned with the internal dissensions within the community, the anxiety of Arabs over the growing power of non-Arabs and the continuous battle over the Caliphate question

¹⁷² Ibid. Pellat indicates there is no reason to doubt this list.

¹⁷³ Pellat. "DJĀḤIẒ," 385.

¹⁷⁴ Pellat. *Life and Works*, 3. There are some fragmentary reports that he sold fish and received gifts from unexpected patrons while in Baṣra. Other reports exist of being a teacher with the story of al-Mutawakkil seeking a tutor for his children and rejecting al-Jāḥiẓ because of his ugliness. Pellat. "Al-Jāḥiẓ," 80. Aside from brief posts as a *Katīb* (clerk) the only precise information is that he was given substantial gratuities from various 'Abbāsīd officials for book dedications and that he was paid a pension during al-Mutawakkil's reign. Pellat. "DJĀḤIẒ," 385. Current knowledge is that al-Jāḥiẓ held no official post and neither was he engaged in regular employment.

¹⁷⁵ Pellat. "Al-Jāḥiẓ," 80.

which pitted ‘Abbāsid supporters against Shī’ites and a host of other factions, sects and groups.¹⁷⁶ It seems that needs of the ‘Abbāsid regime, the fortuitous timing of Jāḥiẓ’s early writings and his network of friends, coincided with his development as an *adīb*. The ability Jāḥiẓ possessed to write on a variety of topics in a comprehensible way drew the attention of the authorities.

Around 200 A.H. (817-8), a treatise on the imāmate seemed to be the vehicle which first launched the writing career of al-Jāḥiẓ. One of his friends from Baṣra, al-Yazīdī (who it seems also tutored Jāḥiẓ), presented him to the Caliph as one capable of writing on the imamate.¹⁷⁷ It is reported in the *Fihrist* that al-Jāḥiẓ said:

When al-Ma’mūn read my books about the imamate, he found them to be in accordance with what I had been ordered to undertake. When I went to him, after he had instructed al-Yazīdī to inspect them and to tell him about them, al-Ma’mūn said to me, “A man whose intelligence we respect and who gives information accurately has submitted a report to us about these books, with precise details about the workmanship and abundance of useful material. He said to us, “The evaluation [of the books] might have been more favorable than what [actually] appears, but when I looked into them, I saw that what I found was even better than the evaluation. Then when I examined them carefully, the investigation disclosed even more than what had appeared [at first reading], just as what [actually] appeared amounted to more than the [preliminary] evaluation. For these books, moreover, there is no need for the author or for anyone else to be present in order to explain them, for the author has combined a study of all the rights [of the caliphate, expressed] in eloquent phraseology, with the early manners of speech of the market place, of the kings, the populace, and special classes.¹⁷⁸

This is high praise indeed, but since it was reported to have come from al-Jāḥiẓ himself, it led to some suspicion. Muḥammad ibn Ishāq [al-Nadīm] questioned the truthfulness of what Jāḥiẓ wrote:

¹⁷⁶ Pellat. *Life and Works.*, 5.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibn al-Nadīm, Muḥammad ibn Ishāq, fl. 987 *The Fihrist of al-Nadīm : a tenth-century survey of Muslim culture Vol. 1.* Bayard Dodge, editor and translator. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 399.

I suppose al-Jāḥiẓ elaborated this statement, glorifying himself and honoring his composition, for how could al-Ma'mūn have spoken these words, praising the composition and commending the authorship?¹⁷⁹

Whether or not the words of Jāḥiẓ are accurate, he did go on to a highly praised literary career which afforded the opportunity to mix with leading political figures as well as continue his appetite for reading and learning.

Jāḥiẓ mixed with the affluent and educated and gained entry to lectures and discussions as well as access to books of Pahlavi and Greek translation. He also seems to have maintained a broad level of social engagement not just with the educated but also with people from his own background, artisans, seaman and others of the working classes.¹⁸⁰ In Baghdad, the Ibn Raghbān mosque was a favourite meeting place for the people of Baṣra.¹⁸¹ Here Jāḥiẓ could remain in contact with his old home and reconnect with former teachers such as al-Aṣma'ī, the Mu'tazilite Abū al-Hudhail al-'Allāf and al-Nazzām.¹⁸² Jāḥiẓ did not always make the correct choices for political friends, but the need for his writing ability seemed to preserve him.

On one such occasion, the vizier Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Malik al-Zayyāt (d. 233/847) and the chief Qāḍī Aḥmad b. Abū Du'ād came into conflict and Jāḥiẓ sided with al-Zayyāt.¹⁸³ When the vizier fell into disfavour, was arrested and tortured, Jāḥiẓ fled to Baṣra only to be brought back to Baghdad. Jāḥiẓ, despite his earlier opposition to the Qāḍī, was admitted into the Qāḍī's entourage. Evidently the Qāḍī had need of Jāḥiẓ's writing abilities and it did not hurt that Jāḥiẓ was good friends with the Qāḍī's son Muḥammad. In fact many of Jāḥiẓ's letters were addressed to his friend Muḥammad.

¹⁷⁹ *Fihrist Vol. 1*, 400.

¹⁸⁰ Pellat. "Al-Jāḥiẓ," 79.

¹⁸¹ Pellat. *Life and Works.*, 8.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

When the Qāḍī and his son fell from political favour (237/851-2), Jāḥiẓ again survived. In fact, the successor of the vizier al-Zayyāt was al-Faṭḥ b. Khāqān who protected Jāḥiẓ and probably allowed Jāḥiẓ admittance into the court of al-Mutawakkil. It seems Jāḥiẓ's independence allowed association without identification with his various patrons thereby allowing him to survive into new regimes and political environments. He survived many of the leading political figures.¹⁸⁴

While in Baghdad, Jāḥiẓ continued to learn and read especially works of his contemporaries as well as translated books. Al-Ma'mūn's translation efforts provided opportunity to study the philosophers of antiquity such as Aristotle. His Mu'tazilite theological position became more refined and mature under the supervision of such scholars as al-Nazzām and Thumāma b. Ashras.¹⁸⁵ It is reported in the *Fihrist* that Abū 'Ubayd Allāh said that Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad related that Abū al-'Abbās Muḥammad ibn Yazīd [al-Mubarrad] the grammarian said:

I never saw anyone more avaricious for learning than these three: al-Jāḥiẓ, al-Faṭḥ ibn Khāqān, and Ismā'il ibn Ishāq al-Qāḍī (the Judge). Whatever book came into the hands of al-Jāḥiẓ, he read it from start to finish, while al-Faṭḥ carried a book in his slipper and if he left the presence of al-Mutawakkil [the caliph] to urinate or pray, he took up [the book] as he walked, looking it over until he reached his destination.¹⁸⁶

Jāḥiẓ travelled little content with venturing between Baṣra and Baghdad with a short visit to Sāmarrā.¹⁸⁷ There is no indication of his ever performing the Hajj to Mecca and he eventually retired back to Baṣra in his later years.¹⁸⁸ It was likely that he left

¹⁸⁴ Pellat. "DJĀHĪZ," 385. Jāḥiẓ maintained contact and out lived such political figures as Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Malik al-Zayyat, Qāḍis al-Judat and Ahmad Abu Du'ad including his son Muḥammad, and al-Faṭḥ b. Khaqan.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 386.

¹⁸⁶ *Fihrist*. Vol 1, 398.

¹⁸⁷ Pellat. "Al-Jāḥiẓ," 81.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

Baghdad before the assassination of al-Mutawakkil (247/861).¹⁸⁹ Later he suffered from partial paralysis.¹⁹⁰ Abū ‘Ubayd Allāh again in a report to al-‘Abbās said:

I heard al-Jāḥiẓ say, “I am paralyzed on my left side, so that even if I pinch with scissors I do not feel it, whereas on my right side there is a swelling of the joints [neuritis], so that even if flies pass over it I feel the pain. I also have stress because of which my urine does not flow, but the most oppressive thing for me is ninety-six years [of age].¹⁹¹

Jāḥiẓ lived a long and literary productive life, which saw him survive caliphs and changes in political and theological policies all the while leaving behind a corpus of literary works to which we now turn.

The Works of al-Jāḥiẓ

Pellat lists some 231 authentic works of al-Jāḥiẓ.¹⁹² While this output was not unique in Arabic literature, it was remarkable considering that writing materials were expensive and paper was just coming into use.¹⁹³ Only about two dozen of his works remain intact.¹⁹⁴ Considering the decline in Mu’tazilism, it is understandable why many of Jāḥiẓ’s works ‘disappeared’. A number of the lost works were epistles and short works, which would have contained information about his doctrinal position. As it is, his works have been preserved extant such as his major manuscript *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*, in portions selected by anthologists or as merely citations in the works of others. It is probable that anthologists had access to complete texts, but reproduced only extracts

¹⁸⁹ Pellat. *Life and Works.*, 8.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ *Fihrist*. Vol 1, 399.

¹⁹² Charles Pellat, “Nouvel essai d’inventaire de l’œuvre gahizienne,” *Arabica* XXXI (1984), 117-164. This is the most comprehensive and detailed listing of the works of al-Jāḥiẓ.

¹⁹³ Lewis. *The Middle East.*, 267. The introduction of paper into the Islamic world is traditionally dated from 751A.D. with the capture of two Chinese paper makers.

¹⁹⁴ Pellat. “Al-Jāḥiẓ,” 81.

suggesting the style of al-Jāḥiẓ was perhaps more interesting than his content.¹⁹⁵ Indeed, it is the Jāḥiẓian style which has long been held up as an example of excellence in *Adab*.¹⁹⁶

The task of constructing a chronological order for his writings is rather difficult because so few of his works remain. Thus, there is little opportunity to trace the development of Jāḥiẓ's thought by observing when his works were composed and in what order. Any attempt at a reconstruction of his literary corpus is at best speculation. Despite this, Pellat supports the belief that Jāḥiẓ wrote the vast majority of his works in Baghdad in the first half of the third century A.H.¹⁹⁷ There is no reason to doubt this claim for much of his existing works reflect the contemporary preoccupations of the politics of the period.

Much has been said about the style of Jāḥiẓ's writings and Finkel summarised this style as "... the ability to write anything about everything, and be affected by nothing".¹⁹⁸ Finkel labeled this as the "Jāḥiẓian idea". Traditionally, *Adab*, according to Hodgson, required a 'comprehensive synthesis of all high culture' combined with a complete mastery of Arabic and a bit of knowledge about everything of interest to the curious.¹⁹⁹ The *Adīb* would need to be fluent with a variety of Islamic sciences, natural sciences, poetry, history and geography and anything else that would prove useful. Jāḥiẓ seems to have possessed such knowledge and qualities but added a certain detachment that removed him personally from his writing. His ability included writing with vigour and passion for the demands of the occasion and later as the demands changed so would his

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Hodgson, 466-468 provides a concise summary of the works and style of al-Jāḥiẓ.

¹⁹⁷ Pellat, *Life and Works*, 10.

¹⁹⁸ Finkel, "A Risāla of Al-Jāḥiẓ," 314-15.

¹⁹⁹ Hodgson, 452-453.

opinions. Finkel goes as far as writing that, “Jāḥiẓ was a man devoid of principles and ideals who was essentially a skeptic.”²⁰⁰ This seems overly harsh and perhaps even a gross exaggeration for Adab appears to have been associated with virtue and Islamic concepts of ethics.²⁰¹ Ibn Kunāsah (741-823), a scholar of ḥadīth, wrote a poem which began: “He who studies *adab* but does not act on it and fails to control his passions is no *adīb*.”²⁰² Jāḥiẓ was a master of *adab* and is generally credited with being the originator of this genre. Works of Adab were usually miscellanies, even encyclopaedic in nature with didactic aims presented non-technically and thus readily accessible to the average reader. Jāḥiẓ employed a variety of styles of expression including stating ideas indirectly by hinting at the existence of possibilities. It was perhaps this ability to question, mock, ridicule, oppose indirectly and subtly that enabled him to survive so long. For example, if he wished to introduce ideas that would conflict with conventional belief, he would make no personal comment, but would simply present these unconventional ideas as those of others.²⁰³ Under al-Ma’mūn, Mu’tazilite ideas were encouraged as state policy and Jāḥiẓ would have enjoyed freedom to express his theological beliefs and concepts without restraint. However, under al-Mutawakkil when the Mu’tazilites were out of favour, Jāḥiẓ needed to couch his ideas by employing awkwardness of style, ambiguity, and digressions²⁰⁴ to obscure ideas yet allowing enough to be visible for his readers to grasp hold of the intention. This required tremendous skill of language and thought. He was a true politician who could say everything yet claim to have said nothing of the kind.

²⁰⁰ Finkel, “A Risāla of Al-Jāḥiẓ,” 316-17.

²⁰¹ Bonebakker, S.A. “*Adab* and the concept of *belles-lettres*,” in ‘*Abbasid Belles-Lettres* (The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature) edited by Julia Ashtiany et al (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 24.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Finkel, “A Risāla of Al-Jāḥiẓ,” 316-17.

²⁰⁴ In his *Kitāb al-Ḥawayān*, Jāḥiẓ introduces assorted material leading off into interesting digressions which do not actually contribute to the subject under discussion which is part of the genre of *Adab*.

Perhaps Finkel interpreted this ability as evidence of a man who was a skeptic without seeing that Jāḥiẓ could use skepticism without being a skeptic.

Pellat suggests Jāḥiẓ had two main areas of focus in his writings, theology and politics, and *adab* (literature).²⁰⁵ These areas would have been dictated by the needs of his patrons.

As a writer on matters political and theological, Jāḥiẓ's aim was to act as an apologist for the 'Abbāsids and the Arabs respectively, on the one hand, and, on the other, to uphold and spread Mu'tazilism and to prove the existence of God by rational argument and the direct observation of nature.²⁰⁶

At the same time, Jāḥiẓ was an *adīb*, a man of letters who hoped to educate his readers, and to do so by a process more attractive than that of contemporary scholarship.²⁰⁷

These may well have been the purposes behind his writing, but it seems that Jāḥiẓ was ultimately a pragmatic man with a sought after skill to persuade and entertain whatever the motives. Since there is little information about Jāḥiẓ other than some of his own writings, it is to these that one must turn to discern patterns of thought and style.

Carl Brockelman suggested classifying the works of Jāḥiẓ under rather well defined headings²⁰⁸ of which Pellat felt were too definite since these headings failed to account for Jāḥiẓ's tendency to wander from subject to subject within a single work.²⁰⁹ Instead, Pellat suggested a broader classification based on the overall function of the

²⁰⁵ Pellat. "Al-Jāḥiẓ," 83. There were three types of Adab all of which al-Jāḥiẓ practiced. These were: 1. To instill ethical precepts; 2. Provide readers with a general education; 3. Lay down guiding principles for members of the various professions.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Brockelman, Carl. *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur 2 Vols. and suppl. I-III*. (Leiden: 1943-49), Vol. 2, 241-247. These headings are: 1. Theological and political-theological writings; 2. History; 3. Anthropologies; 4. General Ethics; 5. Professions; 6. Animals; 7. Languages; 8. Geography; 9. Anthologies; 10. Polemics; 11. Lost works covering games, plants and other substances, literary history, works of entertainment.

²⁰⁹ Pellat. "Al-Jāḥiẓ," 83.

various works. This is essentially a descriptive arrangement. By examining the writings, the works were divided into three categories: semi-political and semi theological works, Jāḥiẓ's own particular *Adab*, and traditional *Adab*.²¹⁰ For the purposes of this study, the treatise *Reply to the Christians* falls within the first category although it is important to place this work within the broad and varied context of his other writings. Jāḥiẓ was not just a polemicist; in fact, this was a rather minor outlet for his writing appetite.

Having introduced Jāḥiẓ, particularly his writings and style, it becomes easier to see why al-Mutawakkil would have employed him. The Caliph did not choose an orthodox intellectual to write a work against Christians, but a man who possessed strong unpopular Mu'tazilite ideas yet who was a master of literary prose.²¹¹ He chose a man who could write anything about everything in spite of his personal beliefs.

It was precisely because of his literary ability that he was used by the authorities as a means of popularizing the religious views of the moment and expounding current policies to the literate public.²¹²

It is important to note that while poetry was valued by Arab Muslims, non-Arab Muslims were more open to the use of reason expressed in prose.²¹³ The 'Abbāsids sought to use more intellectual weapons expressed in part through prose rather than poetry. Jāḥiẓ

²¹⁰ Pellat. *Life and Works*., 14-275. The section on the Work's of al-Jāḥiẓ are given here as headings only to show the breadth of Jāḥiẓ's works.

I. Semi-political, semi-theological works
 An account of Mu'tazilite doctrine
 Defence of the 'Abbāsids against their Opponents
 II. Jāḥiẓ's own particular adab
 Literary Works
 Quasi-Scientific Works
 III. Traditional Adab
 Manners
 Character Traits
 Emotions
 Social Groups

²¹¹ Finkel, "A Risāla of Al-Jāḥiẓ," 316.

²¹² Pellat. *Life and Works*., 12.

²¹³ Ibid.

appealed to both Arab and non-Arab. He wrote prose, but his sources included literary and religious traditions of the Arabs, which his colleagues in Baṣra were avidly collecting.²¹⁴ Jāḥiẓ was a true eclectic marshalling a variety of sources and traditions to champion the intentions of the moment.

He wrote for every Arabic reader who had the ability to look beyond the old familiar horizons and the patriotism to reject non-Arab literature. Thus originated Jāḥiẓ's own particular type of adab. It drew its inspiration from the main stream of Arabic literary tradition, enriched by such Persian influences as were consistent with Arab predominance. The latter were modelled on Greek patterns, but adapted to the taste of readers who preferred fine language to formal logic.²¹⁵

The work *A Reply to the Christians* was commissioned by al-Mutawakkil and al-Faṭḥ ibn Khāqān, courtier of the Caliph and friend of al-Jāḥiẓ urged him to hasten its completion. In correspondence to al-Jāḥiẓ, al-Faṭḥ wrote:

The Commander of the faithful has taken a tremendous liking to you, and rejoices to hear your name spoken. Were it not that he thinks so highly of you because of your learning and erudition, he would require your constant attendance in his audience chamber to give him your views and tell him your opinion on the questions that occupy your time and thought. The Caliph told me the title of the book you are now writing, and I went out of my way to enhance the already high opinion he has of you, so that he decided against disturbing you further. You thus have me to thank for the gain to your reputation, and your book entitled al-Radd 'alā al-Naṣārā for the respite. Finish it off, hasten to bring it to me, and endeavour to gain personal advantage from it. You will be receiving your monthly allowance: I have arranged for you to be credited with the arrears, and am also having you paid a whole year in advance. There is a windfall for you! I have read your treatise entitled Baṣīrat Ghanhām al-Murtadd, and were it not for fear of making you conceited I would tell you of my feelings when I read it. Farewell.²¹⁶

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 13.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 7-8. See Yāqūt ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Ḥamawī, 1179?-1229. *Kitāb Irshād al-arīb ilā ma'rifāt al-adīb*, (*Dictionary of learned men of Yāqūt*) Vol 6. (D. S. Margoliouth ed. London: Luzac & Co. 1931), 56-80.

From this letter, it appeared the court possessed strong motivation to obtain the treatise even paying a great deal in advance of its completion. The reputation of Jāḥiẓ preceded the work and added to the high expectations.

In this second chapter, several items have been addressed in order to provide a context and background for al-Jāḥiẓ and his treatise which will later be presented in translation and partially analysed. The general history of the demise of the Umayyads and the rise of the ‘Abbāsids showed the political and religious concerns of legitimacy and unity plagued the early ‘Abbāsīd dynasty. These concerns found focus first within Islam and then outside of Islam in relation to non-Muslim religions. The translation movement initiated for various reasons fuelled the development of *kalām* and disputation leading to the wider debates and polemics between Muslims and Christians. The Christian communities and their influence in the early ‘Abbāsīd regime were gradually reduced particularly under al-Mutawakkil. This coincided with a fuller development of Muslim-Christian polemic in which Jāḥiẓ was commissioned to participate. The writing career of Jāḥiẓ mirrored the historic development of the ‘Abbāsids. He began writing works for the internal needs of the dynasty as it sought legitimacy by countering claims of the Shi’ites for the imāmate. Then, along with a variety of *adab*, Jāḥiẓ was employed to write a much anticipated work for the external needs of the ‘Abbāsīd caliphate namely against the Christians.

Chapter 3

The Text and Translation of the Risāla

The treatise *Radd ‘alā al-Naṣārā* is one of the few extant works of al-Jāḥiẓ.

Unfortunately the vast majority of his writings remain only as citations in a variety of other works. It is fortunate then that Joshua Finkel found and published an edited Arabic version of this *risāla* in 1926,¹ followed by a partial translation into English² in 1927. After a brief discussion of the background and scholarly work on the text, a full English translation will be presented.

The discovery of the *risāla* was made by chance when Finkel visited Egypt in 1925. While in Cairo, he examined an edition of *Kāmil lil-Mubarrad*³ and found that the margins contained several epistles written by al-Jāḥiẓ some of which were not published elsewhere. Thus interested, he searched for local manuscripts assuming the publisher had made use of these in the publication of the *Kāmil lil-Mubarrad*. His search was rewarded when he found all the epistles printed in the margins of the *Kāmil* in a private collection of *Taymūr Pasha* and in the library of al-Azhar Mosque. By comparing these manuscripts, Finkel found that the Cairene publisher, *al-Ṭūbī*, had only chosen to publish part of the *risāla*, *Radd ‘alā al-Naṣārā*. Finkel wrote:

I assume now that al-Ṭūbī must have felt much like Ibn Ẹutayba with regard to the part of the essay which he tacitly omitted, and that Jāḥiẓ’s emphatic statement about the text of the Torah as being true and uncorrupted was not at all to the liking of this publisher.⁴

¹ Al-Jāḥiẓ. *Three Essays of Abū ‘Othman ‘Amr Ibn Baḥr al-Jāḥiẓ*. (d. 869) edited by J. Finkel (Cairo: Salafyah Press, 1926).

² Joshua Finkel. “A Risāla of Al-Jāḥiẓ,” *Journal of American Oriental Society*, No. 47, (1927), 311-334. For a French translation see I.S. Allouche, “Un Traité de Polémique Christiano-Musulmane au IXe Siècle,” *Hespéris*, 26, (1939), 123-155.

³ *Kāmil lil-Mubarrad*. (Cairo: al-Ṭūbī, 1323-1324) reference cited in Finkel, “A Risāla of Al-Jāḥiẓ,” 311.

⁴ Finkel, “A Risāla of Al-Jāḥiẓ,” 311.

As a result, Finkel decided to edit the entire *risāla* using these two manuscripts. He also found other essays by al-Jāḥiẓ in a private collection of Nūr al-Dīn Bey Mustafā two of which were the *risāla al-Qiyān* (the Epistle of the Singing Girls)⁵ and the *risāla fī ḍamm aḥlāq al-Kuttāb* (An attack on secretaries).⁶ Finkel chose to publish these three essays.

The authenticity and manuscript support for the *Radd ‘alā al-Naṣārā* are discussed both by Finkel and in more detail by Pellat.⁷ The *risāla* is cited by a number of ancient sources⁸ including Al-Nadīm’s *Fihrist*⁹ and Yaqūt’s *Irshād*.¹⁰ There is little doubt in any of the citations as to the authorship of al-Jāḥiẓ. There are four manuscript sources for this *risāla* three of which Finkel used in editing the text.¹¹ The Azhar manuscript No. 6836 is dated 1313 A.H. and the Taymūr manuscript (Adab division No. 19) is dated 1315 A.H.¹² Both of these manuscripts formed the basis for Finkel’s edition. There is a manuscript in

⁵ Al-Jāḥiẓ. *The Epistle on Singing-Girls of Jāḥiẓ*. translated & edited by A.F.L. Beeston (Warminster, England: Aris & Phillips LTD, 1980).

⁶ Selected portions are translated into English in *Life and Works*., 273-275. A partial French translation was published by Charles Pellat “*Dhamm al-kuttāb*,” *Hespéris* (1956), 1-2.

⁷ Finkel. “A *Risāla* of Al-Jāḥiẓ,” 311-334; and Charles Pellat. “Nouvel essai d’inventaire de l’œuvre gahīziene,” *Arabica* XXXI (1984), 117-164.

⁸ Charles Pellat. “Nouvel essai d’inventaire de l’œuvre gahīziene,” *Arabica* XXXI (1984), 151,52. In addition to the *Fihrist* and *Irshād*, Pellat lists ancient citations as:

1. Jāḥiẓ, *K. al-Hayawān*, ed. Harūn, Cairo 7 vol. Le début du t. I fournit une liste des écrits antérieurs a cet ouvrage, lui-même composé avant la mort d’Ibn al-Zayyāt (232/847). Vol. I, 9 and Vol. IV, 28.
2. Ibn Qutayba, *K. Ta’wīl muḥtalif al-ḥadīth*, (Cairo, 1326), 72; trans. G. Lecomte, *le traité des divergences du ḥadīth*. (Damas 1962).
3. Bāqillānī, *Tamhīd*, (Cairo, 1947), 144.
4. Ibn Qāḍī Suhba, *Tabaqāt al-nuḥāt wa-l-lujawīyyīn*, passage concernant Jāḥiẓ imprimé, d’après le ms. de la Zāhiriyya, dans Mawrid, VII/4 (1978), 123-5.
5. Ismā’īl Pasha al-Bagdādī, *Ḥadiyyat al-‘arīfīn*, (Istanbul, 1951), 802.

⁹ Ibn al-Nadīm, Muḥammad ibn Ishāq, fl. 987. *The Fihrist of al-Nadīm: a tenth-century survey of Muslim culture*. Bayard Dodge, editor and translator. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 404; and A.J. Arberry, “New material on the Kitāb al-Fihrist of Ibn al-Nadīm,” in *Islamic Research Association*, vol. I, (1948/49), 19-45.

¹⁰ Yāqūt ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-Ḥamawī, 1179?-1229. *Kitāb Irshād al-arīb ilā ma’rifāt al-adīb*, (*Dictionary of learned men of Yāqūt*) Vol. 6. D. S. Margoliouth ed. (London: Luzac & Co. 1931), 72,76.

¹¹ Finkel made use of the Azhar and the Taymūr manuscripts, but indirectly used the British Museum manuscript in a comparison with Hirschfeld’s mention of the *risāla* (see footnote 13). It does not appear that Finkel was aware of the Emanet Hazinesi manuscript

¹² Finkel. “A *Risāla* of Al-Jāḥiẓ,” 312. See also Pellat “Nouvel essai,” 119,120.

the British Museum suppl. 1129 from which Hirschfeld published and translated a paragraph.¹³ Concerning the British Museum manuscript, Rieu noted that the transcription was completed by ‘Abd Allāh al-Manṣūrī in 1294 A.H. in Cairo, from a unique copy belonging to Shaikh ‘Alī al-Laythī, which had been copied from a still older manuscript.¹⁴ Upon comparison, Finkel found few and insignificant variations with his two manuscripts thus concluding the British Museum manuscript and his documents were made from the same manuscript. However, since Finkel did not examine the British Museum manuscript in its entirety, one cannot assume the Taymur and Azhar manuscripts are identical to the British Museum manuscript. The final manuscript is the Emanet Hazinesi no. 1358 which was either unavailable to Finkel or he simply was unaware of its existence. It was copied by one ‘Ubayd Allāh b. Hassān who, Pellat writes, is probably Abū l-Qāsim ‘Ubayd Allāh ‘Alī b. Abd Allāh al-Raqqī.¹⁵ This ‘Ubayd is the same scribe mentioned in the colophon of the Taymūr and Azhar manuscripts and is included in Finkel’s edition. The colophon reads:

From a written specimen from the Timurienne Library in Cairo, No. 19 Literature, copied by the hand of Muḥammad b. Allāh b. Ibrāhīm Al-Zamārānī, in the month of du’l-ka-da 1315 which is the copy of a handwritten specimen which dates from the month of ragab 403 of Hijra, by the hand of Abu’l Qāsim ‘Ubaīd Allāh b. Alī.¹⁶

According to Finkel, the scribe ‘Ubaīd (‘Ubayd) appears as the person responsible for the abridged form of the *risāla*. Finkel writes about this abridgment:

¹³ Finkel. “A Risāla of Al-Jāhiz,” 312 cites that H. Hirschfeld *A Volume of essays of Al-Jahiz*. Browne Festschrift (1922), 200-209 mentioned the *risāla* and in an earlier article in *Jewish Quarterly Review Old Series* XIII (1910), 239-240.

¹⁴ Ibid. See Charles Rieu *Supplement to the Catalogue of the Arabic Manuscripts in the British Museum*. (London: Gilbert & Revington, 1894), 709-10.

¹⁵ Pellat “Nouvel essai,” 119.

¹⁶ Finkel. “Three Essays”, 39.

... on perusing the essays one realizes that ‘Ubayd Allāh has not curtailed them with regard for the preservation of the symmetry of their original parts, for he has no scruples whatsoever in shocking the reader here and there with a sudden break in the line of the argument; and his crude method, therefore, speaks well for the spells of verbosity which Jāḥiẓ is subject to, his stock-phrases and peculiar modes of expression are faithfully reproduced by ‘Ubayd Allāh, so that these considerations in themselves should exclude all suspicion of paraphrase.¹⁷

Little is known of ‘Ubayd Allāh, but his redaction would have occurred between the death of al-Jāḥiẓ (255 A.H.) and the date Al-Zamārānī cites as 403 A.H.. Despite the shortcomings of not comparing all the manuscripts, Finkel’s Arabic edition has remained unchallenged even by Pellat. However, it was beyond the scope of this study to re-edit the Arabic text by consulting all the available manuscripts as well as indirect witnesses as listed by Pellat.¹⁸

Scholarly work on this *risāla* has varied from partial translations to citations of its existence, but as yet it does not appear that any scholar has analysed the *risāla* beyond Finkel and Allouche’s summary attempts.¹⁹ The history of modern scholarship on the *risāla* begins with Finkel’s Arabic edition and later partial English translation in 1925-27. I.S. Allouche in 1939 published a French translation of the text.²⁰ Charles Pellat published excerpts in his *Life and Works*²¹ and W.W. Müller published extracts in German.²² Marguart,²³ F. Nau²⁴ and O. Rescher²⁵ have also produced translated excerpts.

The translation of the text found below was made from Finkel’s Arabic edition with comparisons made to Allouche’s French translation and Pellat’s two excerpts.

¹⁷ Finkel. “A Risāla of Al-Jāḥiẓ,” 313.

¹⁸ Charles Pellat. “Nouvel essai d’inventaire de l’œuvre gāḥiẓiène,” *Arabica* XXXI (1984), 151,52

¹⁹ Ibid., 313-321 and Allouche, “Polémique,” 123-128 and 154-155.

²⁰ Ibid., 129-153.

²¹ Pellat. *Life and Works*., 88-91.

²² R. Caspar, “Bibliographie du dialogue islamo-chrétien,” *Islamochristiana*, Vol I (1975), 146.

²³ Marguart. *Streifzüge*, 271-276.

²⁴ F. Nau. *Arabes chrétiens*, Paris (1933), 119-232.

²⁵ O. Rescher. *Excerpte und Übersetzungen aus der Schirften des... Ġāḥiẓ*. Stuttgart, 1931.

Concerning Allouche's translation, it is generally reliable although he neglected to translate two paragraphs.²⁶ The portion that Finkel had previously translated into English was accepted as reliable and incorporated without re-translation from the Arabic.²⁷ The challenge to render al-Jāḥiẓ into English is a daunting task and every attempt has been made to make the translation 'readable' without losing fidelity to the original. The words of Pellat who is the premier scholar of al-Jāḥiẓ offers some insight into the difficulties of translation.

... Jāḥiẓ is a difficult writer to translate, so much so that, whenever the present writer [Pellat] has little trouble in turning into French a work attributed to Jāḥiẓ, he is inclined to consider it doubtful authenticity. The difficulty stems from the often defective state of the texts, the richness of the vocabulary, and from Jāḥiẓ's untidy and confusingly digressive method of composition. But the untidiness is intended and is perhaps, less a result of Jāḥiẓ's pen trying to keep pace with his ideas than of his desire to vary his rhythm and subject-matter, to break down his reasoning into easy steps and to make room for witticisms, anecdotes and pithy reflections.²⁸

²⁶ I.S. Allouche, "Un Traité de Polémique Christiano-Musulmane au IXe Siècle," *Hespéris*, 26, (1939), 145. The first untranslated paragraph (lines 374-381) contains the following footnote « Suit une traduction fantaisiste (dans le but, pour l'auteur, de donner une idée des erreurs que l'on peut commettre en traduisant un texte par le mot-à-mot), du passage suivant de Esaïe XLII.. » The second paragraph (lines 384-388) is left untranslated without reason.

²⁷ In the English translation presented later, the section that Finkel translated is from lines 65 - 247 as found in "A Risāla of Al-Jāḥiẓ," 322-334. Finkel's translation corresponds to the Arabic version *Three Essays of Abū 'Othman 'Amr Ibn Baḥr al-Jāḥiẓ* p. 12 line 65 – p. 22 line 247.

²⁸ Charles Pellat. "Al-Jāḥiẓ," in *'Abbasid Belles-Lettres*. (The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature). edited by Julia Ashtiany et al (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 94.

An English Translation of Radd ‘alā al-Naṣārā

- Notes: 1. The reference numbers on the margin of the translation refer to the lines of the Arabic text.
 2. Insertions made in order to assist understanding of the text are bracketed []
 3. The translation made by Joshua Finkel “A Risāla of Al-Jāhiz,” *Journal of American Oriental Society*, No. 47, (1927), 322-334 is found below in lines 65-247. See Footnote 36.

1-3 Praise God who blessed us with belief in His Unity and [who] created us from whom he removed the doubt of his people while guiding His servants; and [who] made us; we are not differentiating between anyone among his messengers. We are not denying any book he affirmed upon us the confirmation by Him. We are not ascribing to Him what is not from Him. He is worthy of praise and glory; doing good as he desires.

4-7 Now then, I read your letter and I understood what you reported regarding the questions of the Christians in your presence. [Questions] which have entered the hearts of the young people and your weak among the confused who became silent before their replies. What you asked from their confession with questions and from the good of their assistance with answers.

8-11 You report that they [the Christians] allege that the proof that our book is false and our instruction is corrupt is that we hold things they have never heard and have never known from their forefathers. [They allege such] because we claim that God (the exalted and powerful) said in his book through his prophet Muḥammad (God bless and grant him salvation): ‘O Jesus son of Mary’ did you say to the people “Take me and my mother as gods apart from God?”²⁹ The Christians claimed they never believed in the divinity of Mary neither secretly nor publicly.

13-19 They claim that we asserted upon them that which they did not know just as we asserted upon the Jews that which they did not know when our book said and our prophet

²⁹ Qur’ān 5:116

testified that the Jews said: “Uzair [Ezra] is the Son of God³⁰ and that the hand of God is tied³¹ and that God is poor and that they are wealthy.”³² Moreover no person spoke about this and it is not known in any of the religions. If the Jews had said about Ezra what you attribute to him and you claim him as they denied it from their religion and as they disavow that it was from their teaching and as they were in denial of the divinity of Ezra, it is more deserving from us to be in denial of the divinity of the Christ. And as it is, we have from you courage after the contract of protection (*dhimmi*) and the tax is taken.

20-36 You mentioned that they said, which shows your error in the reports and your acceptance of knowledge from the untrustworthy, that your Book said that Pharaoh said to Hāmān “Build me a palace”.³³ Hāmān lived in the time of the Persians a long time after Pharaoh and that is well known in the opinion of the books and famous with the people of knowledge. Pharaoh constructed a palace in order to be if [possible] elevated to tower above God. And Pharaoh is not free from that he was an unbeliever of God (the exalted) or a dweller with Him (i.e. a believer). If his religion was himself, is the construction of his palace and the desire to tower above God nothing more than saying for him there is no God? Alternately if he was a believer, a knower of God, then he is not free from [the fact] that he [either] is or is not an anthropomorphist. If he is one who rejects [that God has] length, width, depth and limits and dimensions [i.e. a non-anthropomorphist], then would he have [had] the goal and wish to raise a palace in a certain place for God is everywhere? If he was an anthropomorphist, he would have known that it is not possible for a human being to build a structure or to raise a palace

³⁰ Qur’ān 9:30

³¹ Qur’ān 5:64

³² Qur’ān 3:181

³³ Qur’ān 40:36

which traverses the seven heavens with their depth and celestial bodies which are between them, in order to stand opposite the throne of God then rise above Him.

Pharaoh, though he was an unbeliever, was not insane and he was not deficient of intellect among Kings. One supposes that the intelligence of Kings is usually greater than the intelligence of their subjects.

You mentioned that they said: You alleged that God (the exalted) speaking about Yahya, son of Zakariyah, made known that he had not previously given this name to anyone.³⁴ They take serious their book, that is they agree in it, particular their leading personalities and their common people because the name was given before Yahya son of Zakariyah and someone said that Yahya is from Yuhanna sons of Karh (Farh).³⁵

37-41 You claim that they said to you: You think that God said in his book to your prophet: ‘We did not send before you if not a man we inspired and if you don’t know then ask the people of remembrance.’³⁶ The meaning of the expression “People of remembrance” is the people of the Torah (Pentateuch). The companions of the Books claimed that God sent from the people prophetesses among them Maryam daughter of Umrān, and Hanna, and Sārah, and Ra’fka (Rebecca).

42-61 And you mentioned that [the Christians] said: you claimed that Jesus spoke in the cradle.³⁷ We despite our dedication to him and our closeness to his matter and our exaggeration by your claim in it - despite the large quantity of our number and the differences of our countries and our different opinions that are between us - we did not know that and we did not claim it is true. How can we claim it [is true] since we have

³⁴ Qur’ān 19:7

³⁵ Allouche notes the text should read *Ḳarḥ* not *Farḥ*

³⁶ Qur’ān 26:45

³⁷ Qur’ān 3:46

never heard it from the forefathers and the ancestors, and none of us claimed such a thing. Then these Jews do not know this and claim that they never heard this except from you. The Majus are not aware of it nor the Sabeans, nor the worshippers of the Buddha (Buddhists) from India, nor the Turks and the Hazars, and we did not receive this from one of the important ancestors and the past centuries. It is not [found] in the Injil (Gospel) and not in the narrative of the life of the Messiah, in the books (message) and the annunciation in it, nor upon the Sunna of the messengers. So it is inconceivable that everyone, whether friend or foe, is ignorant of it. A proverb has not been spoken [about] it and the people have not spread it. Therefore, the Christians agree on the rejection of [this story] with their love for simple-minded piety. They were not opposing you in that it returns to them a benefit. How [is it that] they did not mislead you in his life from dead and that he walked on the water and he healed the one born blind and the leper? Indeed, how is it that they were not agreeing to declare a difference of opinion of their religion and to deny the greatest proof, which was to their master (i.e. Christ)? Similarly this [is something that can] not be kept secret nor kept separate from one who is opposing and betraying for the words in the cradle are more astonishing than every wonder and more strange than all strangeness and more amazing than all amazement. Because he resurrected the dead, walked on water, raised up the disabled (paralytic), and healed the one made blind by accident and the one born blind, the prophets had accomplished it and the messengers knew how to do it and it circulated in their hearing. Neither a short curly haired youth nor a newborn has spoken from the cradle. How did the memory of such a miracle disappear without leaving any evidence and how did this sign become lost amongst every other miracle? Then even every miracle achieved by men and the well

known by the explanation and attributed to the reasoned opinion can pass for an imposture and one has the right to fear that is a stratagem. The newborn youth is incapable in nature of any deception. It is unnecessary to watch and to compare the miracle from the perspective of cunning.

Section I

62-69 We will answer all your questions, those you have sent us and others that you have yet to send, with clear evidence and forceful argument and decisive proofs. Then, after our answers, we will ask them, the Christians, about certain subjects which will show them their own contradictions, the weakness of their doctrines and the inconsistency of their religion. We take refuge in God from hypocrisy and from the undue assumption that we are capable of doing this well. We ask him to allow us to reach, in our words and deeds, our goal, which is to fight for the love of him and the triumph of his religion.³⁸ I shall begin to enumerated the reasons which made the Christians more liked by the masses than the Magians, and made men consider them more sincere than the Jews, more endeared, less treacherous, less unbelieving, and less deserving of punishment. For all this there are manifold and evident causes. They are patent to one who searches for them, concealed to one who shuns investigation.

70-87 The first cause is as follows: The Jews were the neighbours of the Muslims in Medina and other places, and (as is well known) the enmity of neighbours is as violent and abiding as the hostility that arises among relatives. Man indeed hates the one whom he knows,³⁹ turns against the one whom he sees, opposes the one whom he resembles and becomes observant of the faults of those with whom he mingles; the greater the love and

³⁸ Finkel's translation begins and is taken from Finkel's "A Risala of al Jāhiz," 322-334 and corresponds to the Arabic in Finkel's *Three Essays of Al-Jāhiz* p. 12 line 65 – p. 22 line 247.

³⁹ The meaning is: you cannot hate someone you do not know.

intimacy, the greater the hatred and estrangement. Therefore feuds among relatives and neighbours, in the case of the Arabs as well as of other people, lasted longer and proved more rancorous. When the Emigrants became the neighbours of the Jews – at the time the Helpers had already been enjoying their proximity – the Jews began to envy the Muslims, the blessings of their new faith⁴⁰ and the union which resulted after dissension. They proceeded to undermine the belief of our masses and to lead them astray. They aided our enemies and those envious of us. From mere misleading speech and stinging words they plunged into an open declaration of enmity, so that the Muslims mobilized their forces, exerting themselves morally and materially to banish the Jews and destroy them.⁴¹ Their strife became long-drawn and widespread, so that it worked itself up into a rage and created yet greater animosity and more intensified rancour. The Christians, however, because of their remoteness from Mecca and Medina, did not have to put up with religious controversies and did not have occasion to stir up trouble and be involved in war. That was the first cause of our dislike of the Jews and our partiality toward the Christians.

83-87 There were, besides, some Muslims who emigrated to Ethiopia and looked upon that country as their haven. This hospitality accorded to the Muslims helped to further the friendship between us and the Christians. And as the hearts of the Muslims softened toward the Christians, in like degree they hardened to the Jews, and the less the Muslims hated the Christians the more they hated the Jews. It is indeed the nature of man to love the one who does him good or is instrumental in doing so – no matter whether he does so intentionally or unwittingly, whether he does so for the glory of God or not.

⁴⁰ Qur'ān 2:103

⁴¹ Qur'ān 2:79 and 178

88-96 Another circumstance, which is the most potent cause, is the wrong interpretation given by the masses to the Qur'ānic verses: "You will surely find the strongest in enmity against those who believe are the Jews and the idolaters; and you will find the nearest in love to those who believe to be those who say, 'We are Christians,' that is because there are amongst them priests and monks and because they are not proud. And when they hear that which has been sent down to the apostle read to them, you will see their eyes overflow with tears, because of the truth which they perceive therein, saying, 'O Lord, we believe; write us down therefore with those who bear witness to the truth; and what should hinder us from believing in God and the truth which has come unto us and from earnestly desiring that our Lord would introduce us into Paradise with the righteous people?' Therefore hath God rewarded them, for what they said with gardens through which rivers flow; they shall continue therein forever; and this is the reward of the righteous."⁴²

The wrong interpretation of the above verses supplanted that of the learned, and the Christians craftily used it to seduce the common and vulgar. In the very verses lies the proof that here God is not referring to the Christians we are acquainted with nor to their associates the Melkites and Jacobites, but rather to the type of Bahira and the kind of monks whom Salman used to serve. There is a vast difference when we consider the phrase "*Who say we are Christians*" (as an insinuation) that these monks misnamed themselves or as a real term to be taken like the word "Jews" (which refers to the Jews who plotted against Muḥammad in Medina).

97-103 When Islam first appeared there were two Arab kings, one of Ghassan and the other of Lakhm, both of whom were Christians. Arabs were their subjects and paid

⁴² Qur'ān 5:82-83

them tribute. The respect which these Arabs accorded to their rulers found its root in the esteem that they held out for their Christian religion. And Tihama, though a tribe that did not pay tribute and was not subject to royalty, still could not refrain from respecting what others respected and from condemning what others condemned. The fact that Nu'man and the Kings of Ghassan were Christians is known to the Arabs and is common knowledge to the genealogists. Were this not known, I would prove it by quotations from popular verses of poetry and stories worthy of belief.

103-109 The Arabs (the Quraysh) traded with Syria; they sent their merchants to the emperors of Byzantium and conducted two yearly caravans,⁴³ in the winter to Yemen, and in the summer in the direction of Syria. Their summer resort was in Ta'if. They were people of wealth, as is mentioned in the Qur'ān and by men of learning. They also travelled to Ethiopia and appeared as emissaries before the Ethiopian king, who would present them with considerable gifts and honour them according to their rank. They (the Quraysh) did not, however, come in contact with Chosroes, and he in turn did not have intercourse with them. The Byzantines emperors and the Ethiopian kings were Christians. This too gave the Christians advantage over the Jews. And history, as we know, provides the future generations with their prejudices and predilections.

110-120 There is still another reason. Christianity was prevalent and widespread among the Arabs except among the tribe of Mudar. Neither did Judaism or Magianism find acceptance in this tribe. Christianity was only popular with that portion of the tribe that emigrated to Hira and which was styled "servants." They have there been absorbed, together with a small number (of other Christians), by some of the tribes. Thus Mudar knew no other religions than idolatry and Islam. Christianity, however, was in most

⁴³ Qur'ān 106

cases, the faith of the Arab kings and prevailed among the following tribes: Lakhm, Ghassān, Ḥārith b. Ka'b in Najrān, Kudā'a and Tays, not speak of other numerous and well-known tribes. Besides, Christianity gained a foothold in Rabi'a, and prevailed among the tribes of Taghlib, Abdu l-Qays and scattered portions of Bakr and notably among the prominent families of Dhu Jaddayn. As for Judaism, at the birth of Islam it prevailed in no tribe. It only had converts in Yemen and a small minority of the tribes of 'Iyad and Rabi'a. The bulk of the Jews, and these were Jews by extraction and were descended from Aaron, lived in Yathrib, Ḥimyar, Taymā'a and Wādi l-Kurā. Thus what filled the hearts with affection for the Christians were the ties of blood and our regard for royalty.

120-123 Moreover, our masses began to realise that the Christian dynasties were enduring in power and that a great number of Arabs was adhering to their faith; that the daughters of Byzantium bore children to the Muslim rulers and that among the Christians were men versed in speculative theology, medicine and astronomy. Consequently they became in their estimation philosophers and men of learning, whereas they observed none of these sciences among the Jews.

124-128 The cause for the lack of science among the Jews lies in the fact that the Jews consider philosophic speculation to be unbelief and Kalām theology an innovation leading to doubt. They assert that there is no lore other than that revealed in the Torah and the books of the prophets; and that faith in medicine and astrology leads to opposition against the standard views of the authorities of old and is conducive to Manichaeism and atheism. So much are they averse to these sciences that they would

allow the blood of their practitioner to be shed with impunity and would prohibit discourse with them.

129-142 But if our masses knew that the Christians (Arabs) and Byzantines are not men of science and rhetoric and not people of deep reflection and possess nothing except the handiworks of iron and wood and the crafts of painting and silk-weaving, they would remove them from the roll of men of culture and would strike their names off the list of philosophers and scientists. For the books of *Logic* and *De Generation et Corruptione* ..., etc., were composed by Aristotle, and he was neither Byzantine nor Christian (Arab). And the book *Almagest* was written by Ptolemaemus, and he was neither Byzantine nor Christian. The book of Euclid is Euclid's, and again he was neither Byzantine nor Christian. And the author of the book of Medicine is Galen, neither Byzantine nor Christian. This holds true also of Democrates, Hippocrates, Plato, etc. All these authors belong to a race that has perished, but whose intellectual impress has endured, and they were the Greeks. Their religion was unlike the religion of the Christians, and their mode of living was totally different. The Greeks were savants, and these are mechanical manipulators. It was by chance of geographical proximity that they got hold of the Greeks books. Either the authorship of some of the books they falsely ascribed to themselves or tampered with their contents so as to make them appear Christian. And if the work was too popular and too well known, so that they could not change the name of the book, they would tell us that the Greeks were a group of Byzantine tribes and would boast of the superiority of their religion over that of the Jews, Arabs and Hindus. They even went so far as to assert that our scientists were the followers of the Byzantine writers and our writers their imitators. Such is the state of affairs!

143-148 And the Christian faith – may God have mercy on you – resembles Manichaeism, and in some of its aspects it is akin to atheism. It is the cause of all perplexity and confusion. Indeed no other people have furnished so many hypocrites and waverers as the Christians. This results, naturally, when weak minds attempt to fathom deep problems. Is it not a fact that the majority of those who were executed for parading as Muslims, while hypocrites at heart, were men whose fathers and mothers were Christians? Even the people who are under suspicion today have come mostly from their ranks.

149-157 Another cause for the admiration accorded by the masses to the Christians is the fact that they are secretaries and servants to kings, physicians to nobles, perfumers and money changers, whereas the Jews are found to be but dyers, tanners, cuppers, butchers and cobblers. Our people observing thus the occupations of the Jews and the Christians concluded that the religion of the Jews must compare as unfavourably as do their professions and that their unbelief must be the foulest of all since they are the filthiest of all nations. Why the Christians, ugly as they are, are physically less repulsive than the Jews may be explained by the fact that the Jews, by not intermarrying, have intensified the offensiveness of their features. Exotic elements have not mingled with them; neither have males of alien races had intercourse with their women, nor have their men cohabited with females of a foreign stock. The Jewish race therefore has been denied high mental qualities, sound physique and superior lactation. The same results (are) obtain(ed) when horses, camels, donkeys and pigeons are inbred.

158-178 And we – may God be gracious to us – do not deny that the Christians are rich and that they wield the sceptre, that their appearance is clearer and their professions

more refined. We do, however, differ with the majority of the people as to which of the two, the Jew or the Christian, is more controversial in word and deceitful in manner, though both be low-born and impure of blood. As for the manifestations of the high social rank of the Christians, we know that they ride highly bred horses and dromedary camels, play polo . . . , wear fashionable silk garments and have attendants to serve them. They call themselves Ḥasan, Ḥusayn, ‘Abbās, Faḍl and ‘Alī and employ also their forenames. There remains but that they call themselves Muḥammad and employ the forename Abū l-Qāsim. For this very fact, they were liked by the Muslims! Moreover, many of the Christians failed to wear their belts, while others hid their girdles beneath their outer garments. Many of their nobles refrained, out of sheer pride, from paying tribute. They returned to Muslims insult for insult and blow for blow. Why indeed should the Christians not do so and even more, when our judges, or, at least the majority of them, consider the blood of a patriarch or bishop as equivalent to the blood of Ja’far, ‘Alī, ‘Abbās and Ḥamza? They also believe that a Christian, when he slanders the mother of the Prophet with the accusation of adultery should incur only a slight punishment or reprimand, defending their decision on the ground that the mother of the Prophet was not Muḥammadan. Good Lord, what a queer judgment, and how utterly untenable! Was it not the decree of the Prophet that the Christian should not sit on equal level with the Muslim? Did he not say: “If they insult you, strike them; and if they strike you, kill them?” But the Christians, calumniating his mother with adultery, suffer at the hands of his believers only a slight punishment, for our judges think that forging a lie against the Prophet does not constitute a breach of covenant. But they forget that it is with regard to the Christians, against whom the Prophet decreed that they deliver the

tribute in a spirit of gratitude,⁴⁴ considering the very receipt of it on our part as a gracious act, for thus we grant them the privilege of being tolerated and give them a guarantee of personal safety. God verily doomed them to abjectness and destitution.

178-194 It is indeed incumbent on the ignorant to know that our righteous ‘Imams and the leaders of old did not include a prohibition against such slander as a condition for receiving tribute and granting toleration, for no other reason but that they considered this matter to be so glaringly self-evident as not to feel the necessity for recording it in treaties. Nay, if they did so, they would betray anxiety and weakness, and the protected cults would imagine themselves in power to create conditions of this sort. To be sure, people will bind by conditions and declare unequivocally only that which is pregnant with doubt or error, or may be overlooked by judge or witness, or may serve as a loophole for the adversary. But as for the evident and clear, what need is there to commit it to writing? Indeed whenever the imposition of a condition was deemed imperative, and its explicit mention in the contract was not thought to reflect upon the Muslims (the written procedure was invariably) adhered to, as for example the conditions of abjectness and humility, payment of tribute, requisition of churches and the prohibition against helping one Muslim faction in its struggle against the other, etc. With the lowest of the low, with men begging the acceptance of their own ransom, beseeching that their very lives be spared, can it be stipulated and said: “We will grant you the benefits accruing from this covenant on the condition that you defame not the mother of the man who is the seal of the prophets, who is the apostle of the Lord of all creatures, etc?” Not even the average man will adopt such measures for his rule, much less the leaders of humanity, the

⁴⁴ Qur’ān 9:29

lamps of darkness, the torches of guidance, who are imbued with Arab pride, with the splendour of sovereignty and the victories of Islam.

195-201 Moreover, our nation has not been afflicted by Jews, Magians or Sabeans as much as by the Christians; for (in the polemics with us) they choose contradictory statements in Muslim traditions (as the targets for their attacks). (They select for disputations) the equivocal verses in the Qur'ān and (hold us responsible for) Ḥadīths, the chains of guarantors of which are defective. Then they enter into private conversation with our weakminded, and question them concerning the texts, which they have chosen to assail. They finally insert into the debate the arguments that they have learned from the Manichaeans. And notwithstanding such malicious discourse they often appear innocent before our men of influence and people of learning; and thus they succeed in throwing dust in the eyes of the staunch believers and in bewildering the minds of those who are weak in faith. And how unfortunate that every Muslim looks upon himself as a theologian and thinks that everyone is fit to lead a discussion with an atheist!

202-211 Moreover, were it not for the Christian theologians, their physicians and astronomers, the books of the Mananiyya,⁴⁵ Dayṣāniyya, Markūniya,⁴⁶ and Falāniyya⁴⁷ sects would never reach our young people and the rich. They would be familiar with naught save the book of God and the Sunna of the Prophet, and the heretical writings would remain with their original owners, passing only as heirlooms to the next of kin. Indeed, for all our grief over the seduction of our youth and unintelligent we have

⁴⁵ Correct transliteration would be Mathāniyya, but the *Fihrist* indicates this group are the Māhāniyya. See Ibn al-Nadīm, Muḥammad ibn Ishāq, fl. 987 *The Fihrist of al-Nadīm: a tenth-century survey of Muslim culture*. Vol 2. Bayard Dodge, editor and translator. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 807.

⁴⁶ Correct transliteration would be Marqūniyya

⁴⁷ Finkel leaves this untransliterated. The Arabic is الفلانية but since this cannot be found as the name of a sect, Finkel suggested reading this as الهيلانية which does appear in the *Fihrist* vol 2, 811.

primarily the Christians to blame. And when one hears their notions about forgiveness and wanderings in quest for God, their censure for partaking of meats and their predilection for grain products; when one hears them preaching abstinence from marriage and from the begetting of offspring; when one observes them worshipping the Church leaders and praising the bishops for practicing celibacy, one is convinced that there is a resemblance between Christianity and Manichaeism and that the former leans toward the teachings of the latter.

212-221 And how marvellous is this! We know that the Christian bishops as well as all inmates of monasteries, whether Jacobites or Nestorians, in fact all monks of every description, both male and female, one and all practice celibacy. When we next consider how great is the number of the monks and the most of the clergy adhere to their practices and when we finally take in account the numerous wars of the Christians, their sterile men and women, their prohibition against divorce, polygamy and concubinage – (is not queer) that, in spite of all this, they have filled the earth and exceeded all others in numbers and fecundity? Alas! This circumstance has increased our misfortunes and made our trials stupendous! Another cause for the growth and expansion of Christianity is the fact that the Christians draw converts from other religions and give none in return (while the reverse should be true), for it is the younger religion that is expected to profit from conversion.

Section II

222-229 And what points to the lack of compassion on the part of the Christians and to their perversion of heart is the fact that they are singled out from all nations in practicing castration, and castration (as we know) is the greatest mutilation and the

gravest sin that a man may commit against himself. They practice it even on innocent and defenceless children. We can accuse no other people of being noted for this practice except those who live in Byzantium and Ethiopia. In other countries castration is extremely rare and, at that, the custom could have been acquired from no others than the Christians. They also castrate their children in order to devote them to the Church. (And this is strange), for castration is with the Sabeans only a religious rite, and it is not seldom that we hear of worshippers of that sect castrating themselves, though they would not dare castrate their children. Indeed, if all Christians' tendencies that I have pointed out were allowed to take their course, progeny would be cut off, religion would become extinct and the world would perish.

230-236 And the Christians, though cleaner in dress, though engaged in more refined professions and physically less repulsive, yet inwardly is baser, filthier and fouler; for he does not practice circumcision, does not clean himself from pollution and in addition, eats the flesh of swine. His wife, too, is unclean. She does not purify herself from the defilement of menses and childbirth; her husband cohabits with her in her courses, and, in addition, to this, she too is uncircumcised. In spite of their evil natures and overruling lusts, their faith offers no restraints against passion such as eternal hell-fire in the world to come or punishment by religious authority in the world we live in. How indeed can one evade what harms him and pursue what profits him if such be his faith? Can such as we have described set the world aright? Can anyone be more fit to stir up evil and corruption?

237-247 Even if one were to exert all his zeal and summon all his intellectual resources with a view to learn the Christians' teachings about Jesus, he would still fail to

comprehend the nature of Christianity, especially its doctrine concerning the Divinity. How in the world can one succeed in grasping this doctrine, for were you to question concerning it two Nestorians, individually, sons of the same father and mother, the answer of one brother would be the reverse of that of the other. This holds true also for Melkites and Jacobites. As a result, we cannot comprehend the essence of Christianity to the extent that we know the other faiths. Moreover, they contend that the method of analogy should not be applied to religion, nor should the validity of faith be maintained by overcoming objections, nor should the verity of a dogma be made subject to the test of intellectual scrutiny. Faith must be based on the unqualified submission to the authority of the book and on following blindly the traditions of old. And, by my life, any man who would profess a faith like Christianity would of necessity have to offer blind submission as an excuse! The Christians also believe that the Magians, Sabeans and Manichaeans, who appose Christianity, are to be pardoned as long as they do not aim at falsehood and do not contend stubbornly against the true belief, but when they come to speak of the Jews, they brand them as obstinate rebels, not merely as people walking in error and confusion.⁴⁸

Section III

248-271 Concerning their question over the words of Jesus [spoken] in the cradle, Christians [despite] their desire to strengthen his religion are not embracing this miracle. They said that we acquired this story and told it from untrustworthy people. The proof that Jesus did not speak in the cradle is that the Jews did not know about it and likewise the Majus, the Hindus, the Hazars and the Dailim. We said - in answer to their question in view of their denial of words of the Messiah in the cradle while a newborn - saying to

⁴⁸ Finkel's translation ends.

them that when you settled the question and you camouflaged it and you arranged its formulation, you believe that you had succeeded and you reached your goal. By my life although it is beautiful in appearance and delights the ear, we [say] that it is upon inspection a shameful trick and the meaning is offensive. By my life, if the Jews had accepted the resurrection of the four which you believe and the raising of the paralytic which you claim and the feeding of the crowd from small loaves [of bread] and the transformation of water into wine and walking on the water and [only] deny the words spoken in the cradle from all his miracles, then that position for you leads to criticism. For the Jews reject all these [miracles]. Sometimes they laugh, sometimes they become angry and they say that [Jesus] was an owner of magic words and a sorcerer and a shameless doctor and a quack and a possessor of tricks and one who practices deception and who read books [of magic] and was eloquent [yet] silent and was killed [yet] was blessed. He was before that a fisherman of fish and an owner of nets. And in the same way his companions, as he went out, were in secret agreement with him. He did not have power. The best of Jews and the most moderate of them claim that he is the son of Joseph, the carpenter; that he had been in agreement [with] that the paralytic several years before his raising even then he was made well known with the paralytic and his situation was known in the course of time in meeting with the crowd of people; as if he was not searching [for a cure] even doubting to him of the chronic illness and littleness of strength and the severity of the need. Then Jesus said hold out your hand and he held it out and he raised him up, but due to a long time of sitting [the body] continued to remain like it had been.⁴⁹ [The Jews also claim] that he never inspired (bring back to life) a

⁴⁹ The stiffness of the body allowed the man to remain standing and thus appeared he was healed.

deceased one, but on the contrary a man was cured called La'ar⁵⁰ because he lost consciousness a day and a night. His mother was undiscerning, simple-minded and thought her son dead and as Jesus passed by, she yelled and screamed so that he entered her house in order to silence her. He consoled her and touched the pulse of La'ar and realised La'ar was alive and so he treated him until he raised La'ar. The mother, in her ignorance, did not doubt that he had been dead and because of her joy over his living, praised Jesus and spoke about this [everywhere]. How can you cite as witnesses a people [who have] this teaching about your founder when they say: How can a baby, even a newborn, speak in the cradle without friend and foe being unaware?

272-275 If the Mazdeens accepted one sign and more appropriately a miracle belonging to Jesus, you [Christians] would have [the right] to reject us by them (the Mazdeen's testimony) and you are seeking help by their [the Mazdeen's] denial. However, the position of Jesus for the Mazdeens is the same as the position of Zoroaster is for the Christians. What is their weakness with them and their affection in their denial? (Why do the Christians want to use the Mazdeens rejection of the cradle miracle when they reject all the miracles, are the Christians that weak?)

276-280 As for your words: How did Hindus, the Hazars and the Turks not know about this miracle? When did the Hindus ever acknowledge a miracle to Moses, let alone Jesus? When did you acknowledge a sign to a prophet or give account of his life so that you call upon the Hindus as a witness for the words of Jesus in the cradle? And when were the Turks, the Dailim, the Hazars, the Tartars and the Tailasan used as proof in such an argument?

⁵⁰ Lazarus

281-293 If they [the Christians] asked us about how come they do not know this and no one told them this, we will answer them, after dispensing with their objections, exposing their counter arguments and proving their witness to be untruthful, replying: They, on the contrary, received their religion according to four individuals: two of them from the disciples by their claim John and Matthew and two of them from those who believed after, Mark and Luke. These four were not safe from errors, forgetfulness, deliberate lies and the collusion in sharing and distributing among themselves information and the leadership. They said: If they were above any lie and any omission, infallible in the religion of God (the exalted) or those who lose a commission,⁵¹ then we will say: the differences of their accounts in the Gospel, the contradictions between each of their books, their differences in [explaining] the nature of Christ and their differences in their [canonical] law are proof of the veracity of what we have said about them and you can disregard [them]. One cannot deny someone like Luke could lie for he was not an Apostle and he was Jewish a few days before that [event]. In addition, your servants among the Apostles were better than Luke the servant of the Messiah in the evident judgment by purity and distinguished character and honesty.

Section IV

294-314 You asked about their claim: If God took one of his servants like a friend, can one admit that God adopts one of his servant like a son; that He searches by that [adoption] to express his mercy to him and his affection for him and that He desires for him an education and training; and that His position is kind and friendly toward him? In the same way does God call one of servants a friend and wants to bestow His honours and exaltation upon him and wants to indicate his servant's special place? I noticed

⁵¹ In the sense of being incompetent and/or purposely neglecting the commission as in perjury.

among the [Muslim] theologians who allow this and do not deny it, [as long as] it is about adoption, education, showing with kindness [the servant's] status and expressing to him in a special way with mercy and affection, but not from the point of view of childbirth and taking a female companion. They say by analogy there is no difference between taking the child by adoption and education and between taking a friend by friendship and affection. They further claim that God (the Exalted) decides on the names by what He desires just as He decides about the quality of person with what He desires. They permit [the] claims of the peoples of the book about the Tevrat (Pentateuch), the Gospel, the Zebur (Psalms), and the books of the prophets, God bless them, that God said: 'Israel is my firstborn which is [the] first⁵² of adoption of my creation'; that He also said: 'Israel is my firstborn and his sons are my children; and to David: 'He will bring forth⁵³ for you a boy. He calls me a son and I call him father'. The Messiah said in the Injil [Gospel]: 'I am going to my Father and to your Father and to my god and your god'; and he commanded the disciples to say in their prayers: 'Oh, our Father in the heavens your name is sanctified'. These, in a remarkable way and in repulsive teaching, prove that the means of expression of the Jews is bad and that the companions of the book are unable to apply allegorical interpretation and are ignorant of the metaphors of words and the alterations of languages; [They are ignorant also of] the way of translating one language to another and what is allowed and not allowed [to be used] about God. The reason for these interpretations is that everyone is in error and are blindly imitating [the past] and [hold to] the beliefs of anthropomorphism. They say: On the contrary the names were put down to the measure of usefulness and to predestination appropriate for the

⁵² Or 'beginning'

⁵³ ولد

natures of people. Perhaps the matter is suitable and believable that God adopted him or takes one [as] a friend or addressed him directly or created him from nothing or brought him forth from sterile parents; Perhaps it was a different matter entirely. As we venerate [him], we call him ‘generous’ (jawād), but God forbade us that we call him ‘generous’ (sakhi) or ‘noble’ (sari). He ordered us to call him faithful and forbade us to call him a muslim. He ordered us to call him ‘merciful one’ and forbade us to call him a ‘friend’ (rafiq). All of these examples are one, but [can be] extended and found according to many customs. It is possible that all of these were widespread in the religions of the Hinds, Salih, Shu’aib and Ismā’il since it was common in the words of the Arabs [to find] arguments for and against that.

320-331 Yet we – God have mercy on you – cannot accept that God has a son, either from natural birth or from adoption. We consider that this would be allowing great ignorance and a big sin because if God is Jacob’s father then he must be Joseph’s grandfather. If we allowed that God can be a grandfather and a father (this does not necessarily imply parentage, introduce any complication nor diminish His greatness and splendour), then we must also admit God is a paternal uncle and a maternal uncle. For it is permitted that we name him on the strength of His mercy, His affection for a person [chosen by Him] and His willingness to bring him up, then it is equally proper for someone wishing to do Him honour and show Him that he acknowledges His superiority and mastery over the whole creation to call Him brother and find a companion and a friend for Him. This is what is allowed only for those who do not know the greatness of God and man’s insignificance compared to Him.⁵⁴ It is not wise to degrade His essence in honouring His servant and to detract from his status in the support of one other than him.

⁵⁴ The above section of this paragraph was compared to Pellat’s translation found in *Life and Works*, 88-89.

It is not from wisdom that you do good to your slave and do harm to yourself; and you bring out of surplus what he does not need by squandering what he does need and much praise does not equal a little bit of the curse. He did not praise God and did not know his divinity from authority upon him the character of the human being and the kinship of the nature (of man) and the equality of servants.

332-353 The master is not free in raising his servant and honouring him from other masters: as for that he becomes powerless over his honour except by degrading himself or he becomes above that possessing power abounding in majesty and the perfection of beauty. If he is unable to raise somebody without himself decreasing, then this shows weakness and the limitation of power. If he was above that possessing power for he preferred to degrade himself and humiliate his dignity even this is stupidity, which is unbearable. These two cases are rejected because it concerns God.⁵⁵ I shall show you another aspect of the question, which will make you see that my argument is well founded. Namely, if God (the blessed and Sublime) knew that in the Books, which He revealed to Banū (Children of) Israel that ‘your father was my firstborn and my son and you are sons of my firstborn’, He would not have been angry with them if they said: ‘We are sons of God’.⁵⁶ For how could God’s son’s son be other than God’s grandson? That would have been a mark of complete respect and perfect love, especially because he had said in the Pentateuch: ‘Banū Israel are son’s of my firstborn.’ You know that the Arabs when they claimed that the angels were daughters of God,⁵⁷ how God regarded this belief as a grave sin and he was angry against this people. He had known that the Arabs were not making the angels His daughters by childbirth and the companions of the prophets

⁵⁵ The remainder of this paragraph was compared to Pellat’s translation found in *Life and Works*, 89.

⁵⁶ Qur’ān 5:18

⁵⁷ cf. Qur’ān 16:57

[agree]. For how could God allow himself to announce to his creatures beforehand that Jacob was His son, like Solomon, Ezra and Jesus? For God, the exalted, is too great for fatherhood to be counted among His attributes and people are too low to claim to have been begotten of the exalted God.

The saying that God is a father, a grandfather and a brother and a paternal uncle is for the latter ones [the Jews] necessary and for the Christians even more necessary because the Christians claim that God is the Messiah son of Mary and that the Messiah said to Apostles [you] are my brothers, then if the Apostles had children, God becomes their paternal uncle. Indeed, they have claimed that Mark is the son of Shamūn al-Ṣafā and that Zūzra was his daughter and that the Christians are certain that in the Gospel of Mark [it says] ‘ “Māzād” your mother and your brothers are at the door’. An interpretation of “Māzād” is Master and therefore they cannot prevent that God (the blessed and exalted) becomes father, grandfather and paternal uncle.

354-359 If, not that God said to the Jews, they said that Ezra is God’s son, and the hand of God is tied and that God is poor and we are rich; if, not that God said to the Christians, they said the Messiah is God’s son and claim that you said that the Messiah is God’s son; and he said he had disbelieved those who said that God is a third of three⁵⁸ – I would prefer to fall from the sky rather than pronounce only one word of all that they say, but it is not possible to disclose all their disgraceful acts and what they conceal of their shame except by reporting their doctrines and the remarks they make.

360-383 If they said: “Did they inform us about God and the Tevrat? Is it not authentic? We said “yes”. They will then say if in the Tevrat, Israel is my firstborn and all that you mention about us is well known in the writings, we will reply that the people

⁵⁸ Qur’ān 5:73

on the contrary knew very little about the meanings of words and about bad translations and their opinion begins with feeling [rather than reason]. By my life if they had the intelligence of the Muslims and their knowledge of what is permitted in the words [language] of the Arabs and what is allowed to apply to God, they would have added to their knowledge of the Hebrew Language and would have found for these expressions good interpretations and a plain extract and an easily understood meaning. If they had not given, in all their translations, a meaning for each word, then discussion and controversy [with them] would be possible, but they know well that God, the exalted and blessed, said in the Decalogue which the finger of God wrote: 'I am a powerful (violent) God; I am an intelligent God and I am the fire which devours all other fires. He punishes the sons for the sins of the fathers -- the first century, and the second and the third to the seventh'; that David said in the Zabur (Psalms): 'Your eyes open oh Lord', 'Rise oh Lord', 'He listened to me he heard you, oh Lord' and David also said in another place concerning God (the exalted): 'God awoke just as a drunk awakes who had drunk the wine'; and that Moses said in the Tevrat: 'God created everything by His word and by the spirit of his breath'; and that God said in the Tevrat to my son Israel: 'By my powerful arms, I brought you out from the people of Egypt'; and he said in the book of Isaiah⁵⁹: 'Praise God with a new praise,⁶⁰ Praise Him in the remotest part of the earth, [the praise] fills the islands and its inhabitants and the seas and the deserts and what is in it and the sons of Kedar in their palaces and the residents of the mountains.' Kedar means the sons of Ishmael: 'They begin to shout the glory and the nobility of God and they are clothed with the praise of God in the islands'; and that God said beyond that: 'The word inspires

⁵⁹ Isaiah 42:10-11

⁶⁰ Allouche chose not to translate the rest of this paragraph except for the last two lines.

like the mountains and like a brave tested man and the enemies and that which is defended rebukes and shouts and is furious and murders his enemies; the earth and sky are rejoicing'; and God also said in the book of Isaiah: 'He became silent and he said when he refused to tell like the woman who is overtaken by her the labour pains because bearing many children did she regret; and that you saw a cultivated ridge of the mountains and the mountain path and he took with the Arabs in a companion they are not knowing it.' All of these Arabic expressions are collected and meaning of this is not authorised [by] someone from the people of science. Examples of this kind are numerous and I do not quote them because you know them.

384-388⁶¹ You know that the Jews if they take the Qur'ān, even they translate it into Hebrew, they take from it meanings in order to change it for their own purposes. What is one to think about them if they translate 'they feel sorry for us' with 'we take revenge on them'; and 'to write in an artificial way' with 'real substance'; and 'the heavens are folded up by his right hand' to 'upon the throne he sits down'; and 'radiance to her Lord' for 'to guard' and saying 'when you reveal his lord to the mountains, he appoints its destruction'; and 'God spoke to Moses words'⁶² and 'Your Lord came and the Angels rank upon rank'.⁶³

389-398 It is known that our exegetes and our interpreters have a better knowledge and a more exact science of the various modes of expressions than the Jews and the interpreters of Books. We find in our Tafsir (commentaries) what is not allowed to be used in describing the attributes of God, allowed by neither the theologians in their process of explanation by analogy nor the grammarians (philologists) in their study of the

⁶¹ This paragraph is missing from the translation of Allouche "Un traité," 145.

⁶² Qur'ān 4:164

⁶³ Qur'ān 89:22

literary Arabic. [This is especially so] when one considers the Jews with their stupidity and error and lack of philosophical speculation and their unquestioning adoption. The Arabs themselves made mistakes in this field. If the masters of the Arabic language made mistakes and erred, then [more errors are made] by those who have less knowledge of Arabic. Some of the Arabs heard all the expressions of the Arabs [Bedouins]: ‘The hearts are in the hand of God’; and their expression in the prayer: ‘Our leaders (chief men of the tribe) are in the hand of God’; and its expression of the majority of the people of remembrance: ‘Indeed, his two hands are open’; and the Arab expression: ‘This is from the hands of God for his grace is upon us’; and it was also from their language that the palm of God is a hand in the same way that grace is a hand and the power is a hand and even the intuitive one made an error and said: ‘Comfort upon you because the destiny of anything is in the palm of the hand of God.’⁶⁴

399-418 It was Ibrāhīm bin Sayyār al-Nazzām who responded with an answer and I am one who remembers it, God willing, and upon the answer were the learned of the Mu’tazilites, [which] I did not find satisfactory nor clear. He was representing khalīl in the same way as ḥabīb and wali and he said khalīl, the merciful (al-rahman), is synonymous with his ḥabīb (friend) and his wali (benefactor) and his nāṣar (protector) and the creatures and the sovereign power and the loving friend are equal. Since all of these words in his opinion are equal, he allows a servant to be called ‘a son’ in terms of education, which is out of mercy and not in terms of nursing and raising a child from the womb. However, if a person had mercy on a puppy dog and then he raised it, he is not allowed to call the dog ‘a son’ or to call himself ‘a father’ [of the dog]. If he received a child and raised him, he is permitted to call him ‘a son’ and he names himself the child’s

⁶⁴ See Qur’ān 3:26, 73; 48:10; 57:29

father because he resembles his son and the son was born in his likeness. There is no such kinship between dogs and human beings. Even if the resemblance of people was further from God (the exalted) than from the resemblance of the puppy was from the people, God was more right to make him his son and to bring him into relation to himself. We said to Ibrāhīm Nazzām - (with his answer and his deduction which he drew from it [there is a] contradiction between our deduction and his deduction [so we ask]) -: Have you seen a dog on intimate terms with his master (certainly not) and that he protects and defends it and makes it live by the game it takes and is close to him in his characteristics and goes out with his master? Can the master call the dog a friend despite little resemblance or relation with the dog? Even if he said 'no', we say: the good servant resembles God even less than the good dog with the man. How is it allowed in your analogy that God becomes the friend of one (who) does not resemble him, only because of his good deeds, yet dogs are not allowed to be called a friend and a son because he raised and trained his dog to the position of a son which provides [the needs] of the brother and the parents? The virtuous man does not resemble God in any way and the dog is in many ways closer in resemblance to man than he is different to man. However, it is these differences between man and dog which prohibits calling a dog 'friend' and 'son' of man.

419-431 If you had asked me: What is my answer to this question, I would say: Abraham (the grace of God upon him) was khalīl (friend), but he was not khalīl by a khulla (friendship) which was between him and God (the exalted) because friendship, brotherhood, affection, purity, blending, etcetera is rejected concerning God being scarcely found between him and between his servants. However, fraternity and friendship are included in the khulla and the khulla is more general of higher in rank and

more specifically of the state. One claims Abraham is khalīl (friend) by the need (khalla) that God brought about to his person and his wealth. Between the facts of being khalīl (friend) by friendship (khulla) and between him and his Lord there is a very clear difference. God (the exalted) subjected Abraham (upon him peace) to sufferings that no one before him faced: they threw him in the fire; he sacrificed his son; and he assumed the burden of caring for the destitute using his property in hospitality, charity and selflessness; he [faced] the hostility of his relatives; the disavowal of his father and mother in their life and after their death; he left his dwelling and abandoned his home and [lived elsewhere than his] home land. Because of these hardships endured in God, he became khalīl in God. Khalīl and mutakhalīl are the same in the words of the Arabs [Bedouins]. The proof that khalīl is from khulla (friendship) just as it is from khalla is in the expression of Zuhīr Bin Abi-Sulan who praises an old man (ḥarīm):

432-434 Even if a friend (khalīl) came to him one day [with] a problem, he says my property is not incapable [of helping you] and it is not forbidden [to you] and another one said: Until you help me I am in need of the family of Laila once for a khalīl (a friend).

435-445 He is not praising him because he is his friend (khalīl) and that his friend (ṣadīk) is a poor beggar who comes [on] the day of the problem and spreads out his hand to charity and to the gift. On the contrary khalīl in this situation is from khulla and from ikhtilāl not from khalla and ikhtalāl. Abraham (peace be upon him) when he became in God conceited, God ascribed him to his person and he distinguished him from among the saints for he named him 'Khalīl of God' (friend of God); just as he named the Ka'ba 'the house of God' from among all the houses and the people of Mecca 'people of God' from

among all the countries; he called the camel of Ṣāliḥ⁶⁵ (peace be upon it) ‘the camel of God’ from among all the camels. So then, everything makes God (the exalted) great [whether] from good and evil and from reward and punishment. Just as they said: he called him in the curse of God, in the hell of God and in his fire. In the same way he said of the Qur’ān ‘the book of God’ and to Muḥarrām ‘the month of God’ and in the same way he called Ḥamza (mercy of God the exalted remembered him be content with him) ‘Lion of God’ and to Khālīd (mercy of God upon him) ‘Sword of God’ (the exalted). In our analogy this is not saying that God is the friend of Abraham like it is saying that Abraham is God’s friend.

446-462 If somebody says: how did they not place him above all the prophets since God had given him precedence with his name that no other prophet carried? They would say that this name was derived for him from his works and his situation and his manner. He had called Moses (peace be upon him) ‘Interlocutor of God’ and Jesus ‘Spirit of God’ which he did not give to Abraham and Muḥammad (grace of God be upon them) and that Muḥammad (grace be upon him and peace) was a higher rank than them. Because God (the exalted) spoke to the prophets (peace be upon them) by the tongue of the angels and spoke [directly] to Moses just as he spoke to the Angels for this reason he calls Moses ‘Interlocutor of God’. God creates people through the seed of man in women according to the usual ways of reproduction in nature. [On the other hand] God created in the womb of Mary a spirit and a body in a different way from the usual manner of a man and a woman in procreation. One can admit that a prophet can have virtues that are not seen in other prophets even if the last has a higher rank than the second while the second can

⁶⁵ Qur’ān 7:73

have virtues not possessed by the first. It is the same for all people. Like the man who is good to [his] parents, is devoted to them and fulfils his covenant with them in patience, but being lame cannot do jihad and being poor cannot contribute to the expenditure [of jihad]. Another one has neither a father nor a mother is wealthy, has a proper character and has a pure nature. He obeyed this for the jihad and the expenditure and he obeyed that for kindness of his parents and patience upon them both. If the discussion were agitated, it would extend indefinitely (there is so much to say). If the principle is established by this discussion then the consequences are numerous and the various ways of exposing them increase. If one did not want to tire the reader nor try the patience of the listener, it would be necessary to amplify all the questions in order for the proof to be more complete and the book more comprehensive. But on the contrary we began the book with the intention only to destroy Christianity.

Section V

463-470 We said in another reply: If the Messiah, on the contrary, was regarded as the son of God because God created him without a male even Adam and Eve, because they were created without a male and female, are more deserving of this name than he who was created without father. If that was due to the consequence of upbringing, then did God hold in esteem the son of Moses al-Ḥamad, and David and all the prophets? And if one must explain [the word] ‘to raise’ as nourishing, providing means of subsistence, to feed him and giving him drink, did not God do that for all people? Didn’t you define ‘to raise’ by his giving them nourishment and drink? Didn’t you say God raised Jesus and didn’t you want [for nothing] except nourishment and he provided that? Didn’t God embrace and touch him reshaping him. He did not by his own hand provide

his food and drink even that becomes a means for him aside from any other people. On the contrary, God gave him the milk of his mother in his youth and food with grain and water in his later years.

Section VI

471-478 The miracle of Adam (peace be on him) was more amazing and his upbringing more nobler and his final destiny higher and most eminent because the sky was his house and paradise his residence and the angels his servants. Indeed, he is the precedent [for all who follow] in giving worship and worship is the best submission. If it was by the superiority of the sciences and the instruction for whom God (the exalted) spoke to him and he entrusted his dialogue without sending him his angels and he sent him his messenger nearest in rank and most elevated in rank and more deserving by the condition of education and distinguished of the sciences. God (the exalted) spoke to Adam just as he spoke to his angels. Then he taught him all the names and not just all the names, but also the meanings.⁶⁶ For likewise he had designated him his entire peacemaker and a peacemaker is his son. That is the limit of the innate nature of the Adams (human beings) and the extent of the power of the created ones.

Section VII

479-502 When they say, that we tell lies to the people about beliefs that they are unaware of and cannot possibly believe, [namely that] we claim the Jews said: ‘God (the exalted) is poor and we are rich’; ‘the hand of God is tied’; ‘Ezra is the son of God’, and [despite] their differences of opinion and their great number, they deny and vigorously refuse these claims, then we will say to them: ‘The Jews, God (the exalted) curse them, were discrediting the Qur’ān and were searching for [ways] to destroy it by looking for

⁶⁶ Qur’ān 2:31

its defects, trying to show the Prophet made errors in it. They criticised the Qur'ān from all sides and were treating it (Qur'ān) with all subterfuge in order to confuse the weak and inflate the hearts of the ignorant.⁶⁷ When [the Jews] heard the words of God (the exalted) to his servants who give them a loan and ask from them double in return, it is a renowned saying that: 'whoever lends God a good loan, God multiplies in return [in the next life].'⁶⁸ The Jews claim, [with] the intention of criticism, [to show] the defect and the errors [of the Qur'ān] and [with] stubborn zeal; that God asks for a loan from us and the one who asks for a loan is one who is poor which makes us rich [in comparison]. [The Jews] disbelieve that saying since it was from denial and error and not from its [Jewish] religion, which was [ironically] the origin [of the saying] that God is poor and his servants are rich. How can humanity conclude that God (the exalted) is a powerless paternal uncle [when] he has power over man from his beginning with [the fact that] God created and provided him with the means of subsistence and if God wills he could deprive him; he could hinder him, and if he wills he could forgive him? He possesses power over everything just as he has power over one [thing]. The metaphor of the verse in [terms of] language is obvious and the interpretation is plain. The man among them was lending to his companion (not a close friend) in order to receive back with the original sum of his property a small profit. Then he is one who takes a risk with his property until it returns [with a profit]. However, God said to them (out of the goodness of his habit and grace), support your poor and give in the proper manner to your relatives from the property which I have given you and the prosperity that I granted you by my order and my guarantee. For I consider these alms a loan from you and although I have

⁶⁷ Literally 'make rich the hearts of the wealthy'

⁶⁸ Qur'ān 2:245

more right than you (to take your property which is mine), I am your compensation and will return to you your loan multiplied so much that any ambition would not have taken the risk to achieve such a return. In addition your property is safe from risk and protected from fraud. The man says to his servant loan me a dirham because I have a need and the servant gives it to him while knowing that he [already] owns his servant and his property. On the contrary these are [but] words and doing good demonstrates the good character and the favour for the servant and the community and is a message from God to his servant which is auspicious to him, and which was conferred by God, himself. This (one) does not make a mistake in words and does not become weary in the words, but the stubborn in order to bring up every reason [to criticise] clings on all he can find.

503-518 When the message [of the Qur'ān] concerning the Jews said: 'the hand of God is tied', one should not believe that the Jews see that his forearm is tied to his neck with a chain. How can one hold the view of this belief? Because it would require one to believe that God chained himself or another one bound him, these two [ideas] cannot reasonably be considered by any men able to answer for his actions and the intelligent use of instruction. But the Jews are people of the Jabriyah⁶⁹ and the Jabriyah reluctantly give God time and complain to him [about] time. They do not [want to] acknowledge it and refuse to admit it, for its expression 'the hand of God is tied' means his gift of charity.⁷⁰ The expression 'tied' does not mean that God was obstructed and restrained by someone other than God. But if in their opinion God is the one who restrained his two hands and obstructed his grace, then he is imprisoned by his own thinking and is

⁶⁹ The Jabriyah was an Islamic school of thought teaching the inescapability of fate.

⁷⁰ The Jabriyah would see 'the hand of God tied' as an expression of being bound to fate already determined and implemented by God. Is God himself tied to fate or is His will, fate itself? Al-Jāhiz mocks the Jabriyah pointing out the contradictions of such a position.

prohibited by his [own] restraint. This shows they mean by his two hands grace and kindness are not from the forearm and the arm, it is the answer of their words when it is said: 'Indeed, his hands are open; he spends as he desires'.⁷¹ It is a proof of what we said and an evidence of what we described. If they say, 'Why is it not [simply] being said that the Jews deem God stingy and deny his goodness without using the expression that the hand of God is tied?' We answer that [when] God wants to make known the people are inaccurate and express his anger, these people should not ask God to expose their beliefs and their sins in elegant terms and with selected expressions. How, while seeking a deterrence for their saying, it is odious to them to have someone hear that about them. If God (the exalted) had wanted you to follow the command and reduced it and its facilitation he would say none of this and every truth⁷² is permissible in the words. This figure of expression of their question is in language while knowledge is upon the people of clearness and eloquence.

519-526 When they say that the Jews do not claim that Ezra is 'son of God', it is necessary to consider that the Jews are divided into two groups: one of them expresses this belief in a specific way and the other in a more general way. The ones of the first group see that Ezra repeated words for them [from] the Tevrat of his own accord after its lessons and separated its decrees they exaggerated [his role and said he was the son of God]. It is well known among their order and [one still finds] a group from their remnant [who live] in Yemen, Northern Syria including the country of Rum (Byzantines). These with their elite are saying: 'Israel of God are his sons' by which they do not mean by blood relation. The name Ezra became associated with 'son of God' because of his

⁷¹ Qur'an 5:64

⁷² The last part of this phrase is obscure in the manuscript and Finkel offers his interpretation. The text reads صدق جائز في الكلام and Finkel offers "في الاصل وحل"

obedience, and great learning. Those who express the belief in a general way see that every Jew who descends from Israel is directly a son of God thus they are not sons of sons. [So in this way Ezra can be spoken of as a son of God.]

Section VIII⁷³

527-553 If they say: Is not the Messiah the Spirit and Word of God, as God said: ‘His word cast into Mary, and a spirit [issuing⁷⁴] from him?’⁷⁵ Did he not Himself announce that He breathed in her from his Spirit and that she was pure? Did He not say that Jesus had no [human] father and that he was a creator since he was moulding from the clay the bird, which became animated and flew?⁷⁶ What greater proof is there that the Messiah is in no respect like a man and is different from all mankind? We reply to them: You have questioned us about our book and what is permitted in our language and our theology and did not ask us about what is permitted in your language and your theology. If we allowed what in our language is not allowed and we say about God what we don’t know, we would be liable before God and our hearers to the punishment appropriate to presumptuousness, and in a worse situation than heretics, and we would be giving you more than what you asked and exceeding your best hopes. If we say ‘Jesus is the Spirit of God and His word’ it is necessary for us in our language to say that God made him His son, and to make him with God (the exalted) another god and to say that a spirit was in God and left from Him and entered to the body of Jesus and the breast of Mary, then it is necessary for us to say the same thing about Gabriel because he too was called Spirit of God and Holy Spirit. However, you know very well that we believe no such thing and we

⁷³ This Section was compared to Pellat’s translation found in *Life and Works*, 89-91.

⁷⁴ Pellat in *Life and Works*, 89 notes the idea is issuing from God not merely given from God.

⁷⁵ Qur’ān 4:171.

⁷⁶ Cf. Qur’ān 5:110.

do not allow anything of the kind. How can we tell people things that we do not think, or acquaint them with beliefs that we do not profess? If God (the exalted of memory) says ‘We breathed upon him from our spirit’, it would mean a breath like the breathing into a water-skin or like the breath of the Jeweller in the bellows, and that some of the Spirit of God left Him and entered to the body of Jesus and the body of his mother Mary. This teaching would be more appropriate for Adam because He said: ‘He began by creating man from clay, then He brought about his descendants - and to this doctrine it is said - He breathed on the mud from his Spirit’⁷⁷ and likewise it is said ‘If I made him good and I breathed in him from my Spirit then [the angels] would bow down to him’.⁷⁸ The word ‘breathe into’ has various meanings, like the word *rūḥ* (spirit, breath). God attributed this Spirit to Himself in some cases and not in others, depending on their importance. The cases in which He attributes it to Himself include Gabriel, who is called the Faithful Spirit, and Jesus son of Mary. The cases in which the word *rūḥ* means only help is that of Moses, when he said: ‘The sons of an unnamed person answered the call of the prophet, but they did not answer You. For God said to him: ‘The spirit of God is with every one.’ As for the Qur’ān, God has called it Spirit and made it to be a guide to people for their worldly goods and their bodies. Because the two meanings of the word *rūḥ* can lead to ambiguity, He added in each case a word to distinguish it from the others, saying to his prophet (God grant him peace): ‘Likewise we also revealed to you a Spirit from Us’,⁷⁹ and he said: ‘The angels shall come down, and the Spirit shall be in them’.⁸⁰

Section IX

⁷⁷ Qur’ān 32:7

⁷⁸ Qur’ān 15:30

⁷⁹ Qur’ān 42:52.

⁸⁰ Qur’ān 98:4.

554-559 We have spoken about the answers given by the Christians and we have amended their questions with issues they have not asked themselves so that [our] proof was complete and [our] reply was comprehensive. Thus, it is known from reading this book and pondering this reply that we do not [want] to take advantage [of] their weakness and we do not [want] to exploit their blindness; that the arrogance with the argument and the confidence with the success and the victory is that which we were called to make known about them which they themselves were unaware. We are saying their questions have significance and we should exercise caution and vigilance. The preceding replies should guard the weak ones and those inadequate by providing answers to their questions.

560-577 We will ask them [questions], if God wills, and we will answer for them. We will penetrate deeply into their answers just as we asked these questions ourselves. It is being said to them: Was the Messiah just a man without being God, was he a god without being a man or was he god and man? If they claim that he was a god and not a man, we say to them: the Messiah was a baby, he became a young man, grew a beard, was eating and drinking and walking around, urinating, was killed by your claim, was crucified and was given birth by Mary who nursed him or is this another person who was eating and drinking according to what we described? What [else] does the word 'man' mean except as we described and enumerated? How can he be a god who is not a man while characterised by all the attributes of mankind? Others who share similar characteristics are not called the same as the Messiah even though the attributes are similar. If they claim that it has not been altered concerning humanity and has not changed concerning the inherent nature of the human being: but when the divinity was in him, he became a creator and was called a god. We said to them: they informed us about

the divinity, was it in him alone or was divinity found in others? If they claim that [divinity] was in him and in others, then he is not the first (original) in that he was a creator and is named a god among others. If it was in him alone, then divinity has a body. We will say in shattering them, when we approach the criticism of anthropomorphism which is a doctrine held among them except for their theologians and philosophers who differ in opinion. They are anthropomorphists to avoid much disgrace and concerning the reply are failures. It is enough for the anthropomorphists to be shameful. And it is a saying the Jews universally accept and their brothers among the Rafidites and their Satans among the Musabihha and the Hashwiya al-Nabita. It is widely dispersed among the people. God (the exalted) is the one to ask for help.

From a written specimen from the Timurienne Library in Cairo, No. 19 Literature, copied by the hand of Muḥammad b. Allāh b. Ibrāhīm Al-Zamārānī, in the month of du'l-ka-da 1315 which is the copy of a handwritten specimen which dates from the month of ragab 403 of Hijra, by the hand of Abu'l Qāsim 'Ubaid Allah b. Alī.

Chapter 4

A Partial Analysis of Radd ‘alā al-Naṣārā

Thus far in this study, the historical context surrounding the polemic of al-Jāḥiẓ and an English translation of the letter have been presented. The purpose of this exercise has been to prepare for an analysis of some of the contents, arguments and perceptions al-Jāḥiẓ offers to his readers. Even though the letter has come down to us incomplete, as will be discussed below, there remains much that this treatise adds to the corpus of ninth century polemic. However, due to the constraints of this present study and for the purpose of brevity, the entire letter will not be analysed. For example, the polemic against the Jews and other non-Muslims will not be examined and even within the polemic against the Christians, only a portion will be studied. In order to assist future work into the areas left unanalysed, a detailed outline of the contents of the letter is provided as an appendix.¹ Thus, the purpose of this brief analysis is to examine what is arguably al-Jāḥiẓ’s most original contribution to the genre of anti-Christian polemic, which is his treatment of Christians in an historic, socio-economic and religious context. The discussion will begin with some comment concerning the structure, purpose and style of the letter and conclude with the analysis.

Structure, Purpose and Style of the Letter

Structure, purpose and style are not treated here as necessarily independent features of this letter. Al-Jāḥiẓ mingles structure and style together to serve his purpose. One could say these are really interdependent qualities and discussing one requires an understanding of the others. It is perhaps for this reason some readers find Jāḥiẓ difficult

¹ See Appendix 1 for an outline of the letter.

to read. Beeston in his introduction to the epistle on the *Singing Girls* makes two important comments.² First, al-Jāḥiẓ was a writer who tended to see many sides of a topic. It seemed his thinking would drive him to move quickly from one idea to the next adding observations or qualifications to his ideas to the point of sometimes contradicting himself. It is perhaps better to say that Jāḥiẓ paints rather than writes with words. When reading a text, one looks for logical order and presentation of ideas and arguments leading to some form of conclusion. However, Jāḥiẓ tends to paint his writings by adding colour, re-painting sections, leaving areas untouched, obscuring perspective yet leaving enough structure to see through the style. He is free to make obvious conclusions, which he does, and yet he allows the reader to interpret even to disagree. Indeed, it is more the style that attracts than the actual content. It is how he presents ideas rather than the ideas themselves.

... he was not a logician, and his Epistles were not always written with the object of convincing the readers and securing their adherence to a particular proposition or point of view, even though they frequently present a superficial appearance of argumentation; he was an observer of life, and his observations are as many-sided and mutually contradictory as life itself. It is a picture of the life of his time that his Epistles are so valuable.³

One example of such observations and argumentation, which in this case is concerned with the superficial favour the Muslim community granted the Christians over the Jews, finds Jāḥiẓ writing:

Another cause for the admiration accorded by the masses to the Christians is the fact that they are secretaries and servants to kings, physicians to nobles, perfumers and money changers, whereas the Jews are found to be but dyers, tanners, cuppers, butchers and cobblers. Our people observing thus the occupations of the Jews and the Christians concluded that the

² *The Epistle on Singing-Girls of Jāḥiẓ*. translated & edited by A.F.L. Beeston (Warminster, England: Aris & Phillips LTD, 1980), 1,2.

³ *Ibid.*, 1

religion of the Jews must compare as unfavourably as do their professions and that their unbelief must be the foulest of all since they are the filthiest of all nations. Why the Christians, ugly as they are, are physically less repulsive than the Jews may be explained by the fact that the Jews, by not intermarrying, have intensified the offensiveness of their features. Exotic elements have not mingled with them; neither have males of alien races had intercourse with their women, nor have their men cohabited with females of a foreign stock. The Jewish race therefore has been denied high mental qualities, sound physique and superior lactation. The same results (are) obtain(ed) when horses, camels, donkeys and pigeons are inbred.

The observations offered are perhaps accurate in one sense, the equating of reputation to occupation, yet in another sense they are offensive such as comparing the Jewish race to animals who, due to inbreeding, are inferior people. The reader is left to decide what to accept of such “observations”.

The second point Beeston makes concerning the difficulties in reading Jāḥiẓ revolve around his writing style.⁴ Understanding is easily hindered by the use of complex paragraph structures. Jāḥiẓ often uses subordinate clauses and long parenthetical statements that can continue for a page or more and leave the reader somewhat lost as to the point. It is almost as if Jāḥiẓ is simply thinking out loud and writing for himself, but these digressions and divergences are part of the charm of his writing. Whether or not he is skilfully constructing these in an effort to obscure his real intentions or whether these reflect a man whose mind tends to wander is debatable. However, Pellat’s suggestion that Jāḥiẓ desired to vary his rhythm and subject-matter in order to break down his reasoning into easy steps and to make room for witticisms, anecdotes and pithy reflections is the most plausible explanation of the style of Jāḥiẓ’s writing.⁵

⁴ Ibid., 2.

⁵ Charles Pellat. “Al-Jāḥiẓ,” in *‘Abbasid Belles-Lettres*. (The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature). edited by Julia Ashtiany et al (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 94.

Despite a purpose driven mixture of style and structure, there is an underlying method to Jāḥiẓ's letter. Unfortunately attempting to reconstruct the structure of the work has two potential problems. First, the letter is incomplete. It ends abruptly and there appear breaks in the argument or thought of Jāḥiẓ. Any structure presented here necessarily reflects this abridgment. The second potential problem is that the structure is an interpretation of the thought of Jāḥiẓ created by the author of this thesis. This is not the only way to structure this letter. However, since Jāḥiẓ tends to mix style and structure as if creating a picture rather than simple prose, there is certain freedom of interpretation bounded by the structural supports Jāḥiẓ himself clearly provides. Given these two issues, a structure of the letter can be offered. In presenting this structure it must be remembered that Jāḥiẓ uses more than one structural style and this is seen in this reconstruction.

Finkels's edited Arabic manuscript comes to us divided into several sections, which roughly correspond to the ideas Jāḥiẓ presents, but if followed rigorously they tend to break the flow of argument. This may indicate either places of abridgement where the section headings were part of the letter or the section headings may have been added later for stylistic reasons. In either case, the section headings are noted, but do not dictate the structure that is presented below.

For our structural purposes, the letter is separated into three parts – the introduction, Muslims answer Christians, and Muslims question Christians. These parts are further divided into sections as follows:

- Part I – Introduction and Purpose
- Part II – Answering questions Christians ask the Muslims (Negative Apologetics)
 - Section I – Correct Muslim attitudes toward Christians
 - Section II – Answering Christian claims
- Part III - Muslims question Christians (Positive Apologetics)

Each of these parts reflects different structures and styles. At the outset of this thesis, two types of apologetic were introduced.⁶ Using these apologetic categories, part two of Jāḥiẓ's letter would correspond to negative apologetics. In negative apologetics, the major objective is to produce answers to challenges made against a religious faith. In contrast, part three of this letter is more inclined toward positive apologetics, which is concerned with asking questions. More will be said about this later, but it is important to notice the flow of thought moves from defending and protecting Muslims to challenging and questioning Christians. The objective is the same, that is, to show that Christians and Christianity are false, but Jāḥiẓ approaches this objective from different directions.

Part one, the introduction, begins with an acknowledgment of the reception of a letter written to Jāḥiẓ by a group of Muslims. This is followed by a series of Christian accusations against Muslims which Jāḥiẓ makes little attempt to answer. This could be a summary of the contents of the letter Jāḥiẓ originally received; it could be designed to create an emotional response from his readers, which would lead them to continue reading; it could also be a summary of some of the most difficult questions Christians generally raise. In any case, it leads to the purpose statement of the letter, which is two-fold, to provide answers for Muslims to questions Christians ask and secondly, to ask Christians questions.⁷ This purpose is restated by Jāḥiẓ later in his letter, after a lengthy digression, when he writes, "But on the contrary we began the book with the intention only to destroy Christianity."⁸

Part two entitled 'answering the questions Christians ask Muslims' is written for primarily a Muslim audience and is divided into two sections. Section one deals with

⁶ See the Introduction of this thesis, 1-2.

⁷ Translation, lines 62-63.

⁸ Ibid., line 462.

disabusing Muslims of their incorrect perceptions of Christians and section two seeks to refute various Christian claims. It is here that different styles and structures are seen. Section one, in contrast to the second section, includes no claims or accusations made by Christians. Instead it is a rhetorical diatribe against Christians with the purpose to show Muslims the real nature behind the Christian façade. The task is to protect, dissuade and educate Muslims about Christians. The structure of his thought is seen in the following way:

- I. Reasons for the positive view of Christians by the Muslim masses
 - A. Jews are close neighbours to Muslims, which Christians were not
 - B. Muslim émigrés to Ethiopia were welcomed
 - C. Wrong interpretation of Sūrat al-Mā'idah (5) 82-85
 - E. Respect for pre-Islamic Arab Christian Rulers
 - F. Trade with Christian ruled lands
 - G. Christianity widespread amongst the Arab Tribes
 - H. Power and prestige of Christian dynasties
- II. The realistic and intelligent view of Arab Christians and Byzantines
 - A. Not true people of science and rhetoric for the sciences came from non-Christians
 - B. Christians obtained learning and books from Greeks
 - C. Christian faith resembles Manichaeism even Atheism
- III. The true dangers of Christians to the Muslims
 - A. Christian appeal
 - B. Muslim negligence to impose the *Dhimmi* status
 - C. Muslim failures to follow the teachings of Muḥammad
 - D. Christian polemic
 - E. Dissemination of false religious information by the Christians

The second section of part two continues with negative apologetic, but in a different way than the previous section. Here Jāḥiẓ set outs a series of Christian claims that he attempts to refute. In all, four claims are dealt with and they are:

1. The Christian claim that the miracle of Jesus speaking from the cradle is false.
2. The Christian claim that God has a son
3. The Christian claim that Muslims misrepresent the Jews
4. The Christian claim of the uniqueness of the Messiah

Through a series of claims and counter claims various responses are offered all with the aim to refute and show the Christian claims are false. Jāḥiẓ, as in section one, does not limit himself to Christians, but includes Jews, the Jabriyah and Mu'tazilite thinkers.

The final part of this treatise is largely unavailable. There remains only one page of the manuscript and this ends abruptly leaving one to assume Jāḥiẓ had written much more. Either the copyist chose to leave out the final sections or these were unavailable for reproduction. In any case, what does remain of part three is really a brief summary of the previous arguments with an introduction to what will next be discussed. Jāḥiẓ writes:

We have spoken about the answers given by the Christians and we have amended their questions with issues they have not asked themselves so that [our] proof was complete and [our] reply was comprehensive. Thus, it is known from reading this book and pondering this reply that we do not [want] to take advantage [of] their weakness and we do not [want] to exploit their blindness; that the arrogance with the argument and the confidence with the success and the victory is that which we were called to make known about them which they themselves were unaware. We are saying their questions have significance and we should exercise caution and vigilance. The preceding replies should guard the weak ones and those inadequate by providing answers to their questions.

We will ask them [questions], if God wills, and we will answer for them. We will penetrate deeply into their answers just as we asked these questions ourselves. It is being said to them: Was the Messiah just a man without being God, was he a god without being a man or was he god and man? If they claim that he was a god and not a man, we say to them: the Messiah was a baby, he became a young man, grew a beard, was eating and drinking and walking around, urinating, was killed by your claim, was crucified and was given birth by Mary who nursed him or is this another person who was eating and drinking according to what we described? ⁹

It appears that Jāḥiẓ intended to ask Christians questions, summarise their answers and then provide his own replies. For this reason, part three has been entitled 'Muslims question Christians' and tends toward a positive apologetic. However, this could only be confirmed by the discovery of rest of this letter.

⁹ Translation, lines 554-561.

Before turning to an analysis of some of the arguments made, it would be beneficial to briefly compare Jāḥiẓ's polemic with two of his contemporaries, 'Alī ibn Rabban al-Ṭabarī and Abū 'Isā al-Warrāq. Rabban, who wrote at the same time as Jāḥiẓ and under the same patron al-Mutawakkil, approached polemic in a different way than Jāḥiẓ. Rabban's work *The Book of Religion and Empire* did not seek to refute Christians, as much as convince them that Muḥammad was a true prophet.¹⁰ To accomplish this, Rabban turned to Jewish and Christian Scriptures to show that Muḥammad was foretold, that he 'fit' the Biblical pattern of prophethood and that it was the Christian exegetes who had obscured these obvious proofs. In the available portion of Jāḥiẓ's letter, Jāḥiẓ did not really attempt to use Jewish or Christian Scriptures.¹¹ However, this may have been used in the latter part of the letter which is now lost. Both Rabban and Jāḥiẓ appeal to reason and assume their readers accept that reason is a valid interpretative tool.¹² This was in the context of the Mu'tazilite use and the place of reason in revelation. There is no indication that Jāḥiẓ and Rabban read the other's work nor is there an indication that they were in dialogue. On the other hand Abū 'Isā al-Warrāq and Jāḥiẓ were likely in contact and this is evidenced by their polemic interchange over the Imāmate.¹³

¹⁰ 'Alī ibn Rabban al-Ṭabarī. *The Book of Religion and Empire: A Semi-Official Defence And Exposition of Islam written by Order at the Court and with the Assistance of the Caliph Mutawakkil (AD 847-861)*. translated by A. Mingana (Manchester: The University Press, 1922).

¹¹ See translation, lines 281-293 where Jāḥiẓ indicates at least a general knowledge of the Gospels. Whether or not he read the Gospels or relied on the reports of others is unknown. In any case, he does not use specific Christian scriptures in his arguments.

¹² A.S. Tritton. *Muslim Theology*. (London: Luzac & Co., 1947), 131, 132. Tritton writes that Jāḥiẓ believed a wise man was one who combined religion and philosophy. Man is a rational being in a rational world and as man exercises his reason on his surroundings he must conclude that there is a creator. This creator is the source of reason and the conscience of man tells him the creator is righteous.

¹³ Thomas, *Anti-Christian Polemic*, 11.

Al-Warrāq wrote an extensive exposition and refutation of the major Christians groups of his time and focused on the Trinity and the incarnation.¹⁴ His style and structure reflected a comprehensive summation of Christian belief followed by a reply. Jāḥiẓ was not nearly as comprehensive, but did make use of summation-reply method. Given the series of polemic exchanges between these two writers,¹⁵ it is likely that Jāḥiẓ had access to al-Warrāq's refutation. Whether or not he read or made use of al-Warrāq's work is unknown. However, what can be known is that neither Rabban nor al-Warrāq used the same kind of arguments as Jāḥiẓ. The former were interested primarily in theology, whereas Jāḥiẓ tended to include everything.

The most remarkable aspect of Jāḥiẓ's treatise, perhaps, is his attention not only to Christian doctrine, but also to Christians themselves. The aims of anti-Christian polemic typically reflects that of the Qur'ān: to condemn theological offenses. Yet Jāḥiẓ finds new reasons for condemnation by turning his eye upon the offenders. Christians, he tells us, seek to undermine the faith of Muslims by bringing up dubious traditions attributed to Muḥammad and obscure verses of the Qur'ān (*mutashābihāt*). Then they start up conversations with fools and riff-raff among the Muslims.¹⁶

Having discussed the structure, purpose and styles of the letter, a partial analysis can now be given.

Analysis of Part II – Section 1 *Correct Muslim attitudes toward Christians*

Of the contents of the letter, only one section will be analysed. The choice of this selection is not difficult to defend for it is the most significant contribution Jāḥiẓ made to ninth century anti-Christian polemic. It reflected the style of Jāḥiẓ and expanded beyond

¹⁴ Ibid., 54.

¹⁵ Ibid., 17.

¹⁶ Reynolds, Gabriel. "Saint Thomas' Islamic challenge: reflections on the Antiochene questions," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* Vol, 12 No. 1 (April 2001), 165.

the traditional theological aspect of argument for he deals with Christians in an historic, socio-economic, demographic, scientific and religious context. Finkel writes that it is:

... part of the *Risāla* in which the subject-matter and its treatment may be characterized as unique in the whole range of Muhammadan polemical literature. Here, not Christianity is so much attacked as the high degree of civilization attained by oriental Christians at that time.¹⁷

It is perhaps for this reason that this portion of the letter was preserved for posterity.

In terms of analysis, this section has been outlined thematically, which assists in examining the perspectives and opinions of Jāḥiẓ in regard to Christians. This differs slightly from the outline given above and that found in the Appendix, which are based on the content rather than the themes.

Part II - Section I – Correct Muslim attitudes toward Christians¹⁸

I. Reasons for the positive view of Christians by the Muslim masses

- A. Historical
- B. Theological
- C. Economic
- E. Demographic
- F. Scientific

II. The realistic and intelligent view of Arab Christians and Byzantines

- A. Source of their science
- B. Religion

III. The true dangers of Christians to the Muslims

- A. Christian appeal
- B. Muslim weakness and failure
- C. Christian polemic
- D. Christian religion and teachings

Jāḥiẓ begins this section with a description of the reasons why Muslims are favourably disposed toward Christians, which he ascribes to the Muslim masses. This implies that intelligent Muslims would know better. Since some of the functions of an *adīb* are to instill ethical precepts and provide readers with a general education, Jāḥiẓ assumes the role of the intelligent Muslim educating his brethren about Christians.

¹⁷ Joshua Finkel, "A *Risāla* of Al-Jāḥiẓ," *Journal of American Oriental Society*, No. 47, (1927), 313.

¹⁸ This section covers lines 66-270 of the translation.

Five reasons are offered for why Christians bear a favoured position in the eyes of Muslims as compared to the Jews and other non-Muslims. The first deals with the early history of Muslim-Christian relations and is presented in the context of the relationship between the Muslims and the Jews. In short, the masses like the Christians better than the Jews or Magians. It is not that Christians are preferred for what they are and believe, but rather for what they are not. In his description, Jāḥiẓ really is attacking the Jews and not the Christians. It is merely the fortunes of geography and bloodlines that set the early tone of Muslim-Jewish and Muslim-Christian relations. Since the Jews lived near the Muslims in Medina and were the first to reject Muḥammad, they are far more disliked. Jāḥiẓ says that enmity of neighbours leads to mutual hostility, which is not forgotten. Indeed, he goes as far as saying the greater the love and intimacy, the greater the hatred and estrangement. In Medina the Jews became religious and political enemies of Muslims, which led to their expulsion.¹⁹ Jāḥiẓ does not appeal to the Qurʾān directly, but instead paraphrases the general history assuming his audience knows the story of the Jews in Medina. Since the Christians were far removed from Mecca and Medina, they were by default more liked than the Jews.

However, Jāḥiẓ lists some positive interactions between Christians and Muslims. The hospitable reception of the émigrés by the Christian Abyssinian Kingdom ‘softened the hearts of the Muslims to the Christians’. This is but a minor point to Jāḥiẓ as he quickly moves on to the positive impact of the many Arab Christian tribes. He mentions the Ghassān and Lakhm tribes as being Christian and wrote, “Arabs were their subjects

¹⁹ See Hodgson, 177, 190, 191. It is beyond the scope of this work to examine the details surrounding the expulsion of the Banū Qaynuqā and the Banū Nadir clans nor the killing and enslavement of the Banū Qurayẓah beyond pointing out that there was a progression in the enmity. This tone of hostility is seen in the Qurʾān and the collective memory such that Jāḥiẓ can recount the story confident his readers are familiar with the details.

and paid them tribute. The respect which these Arabs accorded to their rulers found its root in the esteem that they held out for their Christian religion.”²⁰ The historical reasons Jāḥiẓ presented are either pre-Islamic or during the early developmental stages of Islam under Muḥammad and seem to reflect commonly held Muslim beliefs about history.

The second reason Christians are esteemed by the masses is according to Jāḥiẓ the most important. It is theological in nature and revolves around a misinterpretation of Sūrat al-Mā'idah (5) 82-85. The Qur'ān reads:

Thou wilt find the most vehement of mankind in hostility to those who believe (to be) the Jews and the idolaters. And thou wilt find the nearest of them in affection to those who believe (to be) those who say: Lo! We are Christians. That is because there are among them priests and monks, and because they are not proud. (83) When they listen to that which hath been revealed unto the messenger, thou seest their eyes overflow with tears because of their recognition of the Truth. They say: Our Lord, we believe. Inscribe us among the witnesses. (84) How should we not believe in Allah and that which hath come unto us of the Truth. And (how should we not) hope that our Lord will bring us in along with righteous folk? (85) Allah hath rewarded them for their saying – Gardens underneath which rivers flow, wherein they will abide forever. That is the reward of the good.²¹

The interpretation depends upon the identity of these Christians. Jāḥiẓ determines this verse does not refer to Melkites and Jacobite Christians, but rather to the type of Christian represented by the monk Baḥīrā. There is nothing in the verse to indicate which Christians are spoken of nor is there any mention of Baḥīrā. Interestingly, later commentators such as al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) and Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373) do not support the interpretation Jāḥiẓ gave.²² Their assertion was the verse does not point to any specific group of Christians. However, Shī'ī scholars such as al-Ṭūsī (d. 1067), Abū al-Futūḥ Rāzī (d. 1106) and Kāshānī (d. 1580) all claimed the verse did not intend to refer to all

²⁰ Translation, lines 97-103

²¹ Pickthall translation. Compare to Jāḥiẓ – translation lines 90-96

²² Jane Dammen McAuliffe. *Qur'ānic Christians: an Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 237.

Christians.²³ This leads to an important point. Al-Jāḥiẓ preceded these commentators. The period of his life did overlap with al-Ṭabarī, but since Tafsīr and Ḥadīth studies were developing, the interpretation Jāḥiẓ presents was not in any way official, but certainly useful. It is rather interesting that later in his letter, Jāḥiẓ bemoans the state of Muslim theology when he writes, “And how unfortunate that every Muslim looks upon himself as a theologian and thinks that everyone is fit to lead a discussion with an atheist!”²⁴ To Jāḥiẓ the Muslim masses who favour Christians have simply misunderstood these verses as applying to all Christians, which would be Melkites, Jacobites and probably Nestorians although they are not mentioned. Instead, the correct interpretation referred to Christians of a type of Baḥīrā. This is also an intriguing idea.

The story of Baḥīrā is well known in both Muslim and Christian tradition.²⁵ In the Muslim version, the monk Baḥīrā recognised the boy Muḥammad as the final Prophet by seeing a miraculous vision above Muḥammad’s head and finding the ‘Seal of Prophethood’ between his shoulders. According to the Christian version, Baḥīrā taught Muḥammad the basmala²⁶ and Muḥammad received his message not from God, but from this monk. The point for this discussion is that the story was widely known among Muslims and merely mentioning Baḥīrā was sufficient to convey Jāḥiẓ’s meaning.

There were other reasons that Christians were favoured in comparison to the Jews. These revolved around economic and demographic reasons, and the possession of the sciences. The Quraysh tribe had engaged in trade with the Byzantines and Ethiopian

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Translation, line 201

²⁵ Barbara Roggema, “A Christian Reading of the Qur’ān: The Legend of Sergius- Baḥīrā and its use of Qur’ān and Sīra,” in *Syrian Christians under Islam: the First Thousand Years*. David Thomas, ed. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 200), 57-73.

²⁶ In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.

Kings receiving gifts, honour and wealth. This provided a further advantage to Christians over the Jews. Demographically, there were more Christians than Jews in the midst of the Arab tribes. Many of the Arab kings were Christian before becoming Muslim and there were few Jews. Jāḥiẓ writes, “Thus what filled the hearts with affection for the Christians were ties of blood and our regard for royalty.”²⁷ The Christian dynasties themselves were wealthy, powerful and possessed the sciences of speculative theology, medicine and astronomy.²⁸ Jāḥiẓ almost portrays the situation as natural for the lesser to admire and respect the greater, but as he is quick to point out in his next thoughts such respect is based on ignorance.

After presenting various reasons for why Muslims favoured Christians most of which it seems are from history and “history, as we know, provides the future generations with their prejudices and predilections”,²⁹ Jāḥiẓ now sets out to provide the realistic and intelligent view of Christians. It is to science and religion that he turns to unmask the Christians.

Christians and Byzantines are not men of science and rhetoric. They are in fact pretenders. The great works of logic, philosophy, medicine and science were written by non-Christians and Jāḥiẓ lists several such as Aristotle, Galen, Euclid and others. It was merely due to geographic proximity that the Christians obtained these works. Further, Jāḥiẓ sharpens his point by writing that the Christians tampered with the contents of these books and falsely ascribed the works to themselves. Aside from incorrectly stating that the Greeks were an extinct race and conveniently neglecting to mention they were

²⁷ Translation, line 119.

²⁸ Finkel points out that Jāḥiẓ seriously downplays the cultural and economic state of the Jews. There were Jewish translators and physicians in the eighth and ninth centuries as there were *mutakallimūn* such as Ibn al-Rawandi. Finkel, “A Risāla of Al-Jāḥiẓ,” 319.

²⁹ Translation, line 109.

pagans, Jāḥiẓ takes subtle aim at the prestige Christians enjoyed over the commissioned translations even though Arab readers such as Jāḥiẓ benefited greatly from these works. This subtlety is seen when he writes about the Christians that “They even went so far as to assert that our scientists were followers of the Byzantines writers and our writers their imitators.”³⁰ If this was not enough, the religion of the Christians resembles Manichaeism.

The comparison of Christianity to Manichaeism is understandable since the latter was a political concern to the caliph al-Mutawakkil and Jāḥiẓ is attempting to show that Christians were also a threat. Jāḥiẓ does not indicate why Christians resemble Manicheans,³¹ only that the religion of Christianity is perplexing and confusing and leads to hypocrisy and waverers who parade as Muslims. This could refer more to Manicheans than to Christians. Hodgson points out: “It [Manichaeism] seems to have won many secret followers at court among persons who were officially Muslims.”³² Jāḥiẓ may have also noticed that there were Christian converts to Islam who were motivated not by religion, but by the benefits. This becomes comical when one includes two opinions about Jāḥiẓ as mentioned by Tritton: “I trust his [Jāḥiẓ] wit but not his religion” and “I think his manner of prayer is to omit it.”³³ However, the life and faith of Jāḥiẓ were not under scrutiny that would be left to later generations.³⁴ Jāḥiẓ attempted to create doubt and distrust about the motives and nature of Christians by finishing his thought with the

³⁰ Ibid., line 142.

³¹ James Sweetman. *Islam and Christian Theology*. Part I, Vol. 1 (London: Butterworth Press 1945), 73. Sweetman indicates the affinity between Christians and Manicheans also known as Mazdeans was in the way they regarded the body and their teaching about virginity.

³² Hodgson, 290.

³³ A.S.Tritton. *Muslim Theology*, 131. Tritton provides these two quotes, but does not indicate their source.

³⁴ Much of Jāḥiẓ's works are lost likely due to his Mu'tazilite beliefs which fell into disfavour and thus his works were destroyed. However, what remains has earned him great praise as a litterateur.

idea that people who are under suspicion of pretence and hypocrisy have mostly come from their ranks.

Before moving to the last of the arguments to be examined, a brief summary could be helpful. In this first section of his attempt to answer Christian questions, Jāḥiẓ began with an attack on the nature of Christians themselves in comparison to Jews. He examined why the common Muslim naively liked Christians and then provided a critique of the charade of Christian claims to science and religion. Christians far from being favoured should be seen as dangerous and deceptive. Jāḥiẓ spends most of his energy attempting to show Christians are a threat to Muslims, however, in Jāḥiẓian style, he also condemns Muslim laxity and complacency. The rest of the discussion unfolds as Jāḥiẓ covers Christian appeal, Muslim weakness and failure, Christian polemic and the Christian religion and teachings.

Much of the appeal of Christians thus far discussed by Jāḥiẓ was based upon historical elements preceding and during the time of Muḥammad. These were generally dismissed by Jāḥiẓ as uninformed conclusions drawn by the ignorant. However, in this last part of his examination of correct Muslim attitudes to Christians, he turns to contemporary events. It is one thing to say that the appeal of the Christians was based on a vaguely understood history, but quite another to realise the appeal continues unabated. For this reason Jāḥiẓ portrays Christians as a danger.

The ‘Abbāsid regime including the Caliphs themselves had employed Christians as physicians, secretaries and servants. If favour was shown by the elite of society to certain Christians, one cannot fault the masses for their high view of this group. Of course the Caliph al-Mutawakkil was determined to reduce the influence and status of

non-Muslims, Christians in particular. In comparison to the Jews, who according to Jāḥiẓ served in lower professions, the Christians again by default are viewed as possessing a more noble religion. Combined with being slightly more physically attractive than the Jews, who did not ‘cross breed’,³⁵ the Christians displayed wealth, fine dress and engaged in refined professions. The Muslim masses seeing the outward appearance favoured both the Christians and their religion over other non-Muslim faiths. For Jāḥiẓ, this favourable opinion was based upon outward appearances and not upon the true behaviour and beliefs of the Christians. Jāḥiẓ claims that the Christians hid from popular view their true nature and intentions thus deceiving the Muslim masses. For Jāḥiẓ, this is the essence of the danger of Christians. The intelligentsia saw the Christians as far more dangerous in word and more deceitful in manner.

This danger is played out by the behaviour of Christians in deference to their *dhimmi* status and the re-enacted Edict of ‘Umar. Jāḥiẓ mentions several examples of what Christians were doing. They were riding not just horses but finely bred horses. They were wearing silk and playing polo. They had servants and were using Muslim names. If that were not enough, they were refusing to pay the tax! It must be noted that Jāḥiẓ is writing exactly as al-Mutawakkil would expect. As mentioned earlier in this study, the Caliph had enacted various injunctions against employing Christians as confidants in preference to Muslims. Christians and Jews were to be kept segregated from Muslims while guaranteeing to them the liberties, which they had enjoyed since the early days of Islam. The *dhimmīs* were to wear special clothing, tunics and belts. Here, Jāḥiẓ emphasizes the elite of the Christians were defying all these injunctions and thus were

³⁵ Translation, line 158. For a fuller exposition see Al-Jāḥiẓ. *Kitāb al-Hayawān (Book of animals)*. Vol 1 (Bayrūt : Dār wa-Maktabat al-Hilāl, 1986), 63-64; 71-72.

showing the validity of such measures against them. In other words, the Christians had been allowed to go too far. Jāḥiẓ now takes aim at the Muslims for permitting this state to exist.

Muslim weakness and failure form the second avenue Jāḥiẓ pursues in his quest to show that Christians are a threat and danger. Weakness is shown by Muslim tolerance for the virtual equality Christians assume. Jāḥiẓ writes about the Christians that: “They returned to Muslims insult for insult and blow for blow.”³⁶ Even Muslim courts encouraged such behaviour by considering patriarchs and bishops equal with ‘Alī, ‘Abbās and Ḥamza, which in effect is saying they are equal with the Imam, the ‘Abbāsīd Caliph and the companions of Muḥammad. There is even no punishment for Christian slander against the mother of Muḥammad. One can almost sense the high-pitched fervour Jāḥiẓ is reaching as he climaxes with the cry against the Muslim failure to adhere to the very teachings of Muḥammad.

According to Jāḥiẓ, Muḥammad decreed Christians were not equal with Muslims. He decreed that if they insult Muslims, strike them and if they strike Muslims, kill them. He decreed they pay tribute for protection and tolerance. All of these are ignored or applied unevenly by the Muslim courts. There is a strong sense of a superior graciousness, which Muslims are to extend to the Christians and other *dhimmīs* and since the Christians are violating this relationship, the Muslims, as depicted by the pen of Jāḥiẓ, are obliged to enact harsh measures. Unfortunately the courts, the people and the state have allowed this situation to fester. Now with al-Mutawakkil and the recognition of this danger, faithfulness to the teachings of Muḥammad can once again be realised. Such is

³⁶ Translation, lines 158-177

the tenor Jāḥiẓ is developing. Although he does not mention the Caliph by name, he is the one who will read what he has commissioned Jāḥiẓ to write. This was not to be only a polemic treatise, but also a political justification for the Caliph's actions. This is further emphasised when Jāḥiẓ comments on the lack of explicit prohibitions by former Imams and leaders regarding tribute, tolerance and slander against the mother of Muḥammad. The reason was simple. It was obvious to anyone and everyone including the *dhimmīs*.

Jāḥiẓ writes:

With the lowest of the low, with men begging the acceptance of their own ransom, beseeching that their very lives be spared, can it be stipulated and said: "We will grant you the benefits accruing from this covenant on the condition that you defame not the mother of the man who is the seal of the prophets, who is the apostle of the Lord of all creatures ..." ³⁷

Indeed, it was Arab Muslim generosity and obedience to Muḥammad, which led to the covenant with the *dhimmīs*. Now, the Christians are violating this contract and further the Muslims are abetting them!

Jāḥiẓ has woven his way from the general appeal of Christians to Muslims to the general failure of the Muslims to apply the conditions of the *dhimmi* status. Now he launches his most direct and invective challenge to Christians and their faith. Christian polemic, religion and their greater numbers than Jews, Magians³⁸ and Sabeans³⁹ pose a great threat to the empire.

In terms of the study of polemics, there is a brief yet interesting series of comments made by Jāḥiẓ for he enumerates the polemic challenge Christians directed toward the Muslims.

³⁷ Ibid., lines 190-191.

³⁸ Qur'an 22:17.

³⁹ Qur'an 2:50; 5:73; 22:17.

They [Christians] chose contradictory statements in Muslim traditions ... they select the equivocal verses in the Qur'ān and hold us responsible for Ḥadīths, the chains of guarantors of which are defective.⁴⁰

It would appear that Christian apologists not only knew the Qur'ān, but also the various Ḥadīths and controversies surrounding the chain of transmitters or guarantors.⁴¹ Jāḥiẓ by making this comment indicates such practices by Christians are well known. It is curious why Jāḥiẓ even mentioned this. It would appear to expose Muslim weakness, but Jāḥiẓ continues by saying these Christians target the weak-minded and appear as innocent before our scholars. "Thus they succeed in throwing dust in the eyes of the staunch believers and in bewildering the minds of those who are weak in faith."⁴² The point Jāḥiẓ wants to make is how dangerous and deceptive are the Christians. Whether or not their arguments are clever or even valid is immaterial – they are dangerous.

The final part of this section covers the menace of the Christian religion and teachings. Here Jāḥiẓ reaches the height of his rhetoric. Christians are perverse in teaching, unclean in their practices and seek to lead astray with the strangeness of their religion, which is incompatible with Islam. Christian theologians, physicians and astronomers have introduced heretical writings and sects such as the Māhāniyya, Dayṣāniyya, Marqūniyya and the Falāniyya⁴³ to the Muslim youth and the rich. Without

⁴⁰ Translation, line 195-196.

⁴¹ Muir, William. *The Apology of al-Kindy, written at the court of al-Ma'mun (circa. A.H. 215; A.D. 830), in Defense of Christianity against Islam*. London: SPCK, 1882; 2nd ed. 1887 reprinted in N.A. Newman ed. *Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue*. (Hatfield: Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute, 1993), 365-545.

⁴² Translation, line 200.

⁴³ Ibn al-Nadīm, Muḥammad ibn Ishāq, fl. 987 *The Fihrist of al-Nadīm: a tenth-century survey of Muslim culture*. Vol 2. Bayard Dodge, editor and translator. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 805-807. The Dayṣāniyya were similar to the Manicheans and were divided into two parties. Their origin is attributed to the Greek Syriac writer Bardesanes (d. 222), but it was his son Harmonius and a follower named Marinus who introduced Chaldean astrology and Zoroastrian ideas into Bardesanite ideology. See J.P. Arendzen "Bardesanes and Bardesanites," *The Catholic Encyclopaedia Vol. II*, 1910, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02293a.htm> (3 July 2002); Gherardo Gnoli "Manicheism," *The Encyclopedia of Religion* Vol. 9 editor in chief Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan Publisher, 1987), 161-170; and J.G. Davies "Manicheism and Christianity," *The Encyclopedia of Religion* Vol. 9 editor in

these influences, Muslims would only know the Qur'ān and the Sunna of Muḥammad.

“Indeed, for all our grief over the seduction of our youth and unintelligent we have primarily the Christians to blame.”⁴⁴ This is not only an exaggeration, but difficult to prove. Jāḥiẓ continues complaining about the odd religious behaviour of Christians with their ideas about forgiveness, abstinence from marriage and children, and the worship of clergy who practice celibacy. It is the acceptance of celibacy that particularly draws the whimsical ire of Jāḥiẓ. In a wonderful example of his writing skill, Jāḥiẓ writes:

And how marvellous is this! We know that the Christian bishops as well as all inmates of monasteries, whether Jacobites or Nestorians, in fact all monks of every description, both male and female, one and all practice celibacy. When we next consider how great is the number of the monks and the most of the clergy adhere to their practices and when we finally take in account the numerous wars of the Christians, their sterile men and women, their prohibition against divorce, polygamy and concubinage – (is not strange) that, in spite of all this, they have filled the earth and exceeded all others in numbers and fecundity? Alas! This circumstance has increased our misfortunes and made our trials stupendous! Another cause for the growth and expansion of Christianity is the fact that the Christians draw converts from other religions and give none in return (while the reverse should be true), for it is the younger religion that is expected to profit from conversion.⁴⁵

This is typical Jāḥiẓian logic. Christians prize celibacy, have no children yet fill the earth.

How can this be? It is through conversion. Even as Jāḥiẓ mocks the Christians, he again points to their danger to the Muslims because the younger religion (Islam) is not seeing

chief Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan Publisher, 1987), 170-71. The Marqūniyya were Marcionites an heretical sect of Christianity. The Māhāniyya were a sect of the Marcionites. The Marcionites were an heretical sect founded in A.D. 144 at Rome by Marcion (b. 110) and continued in the West for 300 years, but in the East some centuries longer, especially outside the Byzantine Empire. They rejected the writings of the Old Testament and taught that Christ was not the Son of the God of the Jews, but the Son of the good God, who was different from the God of the Ancient Covenant. They anticipated the more consistent dualism of Manichaeism and were finally absorbed by it. See J.P. Arendzen “Marcionites,” *The Catholic Encyclopaedia* Vol. IX, 1910, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09645c.htm> (3 July 2002); Robert L. Wilken “Marcionism,” *The Encyclopedia of Religion* Vol. 9 editor in chief Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan Publisher, 1987), 196. The final group Falāniyya (الفالانية) are unknown. Finkel could not discover the identity of this group and assumed the Arabic was corrupted in some way. *Fihrist* vol 1 338-339.

⁴⁴ Translation, line 229.

⁴⁵ Ibid., lines 212-221.

the conversion of Christians. Perhaps he is quietly scolding Islam for not accepting the responsibility and duty to convert the hapless Christians who are unclean, polluted and practice castration. Not only are they a danger to Islam, they are a danger to themselves and to their own children. In an effort to devote their offspring to the church, they castrate them. This is likely in reference to Matthew 19:12 in which the context is the seriousness of marriage:

For there are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother's womb; and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men; and there are also eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.⁴⁶

Jāḥiẓ drives home his intention by stating that if Christians were allowed to continue, progeny would be cut off, all religion would become extinct and the world would perish. While outwardly appealing in appearance through expensive dress and refined professions, inwardly they are 'baser, filthier and fouler'.⁴⁷ They eat swine, their women do not purify themselves and their faith provides no restraints to passions.

Finally, Jāḥiẓ ends his diatribe with the utter unintelligibility of the Christian religion. The doctrine of the divinity, by which he means the Trinity and the Sonship of Christ, is illogical. Even two Nestorians, sons of the same father, have different explanations. How can non-Muslims understand the Christian faith? Jāḥiẓ writes, "As a result, we cannot comprehend the essence of Christianity to the extent that we know the other faiths."⁴⁸ In fact, their faith rests on blind submission to the authority of the book and the traditions of old. Any one who professes to be a Christian would need to 'offer

⁴⁶ New American Standard Bible (NASB) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.

⁴⁷ Translation, line 230.

⁴⁸ Ibid., line 241.

blind submission as an excuse.⁴⁹ This last comment of Jāḥiẓ is double edged. It could equally refer to the Muslim traditionalists who were championing Ḥadīth over the Mu'tazilite position of reason over revelation.⁵⁰ Indeed, Jāḥiẓ likely intended his more astute readers to grasp this meaning.

Unfortunately the constraints of space do not permit a continuation of this analysis into the second section, but it is hoped that something of the flare and style of Jāḥiẓ has been communicated. His polemic is forceful, direct and not concerned with factual accuracy. His goal to refute the Christians was fine for domestic consumption, but as a treatise to convince Christians of their errors, his work would have met with less success. For those who desire to rescue Jāḥiẓ from the harshness of his polemic, we conclude with the caveat that this letter likely did not reflect his own convictions.

This attack was nothing if not vicious. But given that al-Jāḥiẓ's own philosophy was basically scepticism, there is considerable doubt as to the degree of conviction with which al-Jāḥiẓ wrote. The work should therefore be seen as a commissioned work of propaganda rather than a statement of al-Jāḥiẓ's own views, but that does nothing to minimise its impact.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Ibid., line 244.

⁵⁰ Watt, W. Montgomery. *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1985), 59.

⁵¹ Hugh Goddard. *Muslim Perceptions of Christianity*. (London: Grey Seal, 1996), 33.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

At the outset of this study the intention was to provide a translation and partial analysis of al-Jāḥiẓ's polemic letter *A reply to the Christians*. The work of Jāḥiẓ was set within the contexts of the early 'Abbāsid regime, the Christian communities of the time, the impact of the translation movement, and the rise and development of polemic discourse between Muslim and Christian. The study provided the manuscript background of the letter along with a translation. The analysis of the treatise was limited to one section, which reflected Jāḥiẓ's most original contribution to anti-Christian Muslim polemic. After examining the structure, purpose and style of writing, an outline was provided in order to determine the flow of the thought. The actual analysis was focused thematically in order to better ascertain Jāḥiẓ's portrayal of Christians before his Muslim readers.

The polemic had two stated purposes, that is, to answer questions Christians asked Muslims and to ask the Christians questions. As was seen, the latter purpose was left unfulfilled with that portion of the manuscript lost. In the development of the first purpose, Jāḥiẓ departed from the style of his contemporaries by challenging Christians not only in terms of theology, but also socio-economically, politically and historically. The first task he undertook was to disabuse Muslims of their incorrect positive view of Christians. Using history, theology, economics, demographics and the possession of the sciences, Jāḥiẓ chipped away the façade. For him, Muslims had an unsubstantiated image of Christians, which was based on a favourable comparison to the Jews. In themselves, the Christians were not only overrated, they were actually insidiously dangerous. In

addition, Muslims had misinterpreted Qur'ānic verses regarding Christians; they only saw their outward wealthy and refined appearances and believed the Christians were the originators or least guarantors of the Greek sciences. Jāḥiẓ addressed each point he raised skilfully and along the way he overtly attacked the Jews and more subtly mocked the Ḥadīth folk.

The image he painted of the Christians served well the purposes of his patron, the Caliph al-Mutawakkil. In an era of increased persecution and prejudice against the Christians and the Jews, this polemic provided justification for the measures enacted. To Jāḥiẓ, the Christians were like a fifth column within the 'Abbāsīd regime and more importantly within Islam. They are portrayed as vile, deceptive, and dangerous enemies to society and even humanity. Theologically, their faith was perplexing and confusing producing nothing but hypocrites and deceivers of the weak minded. Not content with their own religious self-delusions, these Christians were attacking Muslims using the Qur'ān, the Ḥadīth and the spurious claims of some of the Ḥadīth transmitters. This could be one indication of the success of Christian polemic. Politically and economically, Christians were seen as using their high positions and social rank to create a favourable image and even platform from which to disseminate their views. Finally, socially, they were inwardly unclean and polluted; they castrated their children, honoured celibacy, defied their *dhimmi* status and transmitted perverse teachings and attitudes in violation of the Qur'ān and the Sunna of Muḥammad. Jāḥiẓ berated his Muslim contemporaries and the courts for neglecting to impose the *dhimmi* contract and failing to obey the teachings of Muḥammad. In light of such derision, the policies of the Caliph would not only appear

justified but wise. It is no wonder the court encouraged Jāḥiẓ to hasten the letter's completion.

One may ask how accurate such a portrayal was and if Muslims in general actually read Jāḥiẓ's work as truth, entertainment or a mixture of both. Since this was a commissioned work and Jāḥiẓ was known for his ability to appeal to a wide audience with his invective and creative style, one can conclude the work served its purpose by casting doubt on Christians in support of the policies of the Caliphate and Islam. The reader would believe or not as desired. Further, the letter was only partially preserved. Perhaps one can speculate that the most entertaining and novel sections were copied while the latter portions created less enthusiasm and disappeared. This is of course an argument from silence, which Jāḥiẓ seldom succumbed to in his writings.

The latter parts of the preserved letter dealt with more specific theological questions that Christians asked of the Muslims, but this has been left for future research, as have other issues. This study has been concerned with introductory matters, such as background and translation, and a limited analysis dealing with some of the perceptions of Christians mediated through the pen of Jāḥiẓ. Possibilities for further investigation are limited only by imagination and desire. The perception of the Jews by Jāḥiẓ is worth study as is a more detailed analysis of the entire letter. A comparative analysis between the work of Jāḥiẓ and other Muslim polemicists of the period may well be worth the effort. Finally, a broader study on the development of Muslim polemic could be undertaken particularly in comparing Mu'tazlite *Kalām* methodology versus later methodologies using Ḥadīth, Tafsīr and Biblical criticism. The study of Muslim polemic continues to remain essential to understanding Muslim and non-Muslim relations.

Appendix I

*An outline of the treatise: Radd ‘alā al-Naṣārā*¹

Part I – Introduction and Purpose (1-66)²

- I. Introduction (1-61)
 - A. Introductory remarks
 - B. Questions Christians asked Muslims (examples for the need of this treatise)
 - 1. Christians claim the Muslim book and teachings are false
 - a. Muslims assert teachings, which Christians have never believed
 - 1) Mary is a god
 - b. Muslims assert teachings, which the Jews have never believed
 - 1) Ezra is son of God
 - 2) The hand of God is tied
 - 3) God is poor and the Jews are rich
 - c. Various Muslim errors
 - 1) Pharaoh speaking to Hāmān
 - 2) The name “Yahya” never given before John the Baptist
 - 3) Muḥammad is a prophet
 - 4) Miracle of Jesus speaking from the cradle
- II. Purpose of treatise (62-66)
 - 1. Provide answers to Muslims for the questions Christians ask (negative apologetics)
 - 2. Ask the Christians questions (positive apologetics)

Part II – Answering questions Christians ask the Muslims (66-553) (Negative Apologetics)

Section I – Correct Muslim attitudes toward Christians (66-270)

- I. Reasons for the positive view of Christians by the Muslim masses (66-128)
 - A. Jews are close neighbours to Muslims, which Christians were not
 - 1. Closeness in Medina breeds contempt and even hate
 - 2. Feuds last long (between Arabs and between Arabs and their neighbours)
 - 3. Jews envied and fought against Muslims
 - 4. Jews were banished and killed by Muslims
 - 5. Christians far away and little controversy or reason to dislike
 - B. Émigrés to Ethiopia
 - 1. Muslims received hospitality by Christians and loved them more than Jews
 - C. Wrong interpretation of Sūrat al-Mā'idah (5) 82-85
 - 1. People assume verses speaking about the Christians in their midst
 - 2. Qur'ān refers to Christians like Bahīrā not the ones like Melkites and Jacobites
 - 3. Christians misuse this verse to deceive the ignorant Muslims
 - E. Respect for Pre-Islamic Arab Rulers
 - 1. Ghassān and Lakma tribes were Christians; respect given to Christian religion

¹ This is an outline of the arguments Jahiz's develops in his treatise. It does not correspond to the sections contained in the English translation.

² The line numbers from the Arabic text are provided in brackets and correspond to the English translation..

- F. Trade with Christian Ruled lands
 - 1. Byzantium and Ethiopia
 - 2. Provided advantage for Christians because they honoured their Muslim guests and were a source of trade and income
 - G. Christianity widespread amongst the Arab Tribes (excluding the Mudar tribe)
 - 1. Arab Christians and ties of blood
 - 2. Few Jewish Arabs and not as widespread as Christians
 - H. Power and prestige of Christian Dynasties
 - 1. Intellectual Elite
 - Theology (Speculative)
 - Medicine
 - Astronomy
 - 2. No Jewish speculative theology (No *Kalām*)
- II. The realistic and intelligent view of Arab Christians and Byzantines (129-148)
- A. Not true people of science and rhetoric for the sciences came from non-Christians
 - 1. Aristotle
 - 2. Euclid
 - 3. Galen
 - 4. Democrates
 - 5. Hippocrates
 - 6. Plato
 - B. Christians obtained learning and books from Greeks who are an extinct race
 - 1. Christians misrepresented themselves and deceived others to think this knowledge came from the Christians
 - C. Christian faith resembles Manichaeism even Atheism
 - 1. Many hypocrites and waverers
- III. The true dangers of Christians to the Muslims (149-270)
- A. Christian appeal
 - 1. High positions held
 - a. Secretaries and servants of Kings
 - b. Physicians to nobles
 - c. Perfumers
 - d. Money Changers
 - 2. Jews – lower professions (tanners, dyers, cuppers, butchers, cobblers), thus their religion is lower
 - 3. Christians slightly more physically attractive than the Jews
 - 4. Christians are rich, dress well and engage in refined professions
(Intelligentsia sees Christians as more dangerous in word and deceitful in manner)
 - 5. Christians display high social rank
 - a. Ride highbred horses, camels
 - b. Play polo; Wear silk
 - c. Own attendants who serve them
 - d. Use “Muslim” names such as Ḥasan, Ḥusayn, ‘Abbās, Faḍl and ‘Alī
(on the verge of using Muḥammad and Abū l-Qāsim)
 - e. Christians don’t wear their belts.
 - f. Refuse to pay tribute
 - B. Muslim negligence to impose the *Dhimmi* status
 - 1. Christians exchange insult for insult and blow for blow with Muslims

2. Muslim courts consider Patriarchs and Bishops equal to Ja'far, 'Alī, 'Abbās and Ḥamza
3. Little punishment for slandering the mother of the prophet
- C. Muslim failures to follow the teachings of the prophet
 1. Christians are not equal with Muslims
 2. If insulted strike them, if stricken, kill them
 3. Judges and Muslim courts do not follow these teachings
 4. Prophet decreed Christians pay tribute for protection and toleration
 5. Reason for the lack of explicit prohibition against slander by Christians
 - a. This was obvious to Imams and leaders therefore nothing written down
- D. Christian polemic
 1. Christians challenge Muslims using:
 - a. Qur'ān verses
 - b. Ḥadith
 - c. Chain of Ḥadith guarantors
 2. Indirect challenges
 - a. Private conversations with weak Muslims who are ignorant
 3. Use Manichean arguments
 4. Christians appear innocent before Muslim Scholars and men of Influence
- E. Dissemination of false religious information by the Christians
 1. High positions led to influencing the young and the rich with sects such as (*Māhāniyya, Dayṣāniyya, Marqūniyya*)
 2. Strangeness of their beliefs are not compatible with Muslims
 - a. Ideas about forgiveness
 - b. Wanderings in quest for God
 - c. Censure over meats
 - d. Popularity of consuming grain products
 - e. Abstinence from marriage and offspring
 - f. Worshipping church leaders & Bishops because these practice celibacy
 - g. Christianity & Manichaeism resemble each other
 3. Celibacy practiced by all Jacobite and Nestorian Clergy
 - a. Why are there so many Christians?
 - b. Converts from Islam to Christianity
 4. Practice of castration
 - a. Even in Children
 - b. Byzantine and Ethiopic practice
 5. Unclean and polluted people
 - a. Outwardly clean (professions, clean dress)
 - b. Inwardly unclean
 - 1) No circumcision
 - 2) Eats swine
 - 3) Females don't purify themselves from childbirth or menstruation
 6. Perverse teachings
 - a. Pointless to learn their doctrine since it is illogical
 - b. Divinity doctrine – even 2 Nestorians can't understand/explain. It is the same for Melkites and Jacobites
 - c. Other faiths are easier to understand
 - d. Analogy is not allowed in their religion nor intellectual scrutiny
 - e. Faith is dogmatic submission to authorities of the Bible
 - f. Don't like Jews but will forgive Magians, Sabeans and Manicheans

Section II – Answering Christian claims (271-553)

IV. The Christian claim that the miracle of Jesus speaking from the cradle is false (271-293)

A. Claim: Muslims obtained this story from untrustworthy people

1. No one knows about this “miracle”, not Jew, Majus, Hindu, Hazars, Dailim, Turks nor Mazdeens

Response: Illogical to appeal to these peoples

1. Jews deny ALL miracles of Jesus
2. Jews have a negative view of Jesus
3. All other peoples cited as witnesses deny ALL miracles of Jesus
4. Therefore cannot use these peoples as a witness against the validity of miracle

B. Claim: If miracle occurred, why then are Christians unaware of it?

Response: The Gospel writers are suspect – errors, lies, collusion

C. Claim: The Gospel writers reliable

Response: Gospel accounts suspect

1. Different accounts, contradictions, different accounts of the nature of Christ
2. Luke was not an apostle

V. The Christian claim for God having a son (294-478)

A. Claim: Sonship is like adoption, friendship and love

Response: Some Muslim Theologians accept this provided not by birth

1. Accept the claims of the Holy Books
 - a. Israel is God’s firstborn
 - b. Messiah – pray in name of the father
2. Jews do not understand allegory, metaphors, translation into another language

B. Claim: God does what he wishes

Response 1: True, but God tells us the proper way to address Him

Response 2: We say God has no son either by birth or adoption
(in contrast to some Muslim Theologians)

1. Makes God a father, grandfather, uncle
2. God cannot degrade Himself because all other than God are lower
3. Fatherhood is not an attribute of God because he is too great
4. If Jesus is God’s son, makes God uncle of the apostles who are ‘brothers’ of Jesus

C. Claim: The Torah is authentic

Response: Yes, Torah is authentic

D. Claim: God says Israel is my firstborn.

Response: They do not understand language, words, *kalām*, and translation

1. Muslim interpretation, *tafsīr* and philology is superior

Aside: Disagreement with Mu’tazilite al-Nazzām

Claim: *Halil*, *Habib*, *Wali* same meaning thus a servant can be called a son of God

Response: God is more different than man, than man is to a dog, thus no son of God

E. Claim: Abraham is the friend of God (*khalīl*)

Response: Abraham is *khalīl* because of *khalla* (need) not *khulla* (friendship)

F. Claim: Abraham is above all Prophets

Response: Last prophet can be higher despite not possessing same virtues as the former

G. Claim: The Messiah created without male therefore God’s son

Response 1: Adam and Eve created without male or female thus more deserving of name ‘son’

Response 2: Adam nobler upbringing; he is the example for all humans in giving worship

VI. The Christian claim that Muslims misrepresent the Jews (479-526)

A. Claim: Jews never believed Ezra son of God

Response: Jews trying to discredit Qur'ān

1. Jews purposely misunderstand Qur'ān; for example God giving loan to people
2. Jews are same as the Jabriyah (fatalists)
3. Jews divided over question of Ezra, due to his obedience or general term for all Israel

VII. The Christian claim of the uniqueness of the Messiah (527-553)

A. Claim: Messiah is the Spirit and Word of God

Response: Do not understand Arabic or Muslim theology

1. Spirit means 'help' otherwise part of God is lost in another - impossible

Part III - Muslims question Christians (Positive Apologetics) (554-577)

I. Incongruity of the Divine-Human nature of the Messiah

Note: the treatise ends abruptly as if the latter part of the work was not copied by choice or was unavailable

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