

# Four Muslim-Christian encounters in late antiquity

*Apologetics, debate and power disparities*

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Master Thesis in Religious Roots of Europe,  
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## **DECLARATION**

I, Nasir Ali, do hereby declare that except for references to other existing literature, which have been dully acknowledged, this work was conducted by me under the supervision of Oddbjørn Leirvik, Professor, The Faculty of Theology, University of Oslo, during the 2016/2017 academic year. This work has neither been submitted for any degree in this university or elsewhere.

# **Four Muslim-Christian encounters in late antiquity: Apologetics, debate and power disparities**

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# Abstract

This work will consider a range of encounters between Christian and Muslim leaders from late antiquity through to the middle ages. As explored through a lens of political and theological theory, this work will consider interfaith dialogues, encounters, and apologetics between different figures, in order to divine a means of understanding not just the *results* of these interactions, but their larger *purpose* as well. Four primary points of encounter between Christians and Muslims which will form the basis for this consideration. The first will be the encounter between Muhammad and the Christians of Najran in 628 AD., followed by the dialogue between Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I and the Abbasid caliph al-Mahdi in 781 AD. This work will then cover the work of Abu Bakr Muhammad al-Baqillani and Al-kindi, both of whose pivotal interactions took place during the latter centuries of the first millennium.

These works will be considered from a perspective of their theological rhetoric as well as from the basis of their *use* as political documents and exhortations which were levied and extended for political purposes. Through a close analysis of these works through a range of modern theorists, and the concepts of implied and intended audience, debate, dialogue, discussion, monologue, and – in particular – the *necessity* of such dialogues and interfaith interactions, a range of findings will be shown. Of particular note among the findings to follow is the idea that these interactions were less openly theological in nature as they were *political*, and the idea that apologetics would find expression (in theology) of a range of power interactions between their debate partners. This work will show that the debates in which there was little (or no) power disparity between the figures debating Christian and Muslim theology could be far more openly contentious, while those where there was a considerable power disparity on display were often exercised primarily through diplomatic subtlety and implication.

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# CHAPTER 1

## 1. Introduction

Communication between two individuals or groups can be characterized as friendly talk or considered as a hostile conversation. The use of words in such talks/encounters unveils the intention of a speaker and indicates the coming actions from that particular speaker. These words and sentences establish the nature of any conversation, speech or text and then provide us with an expected result of that conversation, speech/talk or text.

It is an impossible task to study or discuss each and every feature of communication and the history of communication/encounters between Muslims and Christians. Therefore the aim of this thesis will be limited to shedding light on some significant subjects/aspects of four historical encounters which took place in the first millennium of Christian-Muslim encounters and an apology from Nestorian Christian. These encounters are: the encounter between the prophet of Islam Muhammad (572-632 AD) and the Christians of Najran which took place in 628 AD; the dialogue that occurred in 781 AD between the Abbasid caliph al-Mehdi (in office 775-785) and the Nestorian patriarch Timothy I (in office 780-823); thirdly, the apologetic text in the book *Kitāb al-tamhīd* (The book of preface) against Christians written by a Muslim theologian and judge Abu Bakr Muhammad b. al-Tayyab al-Baqillani (950-1013 AD) and finally philosophical and theological considerations of the apology of the Nestorian Christian Abd al-Masih ibn Ishaq al-Kindi which reportedly was produced in 830 A.D. This study will remain on the descriptive, analytical and historical level rather than normative.

### 1.1 Research Question

Primarily, this work seeks to discover (1) what was the *purpose* of the spiritual interfaith dialogues and apologetics which took place in antiquity through the Middle Ages, among members of the Christian and Islamic world? This question will be modified through the next question: (2) Should these works be placed in a *context* of theology and faithful discussion, or are they more appropriately considered from a context of politics and social interaction between different political ‘powers?’

This work will seek to evaluate these interactions on their merits and through evidence of the different theoretical viewpoints that have been explored. Such evaluation will be in

service of a larger question, (3) Which of the theorists considered, including Bruce Berg, Dag Hareide, Anne Hege Grung, Helge Svare, and Inge Eidsvåg, as well as Oddbjørn Leirvik, provides the *strongest* degree of analysis of the different events described? As a follow-up, this section will seek to answer (4) if there is a connection between these theorists (through their considerations of sender, recipient, implied and intended audience, debate, discussion, and dialogue, monologue, mutual transformation, and necessary and spiritual dialogue), in which *combination* of these theorists considerations can the best overall analysis of these situations be derived? Finally, this work will seek to evaluate (5) in which ways are these interactions and theoretical frameworks relevant to interfaith dialogues and apologetics in the world today? This study will remain on the descriptive, analytical and historical level rather than normative.

## **1.2 Research Method**

The research methodology for the said historical cases will be presented based upon qualitative analysis, comparison of textually encounters/talks and text. The historical research method which is also called "historiography" will be applied on the above mentioned cases. History which is an alternative word of "past", from social sciences' view point, it means "an account of some past event or series of events".<sup>1</sup> Historiography is then a method to investigate the historical records and accounts, not only to seek information but to present a reasonable description of what happened in the history. Our present is mostly reflection of our past and therefore Berg refers to Notter, Lusk, and Neuman where all concur that historical research is not collection of events but to identify the association between past and present and moreover its influence to our future.<sup>2</sup> Historiography or historical research method further involves the process to scrutinize the different parts of any said historic episode. Another important point involved in the historical research is that to figure out the shift of definition or meaning of a term from past to present. Berg quotes the shift of meaning/definition of word *nurse* which was identified as subservient clinical helper to physicians. Now a nurse is considered as health professional and a respective member of a team which includes physicians too.<sup>3</sup> And there is no doubt that such transfer of definition or meaning leaves different impact on the reader of the said text/s and listener/s of any historic talk.

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<sup>1</sup> Berg, Bruce L, p 264, *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*, 6th.ed, Pearson Education, Inc, 2007

<sup>2</sup> Ibid: 265

<sup>3</sup> Ibid: 267

An important note to be mentioned here that i will not focus on the question of veracity or genuineness of the above said four historic cases and these cases will be consider as true examples quoted in various primary and secondary sources. The issue of transmission of these cases to us is not a part of this research and i will not attempt to figure out that how these texts/cases were conveyed to our modern history. This is what called 'external criticism' as discussed by Berg.<sup>4</sup> The availability of these texts will be presented in the relevant chapters. But to maintain and establish the quality of this thesis the method of 'internal criticism' will be applied in order to figure out the intention, motive, and aim of the author of the text (this method is more relevant to al-Baqillani's text). The internal criticism raises the questions such as: What conclusion or impression can be generated from the content of the document? Why did the author write the document?<sup>5</sup>

That second method that will be applied is, 'content analysis' where a careful, systematic examination and limited attempt of interpretation of the text will be made in order to have a better understanding of the text. Berg describes it as following 'content analysis' is not a reductionistic, positivistic approach. Rather it is passport to listening to the words of the text and understanding betters the perspective(s) of the producer of these words".<sup>6</sup> The attempt to listen the words indicates a very significant relationship between content analysis and speech act theory where words are seen as actions.

The third method that will be applied is, identify the components of a communication, in order to obtain a position where a necessary and comprehensive analysis of the text could be executed. Berg refers to Holsti and Carney who defines the three major components of a communication such as the message, the sender/speaker/writer and the audience/reader/listener.<sup>7</sup>It is worthy to note that the word "audience" may often be substituted by "reader" (but not always even in the case of texts, since we must remember that relatively many people in antiquity were illiterate and since texts were often used in reading sessions in front of an audience). The audience is also categorized into different types as following:

- Addressee: The person (or persons) or the group (or groups) to whom a work is addressed.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid: 271

<sup>5</sup> Ibid: 274

<sup>6</sup> Ibid: 308

<sup>7</sup> Ibid: 309

- Implied Audience (sometimes also “the audience on the level of rhetoric”; “the rhetorical audience”): The person (or persons) or the group (or groups) who are invoked in the text.
- Intended audience: The person (or persons) or the group (or groups) whom the author intends to reach with his text.
- Actual Audience (sometimes referred to as “real audience”, but I do not like this, since other audiences are also “real”): The person (or persons) or the group (or groups) who actually read the text.
- Mediated Audience: The person (or persons) or the group (or groups) who in a mediated way become acquainted with (part of) the content of a text.

Having all the above said types in mind can enhance our capability to present a better analysis of any historic text. When the components of a communication are identified then we can trace the relation(s), balance of power, motive and aims of both the speaker/writer and listener/reader/audience. There are seven major elements to be kept in view in content analysis and those are words, themes, characters, paragraphs, items, concepts and semantics.<sup>8</sup> Speaking or communication is performed to achieve certain goals but the relation between speaker and listener stands vital to obtain a desired result. Roland Mangold and Rupert Pobel discussed this matter in very different fashion and analyzed it by citing Brown, Cruse and Herrman & Deutsch.<sup>9</sup> They attempt to express that choosing the different words/names for a similar object by a speaker may generate distance between speaker and listener. But at the same time the different use of words can lead the listener to identify the goal or meaning of speaker.

In this regard, we have a different way to understand the relationship of speaker and listener in another aspect, and that is, ‘a communication can be a problem-solving tool’. The speaker may produce his utterance in different perspective(s) and according to Wittgenstein the distinction between seeing something and seeing ‘something *as* something’ is very crucial in communication. So in result the listener also possibly understand the goal of speaker by

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<sup>8</sup> Berg, Bruce L, p 312-313, *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*, 6th.ed, Pearson Education, Inc , 2007

<sup>9</sup> Mangold, Roland, Pobel, Rupert,p.23-25, *Informativness and instrumentality in referential communication, Speakers: The role of the listener*, Graumann, Carl F, Harrmann, Theo, Multilingual Matters Ltd, Clevedon, Philadelphia, 1989

following the same perspective or horizon stated by a speaker.<sup>10</sup> But it is worthy to note that cultural, ethnic, social and lingual distinctions can divert the approaches of a speaker and listener and then the results can vary based upon the diverted understandings of both persons/groups involved in any communication. The fourth and much significant issue is that to take care of the distinction between our faith/belief and historical facts. This distinction could be more elaborated as ‘distance’. Van A. Harvey wrote a vivid book *The Historian and the Believer: The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief* and discussed the issue of difference between historian and believer’s viewpoint of a past incident.<sup>11</sup> In his introduction, he presents a very careful analysis by saying that we have believers at one side and historians on the other, but the fact is that historians are also often following one of the famous schools of thought (positivist, Marxist, Freudian, Jungian, feminist, existentialist, structuralist, and poststructuralist). This association with any of said schools (which are few of many) surely has influence on the historians and their viewpoints and conclusions.<sup>12</sup> Harvey mentions Nietzsche (the postmodernist) who claims that “There are no facts, only interpretations” which can lead us to a conceptual clarity at some extent that history is not to be taken as a tool to prove our beliefs but to present it with the interpretation of what has happened in the history. And what could have happened possibly if the certain action were taken.

Harvey also discussed the famous German Protestant theologian Ernst Troeltsch who presented three principles concerning the historical inquiry as following: the principle of criticism, the principle of analogy and the principle of correlation.<sup>13</sup> The summary of these principles that relation between past and present is based upon our knowledge of past and we cannot pass a judgement or write or wrong but can present the possibilities of trueness of falseness. In my perception, the crux of this long and vivid book of Harvey, could be that historical inquiry to be made independently, free of seeing the past in present context, faith and belief to be cornered and not to pass a judgment of right or wrong but to present the meanings which are comprehended by a historian. This dissertation will also follow such lines of thought and will try to bring the facts and interpretation of the said historical instances with

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<sup>10</sup> Graumann, Carl F, Sommer, C Michael, p 35-38, *Perspective structure in language production and comprehension, Speakers: The role of the listener*, Graumann, Carl F, Harrmann, Theo, Multilingual Matters Ltd, Clevedon, Philadelphia, 1989

<sup>11</sup> Harvey A. Van, *The Historian and the Believer: The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief*, Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publishing Data, New York, 1996.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, XI:1996

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 14-15:1996

an attempt to describe their (possible) nature and the (possible) aim of the involved actors in that.

# CHAPTER 2

## 2 Theories - Dialogue and Religious Dialogue

### 2.1 Historical Context

The theorists who have been considered for this work are modern, a choice which presents what may be considered a controversial view of the *events* explored in this work, especially with regard to their placement in late antiquity and the Middle Ages.

The reasoning and rationale for this choice of theorists – whose work, when it extends to practical applications, largely explores only current events – is as follows: First, there is a paucity of evidence contemporaneous to the events considered from which to glean a theoretical consideration of these interactions and apologetics. This must be seen in the light of the relative immaturity of political and theological sciences, as discrete philosophies and systems of thought, which were available during these past eras of interfaith communication. Following from this reasoning, it is the view of this work that the theoretical approach which is considered through this work's citation of Berg, Svare, Eidsvåg, and others, can provide the necessary insight required.

Though these authors do not take a purely *historical* view in their analysis, their works are more than sufficient to explain interfaith connections and interactions today, especially through the various elements and ideas they present to describe human social and communicative interaction. To this end, this work argues that these theorists – and their observations about the political and social connections between different social and religious organizations and peoples – are relevant when extrapolated to describe the ways in which peoples of the past interacted with one another. Though it may seem that a great deal of time has passed since the events explored in this work, this work argues that the long a period of time passed has not resulted in comprehensive change in human motivations toward political power exertion and religious reconciliation. In light of this assertion, this work argues that these philosophers' views and frameworks are relevant to both the topical and theoretical 'mapping' of these varied historical apologetics.

The topic of this thesis is dealing with encounters between Muslims and Christians. The word encounter is used for different sorts of communication because every communication between the two said groups cannot be classified only as dialogue. Therefore this part will attempt to present some theoretical discourses in order to sketch the different

types of communication. The different theories about dialogue will enhance our understandings to comprehend the core issue of this important subject and its components.

There are few terms which have been noticed which constitute the nature and aim of an encounter between the certain persons/groups/traditions. These terms are Dialogue, Debate, Discussion, Negotiations and apologetics.

## **2.2 Inge Eidsvåg**

Inge Eidsvåg is a lecturer in the Nansen Academy at Lillehammer, Norway. He secured the office of The Rector of Nansen Academy for years (1986-98). He initiated the religious dialogue by arranging a seminar with the topic “Humanists and Christians what divides and what unites (Human-etikere og kristne – hva skiller og hva forener?)” at the Nansen Academy in 1985. Eidsvåg was awarded ‘1<sup>st</sup> Dialogue Prize 2013’ which was very distinguished recognition by the Council for Religious and Life stance Communities in Norway (STL in Norwegian).

Eidsvåg refers to Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber and Gabriel Marcel as the pioneer philosophers in the field of dialogue and considers them as key players of dialogue philosophy.<sup>14</sup> Eidsvåg advises the readers to have history in view to understand a text or statement. We can have a better comprehension of a statement if viewed in its historical perspectives.<sup>15</sup> This recommendation from Eidsvåg describes his strong affiliation with history and takes us back to the roots of any statement or text. He presents few instances such as no rights for women, slavery and many more which were reality in the past and impossible to imagine in modern society. The knowledge of language and cultural awareness stand crucial to understand a text or statement in addition to history, Eidsvåg argues.<sup>16</sup> “The boundaries of language are the boundaries of my world”, Eidsvåg claims. These are the very important points highlighted by Eidsvåg for a better understanding of a statement and text.

The balance of power and equality between the partners of a dialogue is a pivotal fact in a successful dialogue, Eidsvåg refers to the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas. This idea is closer to the idea of “asymmetry and dissymmetry” discussed by Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas, where Levinas also uttered following “There would be an inequality, a

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<sup>14</sup> Eidsvåg, Inge, p. 138, *Dialog eller debatt? Samtiden 4*, 2002

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p.139

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 139



dissymmetry, in the Relation, contrary to the «reciprocity» upon which Buber insist, no doubt in error”, Eidsvåg quotes.

Eidsvåg highlights the striking distinctions between dialogue and debate based upon his extensive participation in the different projects pertaining to issue.

**Table 1: Eidsvåg's distinction between Dialogue and Debate** <sup>17</sup> (summarized by myself)

DIALOGUE	DEBATE
An equality based and respectful meeting with honest intention for better understanding without any agreement.	A meeting to defeat other at any cost.
We try to meet others with openness, friendship and thought-provoking fashion to establish a secure environment.	Expression of cold-relationship and distance are the basic features of a debate.
It is important to understand others than to present ourselves. The understanding covers not only the statements but the interests and the existing situation at the time of dialogue.	Listening to others is also a part of debate with the aim to find some weaknesses to use as an argument against other.
Dialogue offers opportunity to present our viewpoint with arguments.	Debate often distorts and gives a misleading/false impression of/to each partner.
In dialogue, we are involved to reflect a deep thought and are interested to highlight the effective arguments of others and then finally to evaluate ourselves.	In the debate we are absolute and frequently manipulative. We issue arrogant judgments, tendentious generalizations and unfair accusations.
We generate new horizons through listening others and then to correct our misapprehensions by confession of low knowledge in the issue. This happens through a productive dialogue.	We become arrogant in the debate and are not ready to accept any fault in our viewpoint which could be used against us.
In dialogue, we keep our identity and viewpoint at priority and do utter bravely	In debate, we keep our focus on both personality and thoughts so that we find a

<sup>17</sup> Eidsvåg, Inge, p. 138, *Dialog eller debatt? Samtiden 4*, 2002

where the difference appears but all happens in a gentleman way. Because we comment on thoughts and views points not on the humans.	fault anywhere to refute other's position.
In dialogue, we attempt to agree upon or discover a common solution. The Swedish writer Göran Tunström (1937-2000) presents his mother as an example as she used to divide the bread in three equal pieces as solution at home.	In debate, we are keen to defend our own solution and to refute the suggestions of others.
Dialogue is a process which requires enough time to deliver its results. The question answer between the dialogues produces an environment where the information and understanding flows to minds of participants in an effective order.	Debate demands a very tight schedule in order to let down other partner and to announce the victory over opposition.
When Dialogue ends it often unlocks news horizons and paves innovative ways to continue the communication.	Debate ends and it shuts many doors of further communication between partners.

### 2.3 Helge Svare

Helge Svare is another Norwegian author, who discussed the dialogue and its different shapes. He disagrees with people who consider dialogue as “conversation between two people”.<sup>18</sup> He refers (similarly to Dag Hareide) word dialogue to its Greece roots (dialogos) and highlights that words and reason are important factors during this sort of communication.

Svare differentiates between three types of communication such as ‘dialogue’, ‘debate’ and ‘monologue’.<sup>19</sup> Monologue a person who presents only his own views and keep on talking without having any question or comment from the listeners/public and communication becomes a one-way communication, Svare describes.<sup>20</sup> A sermon of Priest/Imam/Rabbi, a lecture of a class teacher and an appeal from a politician are the

<sup>18</sup> Svare, Helge, p.10, *Den gode samtalen: Knusten å skape dialog*, PAX Forlag A/S, Oslo, 2006.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p.10-11

<sup>20</sup> Ibid: p 11

classical instances of monologue, Svare adds. The interesting aspect of monologue is that he/she has to be very active observant of public's body language during his/her talk. He must be taking notice of public's body language, listening mood in order to convey his message to the audience. In fact, he is not talking to the public/audience but just conveying his message to him without allowing them to respond.<sup>21</sup>

Debate is a kind of communication where two partners meet with an aim to win over other and to establish a ground for their ideology and agenda. "Debater is a warrior considering himself in a battlefield and others are his enemies and his aim is to achieve victory" Svare defines a debater.<sup>22</sup> The debater must not be only capable to defend himself but to refute others arguments as well. Monologue and debate are very different than a dialogue, Svare underlines.<sup>23</sup>

But as far as a dialogue is concerned it is a bridge to cooperate with others, to consider others as friends/partners, to articulate a common understanding for the achievement of a mutual goal, to be nearer to others, to express openness and let others feel similar, to avoid the use of language of power/dominance and generate an environment of equality during talks and most importantly to constitute and define a common goal of the certain talk and communication.<sup>24</sup> Svare depicts an ideal dialogue with some fascinating existing instances where "Talestokk" (Speaking stick) is worthy to mention in our text. It is a tradition of Indian tribes of North America who use this speaking-stick to maintain the order during their meetings.<sup>25</sup> The speaker possesses a wooden stick while speaking and passes it to next speaker when his turn is over while the all other participants listen to him carefully and does not interrupt the speaker. Svare concludes that such practice generates an atmosphere where everybody feels equal, respected and get good time to explain his/her viewpoint in a meeting. This is an impressive picture of a dialogue where harmony and cooperation is very visible whereas Hareide means that dialogue provides us a chance to know each other. Both stand very close in the definition of dialogue.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p.11

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 13 (My translation, The original text is in Norwegian)

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p.14

<sup>24</sup> Svare, Helge, p.15-17, *Den gode samtalen: Kunsten å skape dialog*, PAX Forlag A/S, Oslo, 2006

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 230:2006

## 2.4 Dag Hareide

A Norwegian writer who has been director of Nansen Academy in Norway, the Norwegian Humanistic Academy, opened a horizon by highlighting the four different forms of communication. He commences his article in an interesting fashion by saying that "How do we talk to each other is linked to the result of the said talk".<sup>26</sup> Hareide underlines that conversation is key tool to resolve the problems in a democracy. Then he shifts to the description of a conversation and points out the four important forms of communication/conversation where dialogue stands central along the debate, discussion and negotiations.

He commences his article by discussing 'debate' and referred its roots to Latin word 'debattere' which mean to 'to put down'. The pivotal point in the debate is to win over other partner by refuting his arguments and to claim that his arguments were weak. Debate makes you aggressive to win as we often observe in TV-debates or any sharp-written articles in the newspapers.

Discussion is another form of a conversation which is taken from the Latin word 'discutire' means 'to separate' and 'to tear apart'. The focus under such conversation remains to observe closely the words and arguments and difference between the person and the case where case (matter/issue) stands central. The arguments are more important than feelings and the central aim is not to reach an agreement but to gain better knowledge even through the disagreement.

Negotiation is another famous type of conversation where partners attempt to face each other with tactics and to achieve a goal with own favor. It is always important to note the hidden agenda and interest of other partner during such conversation, Hareide underlines.

Then he shifts to dialogue and refers its roots (as commonly) to the Greco-term 'dialogos' where the *dia* means 'through' and *logos* reflects 'word'. He indicates that dialogue is a form where the (possible) aim is to meet 'others', to understand others and their feelings and history as well, not to win over others and not necessarily to agreed with others. As we shall see below, Hareide presents a different approach in the dialogue than Helge Svare. Hareide considers a dialogue as an opportunity to know each other whereas Svare takes it as an opportunity to cooperate with other partners of a dialogue.

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<sup>26</sup> Hareide, Dag, "Den fjerde samtaleformen", 24.09.2010 Morgenbladet.

Hareide points to the history of contact between Christians and Humanists where debate has been pre dominating. He discusses that debate often produces hate, negative feelings and indignation whereas dialogue brings openness of feelings. Debate can get its place during conversation but it is often the reason of distance and corrupt feelings whereas dialogue brings calmness among the speaker and audience.

It is worthy to note that Hareide connects dialogue to heart, and therefore he restricts dialogue with feelings and understandings. My perception of his analysis is that we can conclude that a dialogue could be considered as a 'possible bridge' to make different traditions closer and nearer to each other. I would underline the 'possible' because in practical life we have observed many conversations which ended with negativity could not bring the partners near to each other.

## 2.5 Oddbjørn Leirvik

Oddbjørn Leirvik is Professor of interreligious studies at the Faculty of Theology of University of Oslo. In 90's Leirvik was involved in the development of Emmaus dialogue center which was chaired by him later on.

Leirvik presented three-folded aspects of religion where culture, identity and power cannot be detached from the religion.<sup>27</sup> A religion never existed free of association with any culture. Religion receives always some elements from the culture where it came and then becomes a part of the said culture. Identity is another significant factor of religion as all religions promote a specific identity at smaller or larger extend. The followers of any religion support each other on the basis of common religious identity in order to feel secure or to make others feel the same. Leirvik refers to the famous French-Lebanese writer Amin Maalouf who expressed the identity matter in very nice fashion. Amin depicts that how Lebanon is divided into Christians, Muslim, Arab and non-Arab identity and shared his own confusion as well about identity.<sup>28</sup>

Religion has also been used as a tool to attain the power in the society or on the map of the globe. Leirvik presents examples of all three Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) which are being used as a tool to gain the power in the world. The

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<sup>27</sup> Leirvik Oddbjørn, p 60, *Religionsdialog på norsk, new edition*, Pax Forlag A/S, Oslo, 2001.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p, 62

most interesting point raised by him is to see that all these religions claim to raise their voice against injustice but later on became self a symbol of power.<sup>29</sup>

Leirvik presented two very significant types of interreligious dialogue as "Necessary Dialogue" and "Spiritual Dialogue" ("Nødvendig Dialog" og "Spirituell Dialog")' which are mentioned in his two different books (*Religionsdialog på Norsk, & Religionspluralisme, Mangfold, Konflikt og Dialog i Norge*). The Necessary dialogue is based upon our own understanding for the need of a dialogue. The religious conflicts generate or enhance the chances of need for a necessary dialogue, Leirvik elaborates.<sup>30</sup> One of the salient features of a necessary dialogue is that it is designed for the sake of society and thus has a quite broader spectrum than the spiritual dialogue.<sup>31</sup> The necessary dialogue deals with religious policies, human rights and all kind of issue which are valuable for the society and it must be conducted under the systematic approach as concluded by Nansen Academy, Leirvik adds. But the spiritual dialogue deals with individual interests and motivations which make the followers of different traditions meet with each other for learning and better contact.<sup>32</sup> The spiritual dialogue often boosts the expectation but risk always exists under such dialogue, where both individuals/grupper can face a very different dialogue partner (who may be has a hidden agenda). This dialogue creates a positive milieu but simultaneously one has to be careful during such communication.<sup>33</sup> Leirvik is inspired by the philosophies of Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas in the presentation of the above said types of dialogue. He has mentioned in his recent book *Interreligious Studies, A Relational Approach to Religious Activism and the Study of Religion*, published in 2014.<sup>34</sup>

As far as these two types are concerned, I can observe that Leirvik is demonstrating his typical Norwegian/Western nature where he wants to highlight the 'responsibility' of an individual in so-called spiritual dialogue and responsibility of groups in the necessary dialogue. It is important to see that Leirvik attempts to show us the importance of a systematic arrangement of necessary dialogue which in my view can produce better results and provide us an opportunity to enhance the speed or to modify our strategy in order to make it more

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 66-67

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p.217

<sup>31</sup> Leirvik Oddbjørn, p.57, *Religionspluralisme, Mangfold, Konflikt og Dialog i Norge*, PAX Forlag A/S, Oslo, 2007

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p.57

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p.57

<sup>34</sup> Leirvik, Oddbjørn, *Interreligious Studies: A Relational Approach to Religious Activism and the Study of Religion*, Bloomsbury, 2014.

including. Another point to be observed that Leirvik reflects on the two important segments of our society (individual and collective efforts) which could lead us further harmony. It shows the keen observation of him as some individuals don't want to be part of a collective effort and sometime systematic efforts reject the individualism. So he deals with the dual aspect of our life and guides us how and on which basis can we establish these two different types of dialogues. I guess that he wants to convey the message that *spiritual dialogue* will effect to generate respected environment and *political/necessary* dialogue will ensure to establish institutions supporting the dialogical environment.

Another very fascinating aspect of dialogue is to produce a common place/room in the society. Leirvik starts this discourse by referring to a Danish Theologian Lissi Rasmussen who introduced a term (parallel to dialogue) “*diapraxis*” which means ‘through action’.<sup>35</sup> The space can be produced by words or actions; Lairvik connects words with texts and action with society. It is interesting to observe that Leirvik extensively reflects the word (spiritual dialogue) and action (necessary dialogue) in his academic works started back in 90's. This shows his cogent approach which has been very loud and clear from the very beginning of his career. The possible reason could be that he has been enjoying a practical position in the Church of Grunerløkka in Oslo, I guess. So that's why he often talks about systematic and institutionalized activity rather than simple individual talks. Coming to the common space Leirvik discussed the Norwegian word ‘ånd’ (spirit) or breath (in New Norwegian accent). He points out that once we take a breath, more air secure the space in the room or our body. According to Martin Buber's philosophy the relation between humans can also be comprehended in the light of this principle, Leirvik adds.<sup>36</sup>

It is easy to claim a common space than to establish it in reality. Because most of the spaces are already occupied by the specific groups where their agenda has dominates. Whenever and whoever finds an opportunity to occupy a space they do and then close it for the others. There starts the identity issue and nobody is willing to lose its identity by allowing others to enter in the said room. There comes the challenge of tolerance, integration, openness and acceptance. The role of majority becomes crucial in such conditions and they must allow the minority to take breath freely and to express their views and action without any pressure. The room can marginally be enlarged if the difference of opinion is reduced and acceptable

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<sup>35</sup> Leirvik Oddbjørn, p 119, *Islam og Kristendom , Konflikt eller Dialog*, PAX Forlag A/S, Oslo 2006

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 297

among the co-owners of the said room. It is challenging for both political and spiritual type of dialogue to produce a common space where all enjoy a balance of power and sharing.<sup>37</sup>

## 2.6 Anne Hege Grung

Anne Hege Grung is a Norwegian theologian who has also contributed in the discussion of dialogue and its definition. She has been an active member of Emmaus center for interfaith Dialogue in the Oslo, and currently a faculty member of Faculty of Theology at University of Oslo.

She worked in the Emmaus center on a very significant definition of dialogue as following: “Dialogue is a face-to-face meeting of equal valued parties without any hidden agendas. I involve in a dialogue not to convert/transform other, but to take part in the mutual change which may occur through a meeting”.<sup>38</sup>

The definition provides some important aspects of a dialogue where ‘face-to-face’ meeting stands pivotal. Face-to-face meeting contributes to create a milieu where partners can perceive the body language of others which can be a possible Confidence Building Measure (CBM). According to Levinas, face-to-face is “between us” [*entre-nous*] already a conversation, already a dialogue.<sup>39</sup> The physical presence is a key element to establish an effective communication and to produce results which could lead the partners to achieve their expected goals of a said dialogue. Grung connects the face-to-face theory with the French philosopher Levinas and explore that our faces are our identity and body presence is a focal component of a dialogue because dialogue is ‘something beyond the words’ and could also be defined as *diapaxis*, she adds.<sup>40</sup>

Equally valued partners are another crucial portion of a dialogue because dialogue in its essence is “anti-hierarchy, anti-authority and anti-patriarchal”, she explains. The equality factor permits every partner to contribute and say his/her meanings and become an energetic part of a said dialogue which can further possibly help to gain the goal. The idea of equality is visibly connected to the theory of Martin Buber where he claims that the relation of two subjects ‘I-Thou’ is a central part of a dialogue which makes a human ‘*person*’ and not simply an individual. Grung has also indicated to this that giving a subjective status to other partner

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid 300-302

<sup>38</sup> Grung Hege, Anne, p. 88, "Begrepet *dialog* i Emmaus", *Kirke og Kultur*, 2005, Vol.110(01) (My translation. The original text is in Norwegian)

<sup>39</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel, p 93, *Alterity and Transcendence*, translated by Michael B. Smith, Columbia University Press, New York, 1999.

<sup>40</sup> Grung Hege, Anne, 2005:88



(according to Buber) and not making him/her as an 'object of knowledge' is a fantastic example of equality in a (religious) dialogue. Levinas underlines the aspect of responsibility when 'I' stand central in a communication and it is 'I' who takes care of the continuity of a dialogue, no matter what the other intends.<sup>41</sup> Another reference in Grung is the theologian Paul Knitter who believes that arrogance and exclusive behavior can hinder an effective dialogue especially when it comes to a religious dialogue.<sup>42</sup> Grung also highlights that a dialogue free of any hidden-agenda could be successful, and I will add that this part is connected with equality also. Grung points her critic to majority Christians generally in the world and especially in the Norwegian context that they have got a reputation of having always something hidden in their dialogues with others which is partly correct, she adds in her article. The notion of mutual transformation is an interesting aspect of a religious dialogue. Whenever the religious traditions meet, the question of conversion and transformation arises and becomes a topic of intense debate among the common followers. Grung discussed it in a different fashion and elaborate it that this shift could be "from isolation to collectivity" and "from fear to hope" as she refers to Knitter. The religious dialogue is often based upon a 'hope' to settle a dispute or to generate harmony between the two traditions. Language, at this level of dialogue, performs an essential role and could be an effective tool to produce some genuine possible shifts as mentioned earlier.

## **2.7 Jane Idleman Smith**

Jane I. Smith is professor of Islamic studies and co-director of the Macdonald Center for Christian-Muslim Relations at Hartford Seminary in Connecticut. She has been working extensively to write about Muslim-Christian relationship and presented eight different models of Christian-Muslim Dialogue in America in her famous book "Muslims, Christians, and the Challenge of Interfaith Dialogue"<sup>43</sup>. These models are: "The Dialogue of Persuasion Model", The "Get to Know You" Model, "The Dialogue in the Classroom Model", "The Dialogue about Ritual Model", "The Dialogue about Spirituality Model", "The Theological Exchange Model", "The Ethical Exchange Model" and "The Cooperative Model for Addressing Pragmatic Concerns". These models illustrate that how closely Jane Smith observed the different forms of dialogue and attempted to present in various forms.

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<sup>41</sup> Grung Hege, Anne, 57, *Gender Justice in Muslim-Christian Readings: Christian and Muslim Women in Norway Making Meaning of Texts from the Bible, the Koran and the Hadith*, The Faculty of Theology, University of Oslo , 2011.

<sup>42</sup> Grung Hege, Anne, 2005: 89

<sup>43</sup> Smith, Jane Idleman, *Muslim, Christians, and the Challenge of Interfaith Dialogue*, Oxford University Press, 2007.

### **2.7.1 The “Get to Know You” Model**

Smith means this model is the most prevalent and common fashion between the Christians and Muslims in America. She underlines that such model remains in its very initial stage and does not produce some results except the exchange of information where one part is asking question and other replies. Getting to know others is an only salient feature of this model which makes it sometime boring and participants of such dialogue often becomes demotivated reasoned its simplicity. This model is often not very successful due to non-existence of any specific goal but it remains always important being a point of departure for any serious and result oriented dialogue, Smith adds.<sup>44</sup> In my view, this model is closer to the definition of Dag Hareide where he considers dialogue as an opportunity to listen to each other without having an intention to convert/change others.

### **2.7.2 The Dialogue in the Classroom Model**

Smith considers classroom an arena where different identities get the opportunity to exchange their views, raise the questions and explore the differences and parallels between various traditions. Although the religion was almost missing entity in the American Classrooms in the past, however the change is quiet visible where teachers and students participate in discussions where religion stands pivotal. This has provided the chance to different groups to understand each other especially Christians and Muslims, Smith describes.<sup>45</sup> She presents two practical and real examples where a Muslim professor Ali Ansari of Harvard University and Aminah McCloud of DePaul University share their views and experience that how Muslims were able to establish or present their identity through dialogue and communication in the classroom. Aminah McCloud points out that young people find this model very effective as they are often not able to speak in normal conditions or not heard seriously even if they speak.<sup>46</sup> This Model offers a chance to engage into question-answer session where aim is to exchange the views, which is –in my view- closer to the ‘definition of discussion’ offered by Dag Hareide. As per Hareide, the aim of discussion is to differentiate between person and case which is visible in the model of dialogue in the classroom.

### **2.7.3 The Theological Exchange Model**

Smith considers theology a vital factor in the dialogue and therefore tells us about a question asked to her class on Christian-Muslim Relation with subtitle of ‘The Theological

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p67:2007

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, p.69:2007

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p.69:2007

Dimension'.<sup>47</sup> She investigated the question of “Does theology really matter to dialogue? And has it made any real difference over the last fourteen plus centuries in which Muslims and Christians have been arguing with each other?” The respond from class attendants was “theology doesn’t matter”, Smith notifies.<sup>48</sup> But she further informs that theology or “theological disputes” have been the primary factor of dialogue/contact between Christians and Muslims throughout the history. My dissertation will also deal a historical case where a renounced Muslim theologian Abu Bakr Al-Baqillani’s and Nestorian Christian leader al-Kindi's apologetic work will be discussed where theological arguments stands focal.

Theological dialogue is encouraged not because of to attack other traditions but to impress the followers of one's own tradition and especially to enhance the competence of members who are involved in such dialogue. In my view point, an important factor of this format is that theology is brought from the primary source of each tradition which leads the groups/partners to go further deep in studies of their own tradition where they often cease to attack others and just focus on their own tradition for better understandings. Smith indicates to a tendency where some Muslims (in her experience in USA) prefer to use ‘interreligious’ term for a dialogue with others than ‘interfaith’ which could lead to a theological discussion.<sup>49</sup> But it is important to note that theological dialogue could easily lead to a debate because of the involvement of major books/holy books in theology which always remain sensitive for its followers/preachers, I may add.

#### **2.7.4 The Dialogue about Ritual Model**

Rituals stand central in any religious tradition and a very operative tool to express one’s identity among others. Therefore this model allows all the participants to observe each other and expand their existing knowledge about the other tradition and own tradition as well. Smith suggests this model by saying that one group invite the other and allow them to observe their prayer/ritual which can be an “eye-opening” for both participants and observers.<sup>50</sup> This approach or model sounds very close to the definition of dialogue presented by Anne Hege Grung where she highlights “face-to-face meeting” approach where intention is to reach a mutual understanding without having any hidden agenda. It is interesting for me to underline that likewise theology rituals are also directly connected with the primary sources of any said

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p.70:2007

<sup>48</sup> Ibid p.71 2007

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p.73 2007

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p. 77:2007

tradition which indicates the significance of such model. This model is observed in temporary world and history presents only few episodes where Muslim-Christian observed the rituals of each other in order to strengthen their relationship. One of the historical cases where Prophet Muhammed allowed a Christian delegation from Najran (628 AD) to exercise their rituals in His mosque and His companions observed the activity. Simultaneously it is reportedly said that the Christian delegation was allowed to stay in the mosque for couple of days which indicates that they plausibly observed the rituals performed by the Muslims. The event will be addressed in next pages by different question where this model of dialogue will also share its part.

### **2.7.5 The Dialogue about Spirituality Model**

This model is very attractive for a specific group among Christians and Muslims where both traditions deal with mysticism and offer a chance to identify the spiritual commonalities. Muslims and Christians in the USA are engaged in dialogue by this model where namely many Christians read the poetry of a Persian Muslim Jalal-ud-Din Rumi (1207 – 1273) and receive the spiritual satisfaction through his poetry. It is worthy to note that this model sometime becomes skeptic and provides inadequate guidelines to remain in one's own tradition's limits. That is why this model is not highly adopted at public or official level. This model is closer to the "spiritual/individual dialogue" approach presented by Oddbjørn Leirvik (discussed earlier). This model is operated by individuals where later on they plausibly format a group but the nature of model remain very individual and therefore often cannot continue in good structure due to variable wishes and goals of members seeking spiritual satisfaction.

### **2.7.6 The Cooperative Model for Addressing Pragmatic Concerns**

Smith considers this model more practical and attaches young people to this model who prefer more work than only writing or talking by sitting in comfortable rooms. The main aim is often to help others and definitely no help before the better understanding of the turbulent situation/condition of a said suffered group of people or an individual. This model is very interesting for the individuals or groups of community who are fed up with only talk sessions without producing any result and the routine has become a "wheel-spinning" activity for them. By involving groups and having aim to perform something for sake of community this model looks closer to the "necessary dialogue" approach presented by Oddbjørn Leirvik as he also highlights the necessity of such dialogue for the sake of social change and development.

## **Apologetics:**

After presenting the different features of dialogue, debate and discussion and their effect on participants of the said types of communication. We shall attempt to see what apologetics is about and why it is necessary to presents one's ideas and creed both defensive and offensive way. Apologetics existed parallel to dialogue and discussion in the history of Christian-Muslim relation and followers of Christianity and Islam have produced numerous works in this field. The following lines will shed light on the necessity of interreligious apologetic.

### **2.8 The Necessity of Interreligious Apologetic**

Paul J. Griffiths (born 1955) is an English-born American theologian and working at Duke Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina. Griffiths presented the principle of “*the necessity of interreligious apologetics* (NOIA)”<sup>51</sup> and connects this principle to the “epistemic and ethical” obligation of the representatives of religious communities. He raised a significant point that "apologetics" has become a negative term whereas an apologist only attempts to promote his own religious claim and creed by bringing in extensive arguments against other traditions.<sup>52</sup>

It would be interesting to observe the NOIA principle in the light of “explanation, interpretation and understanding” principle raised by Jeppe Sinding Jensen (Department of Religion, Aarhus University, Denmark).<sup>53</sup> Jensen highlights the various types of explanation such as ‘covering law explanation, casual explanation, statistical explanation, dispositional explanation and contextual explanation’ and asserts that “it is difficult to ignore the elements of explanation in religious system and in religious discourse.”<sup>54</sup>My comprehension is that making a combination of principle of explanation, interpretation and understanding and NOIA principle can lead us to have a better understanding of ‘Apologetics’ which is a vital tool to defend own tradition according to Griffiths.

The term *apologia* and verb *apologeisthai* were observed for the first time in the speeches of Antiphon of Rhamnus (480-411 B.C.E) who wrote speeches in defence of

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<sup>51</sup> Griffiths, Paul J, p. 1, *An Apology for Apologetics, A Study in the Logic of Interreligious Dialogue*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1991.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid

<sup>53</sup> Jensen, Jeppe Sinding, p, 331, *Religion, Explanation and interpretation in the comparative study of religion* <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0048721X09000839> (visited 07.06.02016)

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, p 333

accused persons.<sup>55</sup> Apologetics was considered like forensic oration or judicial speeches where an orator used to speak in defence of a matter/case in the court which comes with a verdict.

It is noteworthy to look upon the term ‘Apologetics’ while discussing the NOIA principle. Apologetics means ‘a defence or a speech of defence- written or oral’ and this defence can be explicit or implicit, and simultaneously apologetics can be an attack on others in the shape of defence.<sup>56</sup> Jacobsen continues by presenting some analysis of different definitions of apologetics where he finds out that defence, attack and explanation to prove one’s identity and tradition is called apologetics. And by defending, attacking and explaining the writer/speaker can establish his identity and at the same time becomes in a position where he can target the identity of others. Identity stands pivotal in the issue of apologetics and Anders Petersen names apologetics “a token of identity-formation” through the attack or defence of their respective traditions.<sup>57</sup> In context of ancient world (applies on the contemporary as well, in my view) the apologetics offers us an extraordinary sight of different strategies of “cultural intervention, social maintenance and identity-formation”, Petersen adds.<sup>58</sup>

Having in the mind the NOIA principle, one can produce an apologetic speech or text according to situation. And to meet the necessity of interreligious apologetics one has to first define the nature of the said apologetics and nature reflects from defensive, attacking or explanatory style of the said text or speech. However nature depends upon the addressees and audience of the said speech and readers of a specific text. Therefore writer or speaker secures a position to extend the limitation of apologetic text/speech in the defence/attack/explanation.

The NOIA principle is an “**if-then conditional**”, which means that ‘if’ the representative intellectuals of a community realize that some or all of their “doctrine-expressing sentences” are incompatible with other religious traditions ‘then’ it is their

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<sup>55</sup> Petersen, Anders Klostergaard, p. 36, "The Diversity of Apologetics: From Genre to a Mode of Thinking, Critique and Apologetics: Jews, Christians and Pagans in Antiquity", *Early Christianity in the Context of Antiquity*, Frankfurt am Main et al. Peter Lang, 2009.

<sup>56</sup> Jacobsen, Anders-Christian, "Continuity and discontinuity in early Christian Apologetics", *Early Christianity in the context of Antiquity*, , ed. Jörg Ulrich, Anders-Christian Jacobsen, Maijastina Kahlos (eds.). — Frankfurt am Main : Peter Lang, cop. 2009

<sup>57</sup> Petersen, Anders Klostergaard, p. 16, "The Diversity of Apologetics: From Genre to a Mode of Thinking, Critique and Apologetics: Jews, Christians and Pagans in Antiquity", *Early Christianity in the Context of Antiquity*, Frankfurt am Main et al. Peter Lang, 2009.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, p. 16

obligation to come with both “negative and positive” apologetics verses the other religious traditions, Griffiths elaborates.<sup>59</sup> Griffiths takes the difference of opinion as an obligation for the representatives of a religious community to launch an apologetics campaign in order to highlight their own doctrine. the NOIA principle advocates an organized apologetics movement by involving the ‘intellectual representatives’ who can produce influence on the community. But the major ambiguity in Griffith’s idea is that what is motive of such self-initiated apologetic move? And the intellectual representatives’ role is very wide that they are obliged to rush to present a work of apologetics if contradiction/difference is found with other religious traditions. The interesting point is the terminology of “doctrine-expressing sentences” vs “natural language sentence” where the former stand crucial to launch an apologetic speech/text in order to have recognition of own identity.

According to Griffiths the two types of apologetics “*negative apologetics*” and “*positive apologetics*” are worthy to mention under the discourse of apologetics. Negative apologetics is **defensive** and positive apologetics is **offensive** in their nature but both are common to express their own doctrine-expressing sentences.<sup>60</sup>

Apologetics which starts from difference of opinion and tradition with others and the motive of true presentation of own identity and tradition lead to level of exclusion and the major claim appears that the salvation lays only in our tradition. Although difference is a necessity rather than a problem, according to Martin Buber, therefore Griffiths highlights the necessity of apologetics in NOIA principle, I assume. Dialogue, debate and apologetics are common in communication with others either by text or speech. All these three types of communication provide a platform for each part to highlight their identity for different purpose of friendship (inclusivism, openness) or hostility (exclusivism). The role of significant intellectuals is also one of the commonalities of these forms of communication because they can generate influence upon the public/audience and the readers of their texts.

All the above discussed in the previous pages will accordingly be applied on the four historical cases mentioned earlier in the introduction of this dissertation. The application of contemporary theories upon the historical incidents is always very challenging but remains fruitful to produce some new/different understandings of our past.

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<sup>59</sup> Griffiths, Paul J, p. 3, *An Apology for Apologetics, A Study in the Logic of Interreligious Dialogue*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1991.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, p.14

# CHAPTER 3

## 3 Findings

This section will build upon the above theories to present a larger picture of the interfaith dialogues which reportedly took place between prominent religious leaders – especially Christians and Muslims – between the sixth and eleventh centuries AD. Four primary texts and encounters will form the focus of this consideration. The first illustration of a primary encounter will consider the interaction between the Prophet Muhammad and the Christians of Najran, in a dialogue which according to traditions took place in 628 AD. The second is the dialogue which took place between the Abbasid caliph al-Mahdi and the Nestorian patriarch Timothy I, in 782 AD. The third is the apologetic text in ‘The Book of Preface’, or ‘The Introduction’, written by the Muslim theologian Abu Bakr Muhammad al-Tayyib al-Baqillani, who lived from 950 to 1013 AD. Finally, this work will consider the philosophical and theological considerations of the Nestorian Abd al-Masih ibn Ishaq al-Kindi in his letters of debate which he presented in defense of Christianity from rival and debate partner Abdullah b. Ismail al-Hashimi. Through the course of this consideration, each of these events, as well as the arguments presented throughout, will be explored and presented in light of the necessity of apologetics in interfaith dialogue, as has been considered in previous sections, especially through the contrast between negative and positive apologetics. An evaluation of these works will follow.

### 3.1 Muhammad and Christians of Najran (628 A.D)

There is no doubt that the Prophet Muhammad is an extremely controversial leader, who has long been scrutinized and castigated by Christian and Jewish leaders for being a blasphemer, a bigot, a terrorist, and with other slurs and arguments against his worthiness or humanity.<sup>61</sup> However, claims have come to light in recent years to indicate that these views are not only unfounded, but “dishonest, prejudiced, and not based on sound scholarship,” especially in light of the interfaith perspective and dealings espoused by that founder of the Muslim faith.<sup>62</sup> As will be explored in the indication to follow, several historical sources portray Muhammad was instead a leader of a great deal of patience and acceptance for people

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<sup>61</sup> Considine, Craig, New Book Sheds Light on Prophet Muhammad’s Interfaith Views, <https://craigconsidinetcd.com/2013/12/10/new-book-sheds-light-on-prophet-muhammads-interfaith-views/>, 2013 (visited 10.21.2016)

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 1



of other faiths. This section which will consider the interfaith perspective espoused and respect held by Muhammad for other Abrahamic faith leaders – especially at Najran – actions which Morrow (2013) explains as the Prophet’s “custom”, by which he would contact other world leaders, and “invite them to Islam, or, join the event they opted to maintain their current creed, ask them to enter into an alliance”<sup>63</sup> Muhammad was not a figure particularly well-known to Judeo-Christianity, particularly reflected through the centuries of strongly-biased perspectives which have advanced an overwhelmingly negative perspective of his cause and disposition. Due to this lack of understanding, there was a considerable degree of belief on Muhammad’s part that interaction with other faiths was of primary importance, as facilitated through interfaith dialogue – both in the form of apologetics and direct action – sufficient to lead to solidarity between these faiths, at least from a position of theology, if not outright acceptance.

The encounter between Muhammad and the Christians of Najran will form the primary consideration of this section. The interfaith coordination in this city (in modern-day Saudi Arabia) is a famous episode in interfaith history because it represents the actions and perspectives of a Christian community which sought autonomy under increasing Muslim control. The allowances received by the Christians of Najran reflected an extraordinary gesture, given the considerable amount of evangelizing work that the Christian leaders were performing in this region, both prior to and following the institutionalization of the Muslim faith as the preeminent religious authority in the region.<sup>64</sup>

As described by Irvin and Sunquist (2002), Muslim traditional scholarship will recall that the bishops of Najran were involved in strong “evangelizing work among the other tribes of Arabia,” travelling far from that city to Mina and Ukaz, to preach Christian gospel.<sup>65</sup> A series of major controversies would follow, including, in the 520s – long before the birth of Muhammad -- a period of “persecution against the Christians of Najran,” perpetrated by Dhu Nuwas, a Judaic warlord who ruled modern-day Yemen during this time, after an abortive invasion from Ethiopia.<sup>66</sup>

This persecution was widespread and would result in a large number of Christian martyrdoms, including “men, women, and children,” in events which are mentioned in the

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<sup>63</sup> Morrow, John Andrew, p. 46, *The Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of the World*. Angelico Pres, 2013.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Irvin, Dale T and Scott Sunquist, p. 262, *History of the World Christian Movement: Volume 1: Earliest Christianity To 1453*. Vol. 1. A&C Black, 2002.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p. 263.

Qur'an, in Surah 85:4-8, which tell of martyrs in Najran being "thrown into pits of fire."<sup>67</sup> These events would continue to spur the surging Christian element in this region, as the "severe persecution" that Christians faced in and about Najran was reported to have "stirred other Christians to faith."<sup>68</sup> In time, Dhu Nuwas was defeated in battle and killed, leading to the domination of modern-day Yemen by Ethiopia, and the "Himyarite client-king" who deposed Nuwas was an "aggressive polemicist for a Christian state," who led efforts to construct a new cathedral in Yemen's capital city of San'a, which would be a site for Christian pilgrimage.<sup>69</sup> Through this evidence, it can be argued that there was considerable political pressure on the part of Islam to present a gesture of support to Christianity in the region, albeit countered by forces who would see the faith – which had over five centuries of history by this point – eliminated and removed from the region altogether.

In light of this controversy and the vast amount of persecution and suffering faced by Arab Christians, following the birth and during the life of Muhammad, can the case of Najran be considered. As described by Grafton (2003), the Christians of Najran were people of the "Byzantine Rite," and as a result were aligned politically with the Byzantine Empire. The treaty and language under which these peoples would fall, as described by Grafton (2003), "as recorded in al-Baladhuri", represent a key "turning point in the relationship between Muslims and Christians."<sup>70</sup> Muhammad had long respected the Najran Christians for their "determined refusal," and as a result, chose to meet a delegation from that community.<sup>71</sup>

The foremost encounter between Muhammad and the Christians of Najran is described by Guillaume (1955) in the translation of Ibn Ishaq's *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, a biography of prophet Muhammad which is being used as a pivotal source to study the life of Muhammad. Guillaume (1955) writes with respect to the initial point of contention between these groups as having fallen along lines of politics. Muhammad's larger goal, when faced by the Najranite delegation, was to ensure that they accepted Islamic doctrine over their lives and religious practice. With regard to the 'deputation' of the Najranite Christians to Muhammad, there was a particular lack of *honor* described in this text to explain the posture of those Christians toward Islam; Though the Najranites recognized the preeminent position of Islam in the region, and showed the necessary degree of *deference* toward this political power, both with

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Grafton, David, p. 28, *The Christians of Lebanon: Political rights in Islamic law*. IB Tauris, London 2003.

<sup>71</sup> Byfield, Ted, and Paul Stanway, p. 106, *The Sword of Islam: AD 565 to 740: the Muslim Onslaught All But Destroys Christendom*, Christian History Project, 2004.

respect to “titles [and] subsidies,” the work shows that -- in Muhammad’s view -- the Najranites did not hold the proper level of respect toward Muhammad and Islam with respect to their religious beliefs.<sup>72</sup> The “sixty riders” who came to the mosque of Muhammad were “Christians according to the Byzantine rite,” and would present in the course of this interfaith dialogue the belief that God is both God, as well as the “son of God...[and] the third person of the Trinity,” a series of beliefs which align with the doctrinal beliefs of Christianity.<sup>73</sup>

Crucially, this interfaith dialogue is represented in the Guillaume translation of the Sirat text as hinging upon the degree to which the Najranite Christians had *submitted* to Islamic rule; Though they had provided a considerable degree of political and economic submission to Islamic political rule, this was insufficient to placate Muhammad. The ‘apostle,’ as described in this text, regards the Najranites as having “lied” in their claims of submission, as based upon their “assertion that God has a son,” as well as by their worship of the Cross -- and with it their acceptance and worship of Jesus -- and by their practice of eating pork, all of which represent the Najranites’ failure to present full submission to Muhammad and Islamic religious rule, despite their protestations to the contrary. As a means of *correcting* the Najranite delegation with regard to the proper definition of what would constitute their full and complete submission to the tenets of Islam, the oft-repeated explanation of Islamic doctrine issues forth from Muhammad to the individuals who approached from Najran: Crucial points include the idea that “there is no God but He the Living Ever-existent,” and that any Christian claims to the contrary -- especially those which would align Jesus with God -- constitute a direct assertion against Islamic religious belief, through the creation of “rivals to Him.”<sup>74</sup>

One key point of contention in the context of this interreligious discussion between Muhammad and the Christians of Najran lies in the Najranites’ protestations of Christian doctrine as being aligned with those of Islam, and their allegation that their practice provided a means of coexistence between these two interpretations of religious doctrine. In particular, Guillaume’s translation of the Sirat text shows a point of contention with regard to the ever-presence of God, as it contrasts with the Christian representation of Jesus, a *man*, who died on the crucifix. In this way, Jesus -- unlike the Islamic God -- was not “ever-existent,” but

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<sup>72</sup> Guillaume, Alfred, p. 271, *The Life of Muhammad, A translation of Ishaq's Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, Oxford University Press, Karachi, 1955.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 271

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 272.

instead was “removed from the place where he was and went from it elsewhere.”<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, in a line of reasoning which provides a strong link between Islamic doctrine to describe the inability of Muhammad to accept simple coexistence with the Najranite Christians, the delegation is reminded that those who “disbelieve in God’s signs with have a severe punishment” from a God who is “mighty [and] vengeful,” and that “nothing on heaven or earth is hidden from God,” both of which constitute an implicit threat against those who would maintain doctrines which run counter to Islamic belief.<sup>76</sup> To this end, when the Najranite Christians allege that their God is a figure which is *apart* from the singular God which Islam espouses, God himself -- that which is held by Islam -- is *aware* of their distinction, as well as the “insolence and infidelity” that this distinction represents (especially in the personhood of Jesus, and in the trinity).<sup>77</sup>

By presenting a vision of God which was “formed in the womb...like every other child of Adam”, as being *also* God,” Muhammad argues that the Najranite Christians are not behaving out of legitimate religious belief, but out of either an outright sense of *denial*, or based upon a wish to confuse the true believers -- those who follow the Islamic interpretation -- by their “arbitrary” interpretation, one which they have “created” from whole cloth in direct defiance of the simpler and stronger Islamic creed.<sup>78</sup>

It is in the relative complexity of Christian doctrine presented by the Najranite Christians that the core of this interfaith dialogue can be argued to hinge. In the Guillaume translation, the Najranite Christians are castigated by Muhammad as having invented their faith, and the *personhood* of Jesus (as well as the concept of the trinity) in a manner which reflects an abasement of God’s will: By adherence to this “false doctrine,” through devotional behaviour for which the God of Muhammad is aware, and would be “swift to take into account,” the Najranites are criticized as behaving in a manner which is edifying not to God but to *themselves*, and indicative of a particular sort of vanity which Muhammad would find abhorrent.<sup>79</sup> Through the Christian allegations of having ‘invented,’ themselves, the idea of the three-part God (one part of which was a *man* named Jesus who lived and died), Muhammad describes the core of their reasoning as “specious...[and] devoid of truth.”<sup>80</sup> In this regard, it becomes crucial for the Najranites’ submission to Islamic rule to not be one in

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 272.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 272.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 272.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 272-3.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 273-4.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 274.

which they can *maintain* their adherence to these ‘false’ beliefs, but instead one incumbent upon their having “surrendered” to the singular God of Islam, and in advocating for other members of their society to do the same, in order to be fully in the service of God.<sup>81</sup>

Throughout this interaction, there is the sense that the Najranites have *diminished* God through their Christian interpretation. Jesus, in particular, is not *God*, but rather described by Muhammad as a God-created “sign to men” from *whom* the true powers -- and thus personage -- of God were withheld.<sup>82</sup> This is the crux of Muhammad’s exhortation to the Najranites; In explaining that Jesus cannot be God, he paints a relatively simplistic picture, by which Jesus is distinguished from God through Jesus’s failure to be able to “[make] the night...pass into day and the day into night,” as well as being unable to raise the dead.<sup>83</sup> Because these abilities are foreign to Jesus, this represents -- to Muhammad, in the face of the Najranite delegation -- irrefutable proof of the supremacy of Islam over the Christian interpretation, as if Jesus *were* God, then these abilities would “be within his powers,” and he would have no need to “flee from kings,” or behave without dignity through the ordeal of his execution by crucifixion.<sup>84</sup>

The overall idea of there being no God except for God is an ever-present message during this interaction between Muhammad and the Najranite Christians. However, there is little difficulty presented in the Guillaume translation of the Sirat text with respect to how to *reconcile* Christianity with Islamic views. Through presenting Jesus as *not God*, but as a figure who has been brought into being -- the product of a miraculous conception -- as a *prophet*, Muhammad is showing considerable leniency toward Christian views in a manner which can be interpreted as highly political. Contrary to Christian doctrine, Jesus is not a *version* of God, but instead a *creation* of God, who “creates what He wills of mortal or non-mortal,” and merely has to “say to it ‘Be’” to create “of what he He wills.”<sup>85</sup> In this sense, Muhammad is acknowledging the central position which Jesus occupies in the spectrum of Christian belief, in particular the central notion of Jesus, but goes no further. Though Muhammad is unwilling to acknowledge that Jesus *is* God -- or an iteration thereof -- he is willing to concede to the Najranite delegation on the matter of the central importance of Jesus, so long as the Najranites also acknowledged that Jesus was both created and sent by God to fulfill a purpose on Earth, and was not the embodied person of God in himself.

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 275.

In this way, Muhammad is recognizing the importance of the Najranites being able to maintain their belief structure, but is refuting their claims on this singular point: The “likeness of Jesus with God,” Muhammad is translated as claiming, “is as the likeness of Adam which God created of the earth.”<sup>86</sup> Though Muhammad acknowledges that both God and Jesus are able to dictate matters of *truth*, the truth which issues forth from the mouth of Jesus is “from thy Lord,” that is, Jesus -- by Muhammad’s interpretation -- and from a *vessel* in human form which does not constitute God in himself.<sup>87</sup>

The treaty which would be produced due to this encounter is extraordinary because it argued for the pre-eminence of religious duties, regardless of the faith of the participant, in language which stipulated that “no bishop shall be removed from his bishopric; no monk from his monastery, and no priest from his parish,”<sup>88</sup> or for any other Christian leader in this community to be diverted or coerced away from the duties that they had held, or from practicing their Christian faith.<sup>89</sup> Other major allowances were provided in the decree, including giving special right to the Christians that “no tithe shall be levied from them nor shall they be required to furnish provisions for Muslim troops”<sup>90</sup>, and all sorts of oppressions would be prohibited. Under terms of the signatory parties to this treaty, Christian communities in this region were practically living under the Islamic state of Medina lead by Muhammad and gained a recognition called *ahl al-dhimma*, a term which means protected people. Though this treaty represents a considerable extension of an ‘olive branch’ from ascendant and powerful Islam to the Christian community, the rescinding of the treaty two years after it was signed (for the failure of Christians in Najran to convert) demands a closer exploration of its terms.

Grafton (2003) describes that the terms of this accord do not “seem” to be those of equals, as reflected in how the treaty stipulates that Muslim leadership would not attempt to remove Christians from leadership positions or to invade Najran proper, but does argue that these Christians were “liable for expulsion form their land,” and that Muslim leaders were freed to “[remove] church officials” if they deemed such action necessary.”<sup>91</sup>

Irvin and Sunquist (2002) indicate that the difference between the stated ambition of the treaty signed at Najran and the events which took hold by 634 were not a matter of

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 276.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Morrow, p. 114

<sup>89</sup> Ibid

<sup>90</sup> Ibid

<sup>91</sup> Grafton, David, p. 28, *The Christians of Lebanon: Political rights in Islamic law*. IB Tauris, 2003.

discretion but instead one of *law*, particularly that which originated with the caliph Umar. While Byfield and Stanfield (2004) explain that there was “no doubt” in the mind of Muhammad and other Muslim signatories to this pact that the Najran Christians would “gradually yield to Islam,” they would be disappointed, as the Najran Christians “remained resolutely Christian” following the signing of the treaty.<sup>92</sup> This indicates that the pact – and the interfaith dialogue and cooperation that it represents – was not as straightforward as it seems, particularly in light of the expectation of the Muslim leaders in advance of the Najran pact, and by the rapid pace at which the Najranites were, following the signing of the treaty, forbade from the religious freedoms and personal agency protections that they initially received under its terms.

### **3.2 Debate Between al-Mahdi and Timothy I (781 A.D)**

This second consideration of interfaith communication is between Abbasid Caliph Al-Mahdi (office 775-785 A.D) and a Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I (780-823 A.D), the Syriac text of the said dialogue was translated by A. Mingana and published in 1928 from a copy of a "Syriac manuscript" written in 13th century, Newman (1993) reports.<sup>93</sup> This historical episode reportedly took place in the eighth century, following the rise of the Abbasid dynasty, which shifted the core of the nascent Islamic empire to Mesopotamia and to Baghdad in particular, which would become home to both the Abbasid Caliph and the Christian Nestorian Church, also known as the Assyrian Church, the Church of the East, or the East Syriac Church.<sup>94</sup> This era was notable for the willingness of Abbasid Muslims to “recognize the validity of other religions”, leading to Islam ‘maturing’ as a result of considerable “debates, discussions, and polemics” which marked the era and which took place between the practitioners of different faiths in this “pluralistic” community, Bennison elaborates.<sup>95</sup>

This view is presented in greater detail in a nearly-century old work of criticism by Harris (1928), who presents the era in which this debate took place as a time which shirks modern perception: Mesopotamian Christianity “was not so decadent as has been commonly assumed, nor Islam so blighted by intolerance, at least in Bagdad, as it has been in later days and under less generous rulers,” meaning that the context of this debate is not one reflective

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<sup>92</sup> Byfield, Ted & Paul Stanway, p. 106, *The Sword of Islam: AD 565 to 740: the Muslim Onslaught All But Destroys Christendom*, Christian History Project, 2004.

<sup>93</sup> Newman, A. N, p. 163, *The Early Christian -Muslim Dialogue, A collection of Documents from the first three Islamic centuries (632-900 A.D)*, Intredisciplinary Biblical Research Institute, Hatfield, Pennsylvania, 1993.

<sup>94</sup> Bennison, Amira K. *The great caliphs: the golden age of the 'Abbasid Empire*. I.B Tauris, London. New York 2009.

<sup>95</sup> Bennison, p. 124.

of modern sensibilities – especially the intractable barriers which present between Christianity and Islam – but instead in an environment of greater tolerance, acceptance, and free exchange of ideas.<sup>96</sup>

However, it is important to note that while Muslims were tolerant of the Christians in their midst, there was no question as to which group held greater power: The Muslim community under the Abbasid dynasty in Mesopotamia held all control in the region, including over the Nestorian Christians, whose use to the Muslim leadership lay in their commercial influence and mercantile successes. However, the sophisticated and pluralistic nature of this community meant that there was considerable opportunities for interfaith conversation. One such instance takes the form of debate, which will be considered in detail, and exchange between the Abbasid caliph al-Mahdi and the Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I, whose debate is cited as a point of origin for the “literary genre of...the *Apology*,” as considered in this work as a whole.<sup>97</sup> Another important aspect to be taken into account was the shift of capital from Damascus to Baghdad which also made Abbasid caliphs closer to Nestorians in the East and created distance from "the religious influence of the Melkites (Orthodox) and Jacobites in the West".<sup>98</sup> Interesting to underline that Nestorians-being carrier of Gospel to the people of East and having a nearer doctrine to Islam- are the possible Christian sect who had contact with Muhammad, Newman describes.<sup>99</sup> The salient features of this debate like 1) theological discussion between two leaders, 2) two days sitting with questions and answers, 3) both participants did not had "first hand" knowledge of theology of each religion, 4) respect and accept method, depict that either both were looking to earn knowledge or to express their knowledge upon the both audience and readers till contemporary.<sup>100</sup>

As described by Saperstein (2007), Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I was born “500 miles from Damascus...[and] came of age under the second great Muslim dynasty, the Abbasids of Baghdad.”<sup>101</sup> Through his early life and career, Timothy oversaw missions which reached China, as well as the construction of a considerable number of churches throughout

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<sup>96</sup>Mingana, A., and Rendel Harris, p. 2, *Christian Documents in Syriac, Arabic, and Garshuni, Edited and Translated with a Critical Apparatus, Volume 2: Timothy's Apology for Christianity*. Bulletin of the John Rylands Library, Cambridge, W. Heffer & Sons Limited, 1928.

<sup>97</sup> Bennison, p. 124.

<sup>98</sup> Newman, A. N, p. 163.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, p. 164.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, p.169-172

<sup>101</sup> Saperstein, Andrew, p. 1, *Encounters with Islam*, Christian History Institute, <https://www.christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/encounters-with-islam/>, 2007 (visited 10.21.2016).



Mesopotamia. Of crucial note to this consideration is the fact that at the time, the “rest of Christendom considered the Assyrian Christians heretical,” though Saperstein (2007) allows that this might be more related to differences of politics than theology.<sup>102</sup> His world-spanning career and placement in this uniquely multicultural world capital made Timothy an excellent candidate to form a “bridge between the cultures and ideas of the classical West, the Assyrian Church, and the Muslim community,” as he had skills with respect to conversational ability which were enhanced by his intellectual and diplomatic skills, all of which contributed to his strong ability in theological debate.<sup>103</sup>

As described by Hastings et al. (2000), the debate was fruitful, especially due to how Timothy “acknowledged that Muhammad had a divinely-inspired mission to the Arabs,” a mission which he characterized as leading the Arab people “away from the worship of idols,” and to teach them the “unity of God.”<sup>104</sup>

Beaumont (2005) supports these findings, arguing that the debate transcripts show “Timothy offering answers to Al-Mahdi’s questions,” and raising occasional “counter-questions” of his own, with the prompts from Al-Mahdi focusing on “the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Scriptures, and the status of the prophet Muhammad,” which are described as areas of contention which presented the most significant grounds for “disagreement between Muslims and Christians” of this period.<sup>105</sup>

Hedges (2015) describes other aspects of this encounter in some detail: When asked by his opponent who Muhammad was, Timothy provided an answer which is described as a “marvel of diplomatic ambiguity,” in answering that “Muhammad walked in the path of the prophets, and trod in the tracks of the lovers of God.”<sup>106</sup> By this answer, Timothy was able to satisfy his opponent and Muslim audience by arguing that “Muhammad was the equal to the prophets of old,” while also suggesting to his Christian audience that Muhammad was “inferior to the prophets because he came after them,” and was thus a “borrower of their ideas with no originality of his own.”<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Hastings, Adrian, Alistair Mason, and Hugh Pyper, p. 330, *The Oxford companion to Christian thought*. Oxford University Press, 2000.

<sup>105</sup> Beaumont, Ivor Mark, p. 14, *Christology in dialogue with Muslims: a critical analysis of Christian presentations of Christ for Muslims from the ninth and twentieth centuries*, OCMS, 2005.

<sup>106</sup> Hedges, Paul, p. 6, *Contemporary Muslim-Christian Encounters: Developments, Diversity and Dialogues*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

To support this concept, Pulcini and Laderman (1998) argue that Al-Mahdi asserts that the Bible “predicted Muhammad’s prophethood by pointing to the foretelling of the Paraclete in the Gospel of John,” as well as to “Isaiah’s vision of [a prophet] riding on a camel.”<sup>108</sup> To this assertion, Timothy is described as asserting that he had not seen a “single verse in the Gospel, the prophets, or elsewhere testifying to Muhammad, his works or his name,” leading Al-Mahdi to accuse Timothy – and Christianity itself – of falsifying the gospels in order to assert that it had not foreseen the rise of Islam.<sup>109</sup> Timothy replies that if the scriptures had indeed been altered, then “there would exist versions of the Bible free of falsification,” but no versions had been found, and – crucially – argues that Jews and Christians would have little or nothing to “gain from falsifying the scriptures,” a point defended by his assertion that the Jews never “felt the need to suppress the Messianic prophesies from their texts,” though they deny that Jesus is the Messiah, yet, they never disputed with Christians with respect to “the expectation of a messiah, only about his identity.”<sup>110</sup>

By extension, Timothy asserts that Christians would have had “no need to expurgate from their books testimony to another prophet, even if they disagreed with Muslims regarding his identity.”<sup>111</sup> He asks rhetorically, “how would it suit” the needs of Christians and Jews “to eliminate the foretelling of another prophet?”<sup>112</sup> In addition, he argues that it would be a mighty effort indeed, for Christians and Jews – “given the enmity between them” – to be able to “agree on the same falsification.”<sup>113</sup> Furthermore, continuing this same logical presentation, Timothy argues that if Christians were inclined to alter the gospel, then – again, asking rhetorically – why did they not “eliminate the elements that could be seen as offensive to Christian sensibilities,” such as the “accounts of Christ’s brutal scourging, passion, crucifixion, and death?”<sup>114</sup>

Furthermore, if the holy books of Christianity and Judaism had “foretold the coming of Muhammad” – and he argues that they do – “Christians would have cherished the prophesy,” an argument through which Timothy wonders why Christians might “accept the

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<sup>108</sup> Pulcini, Theodore, and Gary Laderman, p. 16, *Exegesis as polemical discourse: Ibn Hazm on Jewish and Christian scriptures*, Oxford University Press, 1998

<sup>109</sup> Pulcini & Laderman, p. 16.

<sup>110</sup> Pulcini & Laderman, p. 17.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

Jewish messiah and reject a prophet of Ishmaelite stock”, arguing that “certainly the Christians are not in any way closer to the Jews than the Arabs.”<sup>115</sup>

These arguments are based in a logical consideration of the situation at hand, and the sources cited indicate that Al-Mahdi and Timothy chose to leave the argument unresolved, and move on to other matters of theology. For instance, the prophethood of Muhammad is disputed by Timothy through his citation of biblical verse upon which Christ warns against following anyone who claimed prophethood. As described by Thomas (2001), Christ foretold of the rise of “false prophets...[who] would deceive many,” though they would come with “signs and portents [sufficient] to deceive even the chosen,” and argues that Christ warned against letting down one’s guard in the face of such a threat.<sup>116</sup> In the course of this debate, Timothy applies this warning to Muhammad, “who cannot therefore be a prophet, though he claims to be.”<sup>117</sup>

Furthermore, Timothy asserts the idea that Christ “brought the perfection and culmination of human development,” meaning that there was no *need* for any other prophet, an argument which he supports by arguing that Christ “directed [humanity] to divine knowledge,” so there was no need for “human knowledge,” as which might be derived from the teachings of a prophet.<sup>118</sup> To this end, Timothy stresses his point by arguing that Christianity is the “climax of human development,” and that it is unnecessary to “go back to what has been superseded,” and that because Christ brought humanity “to the top...there could be no more upward advance after this,” and that any other step – such as that presented by Islam – would be a “step backward...to lower us from heavenly to earthly things.”<sup>119</sup>

In addition, when considering the concept of the Trinity, Timothy raises the “proof and disproof from the logic of numerical possibility and impossibility.”<sup>120</sup> When Al-Mahdi criticized the Christian leader on the basis of the impossibility of the trinity, Timothy “expounded the doctrine” whereby the trinity was defended through the idea of “three persons in one substance,” in terms of the “necessity of ‘one’ and ‘three’ being reciprocally the ‘cause’ of each other.”<sup>121</sup> To this argument Al-Mahdi argued that “on this basis four would be

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<sup>115</sup> Pulcini & Laderman, p. 18.

<sup>116</sup> Thomas, David Richard, p. 101, *Syrian Christians under Islam: the first thousand years*, Brill, 2001.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Thomas, p. 102.

<sup>119</sup> Thomas, p. 104.

<sup>120</sup> Powell, Avril Ann, p. 25, *Muslims and missionaries in pre-mutiny India*, Psychology Press, 1993.

<sup>121</sup> Powell, p. 26.

the cause of five,” Timothy countered by arguing that “the number three was ‘both complete and perfect’, and included all other numbers.”<sup>122</sup>

There are some areas of agreement, however, though they reflect not a profound compromise with respect to religious considerations but instead the power disparity between the two men. For instance, Timothy affirmed that Muhammad “commanded his people to do good and avoid evil,” and that Muhammad also “bore witness to Christ.”<sup>123</sup> However, by his failure to acknowledge that Muhammad was the prophet, he was able to maintain his standing not only with his opponent but with his supporters as well, as to have done so would have “exposed” the Mesopotamian Christian leader to criticism at not having converted to Islam.<sup>124</sup>

In this way, through his deferential tone and allowance for the major differences in belief systems, and by seeking common ground, Timothy’s allowances for the differences in their belief structures can be best understood, as well as in terms of the ways that he is able to use rhetoric to not offend his opponent, while taking care to not reject his own principles. In this way, as described by Mingana and Harris (1928), the product of this polite-but-strong consideration of his opponent’s view led Timothy to present a “sincere” praise of the caliph’s faith.<sup>125</sup>

Despite the potential intentions behind Timothy’s words of concession, there is evidence from the transcripts that the two antagonists were “keen...to appreciate one another’s arguments,” in evidence that “the Patriarch would praise the Caliph, endorsing from time to time his theology,” in a manner which allows the modern reader to “feel the sincerity of his commendations,” in a manner which “[outruns] any possible cloak of hypocrisy.”<sup>126</sup>

Similarly, the Caliph is described as feeling “so touched by the piety and eloquence of his antagonist that he [broke] out with an appeal,” when translated, is presented as, “if you accepted Mohammed as a prophet...your words would be beautiful and their meanings fine.”<sup>127</sup> In this sense, it can be extrapolated that the differences between these men were few, aside from the major structural differences which separated them with respect to theology. In light of the evidence presented in this review, regardless of the *reason* why Timothy may have adopted such a conciliatory and deferential posture, and even come close to rejecting his

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<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> Hastings, p. 330.

<sup>124</sup> Hastings, p. 330.

<sup>125</sup> Mingana and Harris, p. 2

<sup>126</sup> Mingana and Harris, p. 2

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

own faith, it is clear that the diplomatic posture he adopted was in service of advancing a fruitful dialogue.

### **3.3 Abu Bakr Muhammad al-Tayyib al-Baqillani (950-1013 A.D)**

The third consideration of interfaith debate will consist of an exploration of the life and work of Abu Bakr Muhammad al-Tayyib al-Baqillani (950-1013), who will be referred to in this section as al-Baqillani, though must be considered as distinct from other scholars and leaders of the same name. Al-Baqillani was Malikite judge in Baghdad and was associated with Ash'arite school of theology. He was a famous theologian of his time and gained the title of "Mujaddid (reformer of the age) of the fourth Islamic century".<sup>128</sup>

As described by Thomas (2008), a strong indication of the "intellectual standing" of this pivotal thinker laid in his being sent to enter into negotiations with the Byzantine Emperor Basil II in Constantinople, in the year 371hijrah (981A.D).<sup>129</sup> The interaction between al-Baqillani and this leader will form the crux of this consideration of the interfaith apologetics espoused by this leader, as well as the particular *political* goals he served on this ambassadorial envoy.

The following section will consider two major aspects of the life of this thinker and important Muslim religious scholar, of whom little is known about his life aside from his works and the surviving debates he undertook in the course of his working life. Following negotiations between that caliph and the Byzantine ambassador Basil II over "border fortresses," the caliph's choice of sending Abu Bakr Muhammad to Constantinople is described by Thomas (2008) as an "indication of his intellectual standing."<sup>130</sup>

Al-Dawla, in designating Abu Bakr Muhammad as his ambassador to Constantinople, intended that the assignment would provide a means by which the theologians can attempt to highlight Islam in front of non-Muslims. An account related to this journey was that al-Baqillani was forced to enter through a low door so that he get humiliated before king, al-Baqillani countered that by entering back-ward showing his "rear" first.<sup>131</sup> And when he was asked to take off his scholarly cloths, turban and shoes, he refused and argued that "i am of

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<sup>128</sup> Haddad, Zaidan Wadi, "A tenth-Century Speculative Theologian's Refutation of the Basic Doctrines of Christianity: Al-Baqillani (d. A.D 1013)", *Christian-Muslim encounters*, edited by Haddad, Yazbeck Yvonne, University press of Florida, 1995

<sup>129</sup> Thomas, David Richard, p. 119, *Christian Doctrines in Islamic Theology*, BRILL, 2008.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid

<sup>131</sup> Haddad, Zaidan Wadi, p. 85.

the learned men of Muslims and what you are seeking is humiliation and diminution"<sup>132</sup> The situation of low door is mentioned by unsurprised Hugh Goddard (2000) as he argues that al-Baqillani's behaviour towards Christianity has been "rather acerbic", and he "systematically" refutes the major elements of Christians doctrine such as "nature of God, the Trinity, the divinity of Christ and the incarnation".<sup>133</sup>

As described by Bewley (2016), Abu Bakr also refused the Byzantine king's dictate that he enter the court wearing only modest clothes, instead appearing before that ruler wearing "excellent clothes... a turban and a scholar's shawl," an appearance which Abu Bakr defended by arguing that if he were to appear wearing anything less, then he would "abase both knowledge and [himself]," as well as "forfeit [his] esteem among the Muslims."<sup>134</sup>

When the Byzantine emperor asked Abu Bakr what his views were regarding the views of Islam regarding "[their] claim of the Prophet's miracle in splitting the moon," Abu Bakr argued that the moon was split "in the time of the Messenger of Allah," and that while not all people were witness to this miracle – a contention presented by the Byzantine leader – Abu Bakr replied by arguing that not all people at the time of Muhammad were "prepared and told that it would split and that [the miracle] would occur."<sup>135</sup> Later, when Abu Bakr was asked of his views of "Jesus, son of Mary," he replied that Jesus was "the Spirit of Allah and His Word, His slave, Prophet and Message," and effectively *a man*, "like Adam, who [God] created from dust."<sup>136</sup> When asked to clarify his point, and to reiterate that he believed that "the Messiah [was] a slave," Abu Bakr replied that it was so, and that "Allah has no son", and that there was "no other God accompanying him."<sup>137</sup> When asked to clarify again, this time with respect to the miracles attributed to Jesus, and asked "can a slave create life...heal the blind" and those with leprosy, Abu Bakr argues that Jesus was not the originator of those miracles attributed to him, and instead that those were "all the action of Allah Almighty."<sup>138</sup> Furthermore, he argues that the "Messiah did all of that" – meaning the miracles – "by the permission of Allah alone, who has no partner."<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid

<sup>133</sup> Goddard, Hugh, p. 62, *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations*, Edinburg University Press, 2000.

<sup>134</sup> Bewley, Aisha, *Al-Baqillani*, <https://bewley.virtualave.net/mad6.html> (visited 10.23.2016) (no pagination).

<sup>135</sup> Bewley, (no pagination)

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

To support this concept, Abu Bakr raises the miracles attributed to Moses, particularly his “[splitting] the sea [and] bringing forth his hand white without any harm on his own”, an event which he argues was an act willed and allowed God, the same as any action taken by Jesus.<sup>140</sup> In this sense, he uses the argument from Judaism to refute the claims of Christianity, arguing that if Christianity holds to Judaic views, then one must contend that, either Moses was *asked* by God to perform the miracles in his name (and parted the Red Sea of his own power), or that both Jesus and Moses were both vessels through which God exerted his will and power in the world.

In addition, when asked about the plight faced by Jesus, particularly in the lead-up to the crucifixion and resurrection, Abu Bakr argues that Jesus – who is described as facing this plight at the hands of the Jews – “did not know what the Jews intended,” and as a result, is not omniscient.<sup>141</sup> However, if Jesus was God, and he “entered into [the torture and crucifixion] with full knowledge,” then he was “not wise because wisdom precludes offering oneself to affliction,” and as a result, the *man* Jesus Christ could not also be God, because he would have been wise enough to avoid the torturous death he would have seen coming.<sup>142</sup>

The elements considered above represent the ability of al-Baqillani to present his arguments for the Islamic faith – as well as the pre-eminence of Allah – in a highly-contentious setting with a hostile audience. His views are strong, but are necessarily constrained by the elements of this audience. To this end, it becomes crucial to consider the contribution of al-Baqillani to the larger theological scholarship which he was able to take on his own, without concern for the views of a hostile leader or diplomacy.

The next section will consider Abu Bakr Muhammad’s life with respect to interfaith apologetics by his *written* work, of which *Kitab al-tamhid* (the *Introduction*), is described as one of the “first surviving treatises of Islamic theology.”<sup>143</sup> Goddard defines it also as “the first complete systematic treatise of (Ash'ari) *kalam* known”.<sup>144</sup> The work is described as being written at the “behest of an amir,” due to evidence in its opening pages which indicates that Abu Bakr was “sensitive to the prince’s desire” that he produce a “comprehensive and

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<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> Thomas, p. 120.

<sup>144</sup> Goddard, p. 62

concise work on the elements of theology,” as well as a work which made primary arguments against “non-Muslim groups.”<sup>145</sup>

Though this amir is not identified, Thomas (2008) argues that it is likely that the leader in question was the same leader who sent Abu Bakr to Constantinople, though the work predates the debates which would mark this diplomatic and theological assignment. The *Introduction* is a work which amounts to an “articulation of Ashari traditional Islamic teachings,” as well as a strong presentation of the capacity of “unassisted human reason to deduce from investigation of the world the nature of contingent reality,” and through which the “existence and character of the Creator” might be derived.<sup>146</sup> In this sense, it is a work of *logic* which primarily shows evidence of Abu Bakr’s *reason*, particularly with respect to presenting the central nature of Islam to theological considerations, and through his direct refutation of other faiths.

Central to the arguments presented by Abu Bakr in his *Introduction* are his refutation of other faiths, particularly “proponents of the materialistic principle that the world exists without external influence,” as well as “dualists, Zoroastrians, Christians, Barahima...[and] Jewish” interpretations of the creation of the world.<sup>147</sup> He argues that these other faiths, as described in this work, can be “characterized by two main beliefs”: First, all those which were presented to and which led up to Christianity “[held] beliefs about God that contradict” the teachings of Islam, particularly its presentation of “the nature of God as a single, all-powerful being.”<sup>148</sup> Second, his refutation of Hinduism lies in their faith “denying” Muhammad’s prophethood entirely, or “all prophets after Adam,” as indicated by their view that “God does not give precedence to one human over another,” a view which Abu Bakr categorically rejects.<sup>149</sup>

In this way, Abu Bakr’s refutation of the views of other faiths lies in their disagreements with respect to, if not the nature of God, then their failure to follow Muslim teachings with respect to the ‘appropriate’ messenger, which Abu Bakr argues is Muhammad. That said, as noted by Thomas (2008), al-Baqillani does not argue against the “whole range of beliefs” held by other faiths, but instead chooses areas to refute with discernment: The arguments presented by Abu Bakr in his *Introduction* against the beliefs of Christianity center

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<sup>145</sup> Thomas, p. 120

<sup>146</sup> Thomas, p. 123.

<sup>147</sup> Thomas, p. 124.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.



only on the “Trinity and Incarnation,” which he argues “challenge his own presentation of the oneness and transcendence of God,” and ignore “the atonement” and other crucial aspects of Islam.<sup>150</sup>

A crucial aspect of the arguments from logic presented by Abu Bakr Muhammad in his *Introduction* is with respect to the existence of God as presented in the Christian theology, particularly whether God has a *body*. As described by Thomas (2008), this argument is thorough and precise in its logical approach, and begins with an interfaith place of agreement, namely that “God is the highest order in a series of beings,” a finding which would seem to indicate some “continuity of identity between [God] and the created order.”<sup>151</sup> To this argument, Abu Bakr responds by arguing that there is “no obvious continuity between the phenomenal and transcendent worlds,” and that Christians are incorrect to take this concept of continuity for granted.<sup>152</sup> He argues that to believe in such continuity (as he asserts Christians have done), is to accept logical ‘extremes’, such as the idea that the world is eternal, which Abu Bakr rejects, or that the “Maker of the world acts in the same way as the manufacturers of the world,” or that the whole of existence might “[conform] to existence as it is witnessed by creatures.”<sup>153</sup> If the Christian logic that Abu Bakr presents is correct, then he argues that God must be “temporal like all known substances,” and must – as a result – not only “bear accidents”, but “have a body” as well.<sup>154</sup>

In presenting this view as patently absurd, as it would require the body of God to “change and decay,” as with all temporal forms, he refutes the concepts outlined by Christianity which would argue that there is a stark similarity between the world of the earth and the world of God, and that there is some continuity between these two spheres which would lead to there being aspects of God on Earth, as well as aspects of earthliness – especially with respect to decay – in God.<sup>155</sup> In this way, Thomas (2008) argues that Abu Bakr is able to dismantle the Christian premise that “God is substance”, and thus “destroy [a] fundamental element of Christian thinking.”<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Thomas, p. 127.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Thomas, p. 127-8.

<sup>155</sup> Thomas, p. 128.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

With respect to the Trinity, Abu Bakr's *Introduction* begins its argument by asking the question, "Why do the Christians restrict the divine hypostases to three?"<sup>157</sup> This question is supported by Abu Bakr citing the Christian model, which he finds deficient, that reports that "the Spirit and Son are identified with Life and Knowledge" and are thus seen as "attributes of the father."<sup>158</sup> However, the argument which Abu Bakr Muhammad presents in refutation to this view, which he believes is unnecessarily *limited* in its scope, is that there must also be a "fourth attribute," namely that of *power*, which is similar to knowledge, but by its inclusion, either "Knowledge must be conflated into Life" or the "additional attribute of power must be conceded", and in either case the Christian trinity is necessarily limited by its consideration of the elements of a powerful God.<sup>159</sup>

Through his focused approach to dismantling the belief systems and particular aspects of other faiths, Thomas (2008) notes that al-Baqillani was able to present the views of Islam as being categorically superior to those of Judaism and Christianity. Through the debate in Constantinople as well as his written work, a framework for such superiority is presented: Islam presents a view of God – and the *power* of God – as central and distinct from the earth, and has no earthly vessel, nor son. God is infallible, and has no body, and is wholly separate from the earthly kingdom over which he holds complete power. The existence of miracles attributed to Moses or Jesus are inconsistent with this view, yet can be presented in the course of a larger consideration of the differences between the major monotheistic faiths through holding Islam in prominence: In all cases, there are only *prophets* to God, but those are not the same as God (as Jesus), nor are they capable of exacting miraculous power except at the pleasure (and through the power) of God.

### **3.4 Apology of Abd al-Masih ibn Ishaq al-Kindi (830 A.D)**

This section is going to discuss the apology of Abd al-Masih ibn Ishaq al-Kindi, (Al Kindi), written (830 A.D) reportedly at the court of Abbasid caliph al-Mamun (786-833 A.D). Al-Kindi was a Nestorian Christian who has the distinction of being known as the first self-identified philosopher in the Arabic tradition, and whose contributions included numerous translations of eminent Greek philosophical works into Arabic. In addition, Al-Kindi was the originator of two primary apologetic works to be considered in this work. As described by Block (2013), his two works of apology consist of an invitation from an Islamic colleague,

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Thomas, p. 129.

Abdullah b. Ismail al-Hashimi (Al-Hashmi) inviting Al-Kindi “to convert to Islam,” and the refutation of Islam presented in the Al-Kindi’s reply to this initial letter.<sup>160</sup> William Muir (1819-1905) is a central source of late modern era to access this historical document who first time published this apology in 1881 A.D and then second edition was published in 1886 which is used for this thesis. According to Goddard (2000), the study of apology of al-Kindi done by William Muir has been considered "suspect to several modern scholars" but approved as "authentic" by G. Le Troupeau in second edition of the "*Encyclopedia of Islam*".<sup>161</sup> Goddard believes that al-kindī (whose title was taken from "distinguished pre-Islamic tribe KInda") reportedly around 820 A.D was invited by Abd Allah al-Hashmi, a scholar at the court of al-Ma'mun, to "convert to Islam".<sup>162</sup> However interestingly, as described by Muir (1887), it is “conceivable...that [Kindi’s opponent Al-Hashimi] is an imaginary person, set up to be aimed at as the representative of Islam...to draw forth the Christian’s argument.”<sup>163</sup> Regardless, the points made on both side of this debate are robust.

Al-Hashmi argues that through this invitation, it is his “duty to warn his friends of the consequences of not responding the message of Islam,” and arguing that the “doctrine of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost” was “a mere medley” to which he argued it was improper for Al-Kindi to continue to “cleave”, upon pain of “error and misery and calamity.”<sup>164</sup> In response to this letter of warning, Al-Kindi’s apology begins with a “complimentary address,” in which he expresses his “gratitude” for the Muslim’s “interest in his welfare.”<sup>165</sup> The substance of the first letter begins with a defense of the trinity, a view which Muir (1887) presents as “weak and far-fetched.”<sup>166</sup> The argument consists of Al-Kindi’s view that Christianity is superior to Islam because the “number 3” – to mean the trinity – is superior to the “number 1”, because the “number 3 contains the number 1 and is divisible in a way that produces one odd and one even number,” – thus reflecting both types, and rendering “the number 3 more complete than the number 1.”<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Block, Corrie, p. 73, *The Qur'an in Christian-Muslim Dialogue: Historical and Modern Interpretations*, Routledge, 2013.

<sup>161</sup> Goddard, p. 53

<sup>162</sup> Ibid, 53-54

<sup>163</sup> Muir, Sir William, p. 32, *The Apology of Al Kindy, Wrritten at the Court of Al Mamun: In Defense of Christianity Against Islam*, 2nd edition, E & J.B. Young & Company, New York, 1887.

<sup>164</sup> Block, p. 74.

<sup>165</sup> Muir, p. 41.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Block, p. 74.

When Al-Kindi breaks from numerical consideration, his belief in the primacy of logic comes through: Primary to the arguments levied by this spiritual and philosopher leader concern the objections which Islam had made to Christianity, particularly its implication that the trinity indicated that there were more than ‘one god’. Muir’s work (1887) is invaluable for this consideration, as he presents that Al-Kindi – after what this author describes as his “adducing certain metaphysical arguments” for the trinity, then argues directly from the Old Testament, to show that the *argument* contained within the Christian assertion of the trinity was “plainly foreshadowed in the Jewish scriptures.”<sup>168</sup> Al-Kindi argues that, by extension, the Qur’an and Muslim theological scholarship “[misrepresented] the trinity,” as well as the “Sonship of the messiah”, and claims that Muslim views that Christians believe that “there are three Gods” – which goes directly to the core of the Islamic argument against Christianity – is not based in theological fact, but is in actuality, an “accusation resting on the heretical dogmas of sects like the Marcionites,” Christians who Al-Kindi describes as “ignorant dogs” and as not deserving of being called true Christians.<sup>169</sup> Instead, the true doctrine of the Christian church was not one of polytheism, as might seem to be implied by the existence of the trinity, but rather by the idea that the Christian god is “one god in three persons.”<sup>170</sup>

To lend further support to his assertion of the propriety of the trinity, both in Jewish texts and in Christianity, Muir (1887) explains that Al-Kindi refers to several evidentiary works: First, he “refers to the substitution of the ram for Isaac”, as well as Jehovah’s onetime revelation “I am that I am...the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob,” a plurality in description which is extended to other Old Testament passages and references, including the invocation “Let us go down,” which Al-Kindi describes as “not honorific”, but as patent evidence of the “mystery of trinity in unity,” as seen long before Christianity in the three angels who visited Abraham.<sup>171</sup>

Lending further support to this presentation of evidence to indicate that the trinity is appropriate canon – and also not in *inherent* conflict with Islam – is Muir (1887)’s revelation that Al-Kindi himself chose to truncate his argument, explaining that he might have chosen to “rain down showers of similar evidence, if it were not to make [his work] prolix and wearisome.”<sup>172</sup> Through these arguments, and the implication that there were many similar

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<sup>168</sup> Muir, p. 42.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>172</sup> Muir, p. 43.

arguments to be made, but *politeness* kept Al-Kindi's brevity, it can be argued that this apologist was firm in his beliefs but also a well of respect for not only his opponent's views and perspective, but his time as well.

This maintenance of the diplomatic posture is inherent to the larger argument, and Al-Kindi's larger goals in presenting his views. As Muir (1887) explains, Al-Kindi argued that while he would not "say an offensive word" about his opponent, the claims that Al-Hashmi made with respect to Islam were grounds for greater consideration than the threat they appeared: He argues that "the summons to believe, coming from any but a tyrant, must be based on reason sufficient to carry conviction."<sup>173</sup> To this end, Al-Kindi engages in a strong consideration of the life of the prophet Muhammad, paying particular attention to Muhammad's "plundering and warlike expeditions," from which he derived his power, which he neatly contrasts with the divine assistance, especially "at Jerich [where] the walls of the city fell down flat", as being earthly conquests which highlight the lack of assistance from God throughout the early and pivotal years of Islam's rise to prominence.<sup>174</sup> Other arguments to this effect include Al-Kindi's invocation of the affair of Abu Obzida, who attacked Abu Sofian (who held a far stronger force, two hundred to Obzida's seventy), but was not protected by Gabriel, an event which Al-Kindi presents as paling in comparison to the supernatural protection of Moses – "to whose aid, as the Muslims themselves tell us, Gabriel came" – who was protected by Gabriel to tremendous effect: "Gabriel came...and destroyed Pharaoh, with his 400,000 followers, in the depths of the sea."<sup>175</sup>

A third example comes when Al-Kindi reflects upon Sād, who was "dispatched with twenty men" to intercept a caravan, but Muhammad "had not known of it."<sup>176</sup> In this context, Al-Kindi argues that Muhammad was not the "true prophet" he seemed, as this incident reflects the inability of Muhammad to "unfold the unseen."<sup>177</sup> Finally, Al-Kindi is able to present the core of his argument by arguing that Jesus once claimed that "out of the mouth of two or three witnesses, every word would be established," so – by these three arguments – Al-Kindi presents a convincing argument against al-Hashmi's theological exhortation.<sup>178</sup> Yet, by his diplomacy and thoroughness in citing established theology, Al-Kindi is able to do so in a way that does not insult his opponent.

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<sup>173</sup> Muir, p. 43.

<sup>174</sup> Muir, p. 45

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

# CHAPTER 4

## 4 Discussion

The previous section has considered a series of episodes and considerations from throughout the history of interfaith dealings and apologetics between, primarily, Christianity and Islam, though the Christian authors and thinkers considered have often paid close attention to the history of Judaism and Jewish thought in their presentations. The section to follow will consider each of these studied examples in greater detail, using the perspectives that have been elucidated throughout the review of theories which inform dialogue and religious debate, particularly in light of the distinction presented between dialogue and debate. This section will consider each of the above events in the context of these theories, in order to present a broader understanding of the different factors which inform the power dynamics and roles which are fulfilled by each party to the debates and apologies in question, in order to present a stronger and overarching theoretical understanding of the purpose of actions taken by the various thinkers considered.

To this end, it is necessary to reiterate the salient points of the discussions and considerations which informed the theoretical perspectives, as these will be most relevant to inform this analysis.

### 4.1 Introduction

First, the different components of the dialogue-based interaction between different religious scholars and theologians might be considered in terms of the **sender** and the **recipient**, with the originator of the message (or the author of an apologetic) comprising the active party, and the party to whom the message is addressed comprising the receiving party. As shown in many of the above examples, the *purpose* of these interfaith connections may not always be to extend a dialogue or body of thought to the particular party in question, and may in fact be debate for the benefit of third parties, such as an **intended audience** or **implied audience**, whose presence has a direct impact on the tenor of the debate in question. In addition, these arguments must be considered in terms of their words, themes, characters, paragraphs, items, concepts, and semantics, as has been considered, as well as the ways in

which different actors in the conversational frame seek to establish different facts and reach certain objectives.<sup>179</sup>

In addition, this section will consider the cases presented in the ‘findings’ chapter in the context of the following thinkers;

#### 4.1.1 Inge Eidsvåg

Inge Eidsvåg’s views are crucial to this consideration, as they present the different means by which **dialogue** may be contrasted with **debate**. This author argues that where dialogue is characterized by equity, openness, understanding, and carefully-supported arguments and effective argument, **debate** is characterized by a drive to succeed ‘at any cost’, characterized by differences of opinion that are focused on finding means by which weaknesses can be identified in the opponent, and counter-arguments which often present as manipulative distortions of the truth. Dialogue, in addition, focuses on the viewpoints being exchanged, with the end goal being to find a common ground. By contrast, debate focuses on finding flaws in the other viewpoint and refuting suggestions made by the opponent. Dialogue is a *process*, Eidsvåg argues, where debate uses a concrete timetable, and where dialogue might lead to finding new areas of common ground, the purpose of dialogue is to exhaust options and limit future potential for effective diplomacy and the potential for cooperation to flourish following such effective consideration of opposing views.<sup>180</sup>

#### 4.1.2 Helge Svare

Helge Svare will also inform this consideration of the above debate examples. This author presents **debate** as a form in which two opposing views are contrasted in order to present arguments which are personally favorable as well as to achieve ‘victory’ through strong presentation of views which align with a personal agenda. **Monologue**, by contrast, is presented by Svare as a form which is closely-linked to a *sermon*, by which ideas which are personally favorable are presented without contrast, and without consideration of opposing views or the perspective of a potential audience.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Berg, Bruce L., p. 312-313, *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., Pearson Education, Inc., 2007.

<sup>180</sup> Eidsvåg, Inge, p. 138, *Dialog eller debatt?* Samtiden 4, 2002.

<sup>181</sup> Svare, Helge, "Den Gode Samtalen": *Kunsten å skape dialog*, PAX Forlag A/S, Oslo, 2006.

### 4.1.3 Dag Hareide

Whose depiction of **debate** centers upon refutation of opposing arguments, and in contrast with **discussion**, through which a ‘middle ground’ can best be determined, and greater knowledge obtained, as well as presents negotiation as a third form altogether, notable for its primacy of hidden agendas and focus on achieving strong personal goals. Finally, Hareide argues that **dialogue**, which will form the center of any analysis taken through this author’s perspective, shares little in common with the other forms, and is essentially a means by which greater understanding of others can be obtained.<sup>182</sup>

### 4.1.4 Oddbjørn Leirvik

Leirvik forms a crucial aspect of this consideration, as he argues that there is an inherent sense of *necessity* presented in the form of the interfaith dialogue, or apologetic. He argues that **necessary dialogues** are mounted due to the inherent need of often-pitted rivals to obtain a sense of common ground, for the better good of not just the participants, but society as a whole, and considers human rights and other pertinent social issues. By contrast, the **spiritual dialogue**, argues Leirvik, is a forum for the presentation of one's ritual and spiritual experiences but with no larger social purpose, and may as a result be subject to spiritual enrichment for which the different participants must be aware and wary.<sup>183</sup>

In another work, this author considers this difference between spiritual and necessary dialogues in a more comprehensive manner. The first argument which Leirvik (2014) draws with respect to the difference between these two forms of dialogues lie in the context of larger *civility*. In particular, the necessary dialogue is conducted not *necessarily* from a position of overriding strife or other political animosity between different groups, but from a position of mutual respect. In particular, such respect is often one which is extended from a dominant *government* group toward a minority social group, as a means of engendering a sense of compassion or bettering the standing of these powerful actors among members of that minority group.

In any case, the typical use case for a *necessary* interfaith dialogue is when there is a “socio-political need” to foster “peaceful interaction” between different religiously-delineated

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<sup>182</sup> Hareide, Dag, Morgenbladet, 2010.

<sup>183</sup> Leirvik, Oddbjorn, p .57, *Religionspluralisme, Mangfold, Konflikt og Dialog i Norge*, PAX Forlag A/S, Oslo, 2007.



social groups.<sup>184</sup> By contrast, Leirvik (2014) explains that *spiritual* dialogues are those which are based upon “personal motivation” and are guided by the expectation of mutual spiritual enrichment, through the extension of and by teaching various religious principles between one group and another. Often, such spiritual dialogues can lead to a greater understanding of the practice and principles between these two groups, and often results in a greater understanding of various ritual and spiritual practices. And in my understanding it can be used to find points of compromise as observed in a 'common/silent room' (stille rom) for worship established in many government institutes in Norway. This room provides an opportunity to observe others rituals and demonstrate our compromise with the certain environment of said room. In both cases there is the expectation of respect and the understanding of power disparity, but spiritual dialogues are more often undertaken with the expectation of the political distinction (and power disparity) between the different parties as being either minor or negligible.

#### 4.1.5 Anne Hege Grung

He also presents perspectives on **dialogue**, through arguing that – unlike debate – it is a meeting of equals whose interests are only in establishing a common ground and do not focus on ‘converting’ the other party to their ideas. It is crucial that the parties to dialogue are on relatively ‘equal’ footing, as power relations cannot be allowed to sully the ideas which are presented or the primacy thereof. This author also presents as a core to *religious* dialogue the concept of **mutual transformation**, by which a dialogue is used as a setting through which disputes can be reduced or harmony engendered between participants of a said dialogue.<sup>185</sup> I would understand that such conceptualization of dialogue is often read in a more expansive manner, and can be interpreted as a means by which the different participants in a given dialogue can *elevate* one another, and find points of commonality which serve to *transcend* the manifold views – including preconceptions and goals – which they brought to the dialogue in the first place.

## 4.2 Muhammad and Christians of Najran (628 A.D)

It is under the blanket analysis and reiteration of these theoretical perspectives that this work will proceed to consider the case studies on the merits of their type of debate and the ways in which they fit into this theoretical consideration and broader understandings.

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<sup>184</sup> Leirvik, Oddbjørn, p. 18, *Interreligious Studies: A Relational Approach to Religious Activism and the Study of Religion*, Bloomsbury, 2014.

<sup>185</sup> Grung Hege, Anne, p.59, *Gender Justice in Muslim-Christian Readings: Christians and MUslim Women in Norway Making Meaning of Texts from the Bible, the Koran, and the Hadith*, Faculty of Theology, University of Oslo, 2011.

The first case considers the interaction between Muhammad and the Christians of Najran. Based on the considerations and understanding presented in the findings above, it can be argued that this instance is not indicative of a **dialogue**, as it concerns two parties whose power disparity was too great to be considered (as per the arguments made by Eidsvåg) any sense of equity<sup>186</sup>. As shown above, in the course of Muhammad's first delegation – that of Mughira Ibn Shu'ba – and later the Najranites corresponding delegation of educated leaders back to Muhammad, in either case there was a considerable power disparity on display, and significant social and political implications attached to the success or failure of either delegation.

When considered in the broad context of the theoretical perspectives provided by the authors considered, further evidence is indicated for the failure of this interfaith interaction to be considered in terms of **dialogue**, as reflective of the significant power disparity presented by either party<sup>187</sup>. From Grung's perspective, this meeting was certainly not of equals, and did not involve either party seeking to achieve some lauded 'common ground' in order to further interfaith interaction in the future. Rather, due to the perceived generosity of Muhammad with respect to the Christians of Najran, a direct political effect can be perceived in the course of the early investigation launched by both the Najranites and Muhammad.

Though they sought to reach a conciliatory sense of common ground, there was no agreement reached, as the theological gap which separated those parties was too great to reconcile. However, by acquiescing to the giving the Najranites a series of effective 'allowances' with respect to their agency and political power – under the terms of the treaty – Muhammad can be argued to have shown a perspective and actions reflective of Leirvik's view of **necessity** of taking action that would reconcile political differences between these two faith-based bodies, though the way in which the treaty was so swiftly rescinded and their religious agency supplanted by Islamic law reveals the ultimate failure of this debate to establish effective common ground.<sup>188</sup>

Thus it might be argued that this initial discussion, between the two delegations, was never essentially religious in nature; It was always, foremost, a clash of rivals whose failure to appreciate the view of the other faith was always tinged by the inherent and extraordinary

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> Leirvik, Oddbjorn, p. 57, *Religionspluralisme, Mangfold, Konflikt og Dialog i Norge*, PAX Forlag A/S, Oslo, 2007.

power differences under which they operated politically. To this end, it can be argued that interfaith apologetics – such as those which might have led Muhammad to provide amnesty and allowances for the Najranites which extended for greater than two years – must always come from a position of (per Svare’s views) relative equality of power. In any instance when a dialogue is held between two parties with an extraordinary power differential, the party which holds greater power will prevail, regardless of the views which are presented in the course of the discussion. Furthermore, the willingness of Muhammad to allow the prevailing Islamic law of the period to counteract the generous allowances of the treaty presents a further argument for the ability of *political* power to supplant any conciliatory pose which results from even the most robust interfaith discussion.

It is through this account that Leirvik and Eidsvåg’s perspectives are most useful. Though it is likely that both Muhammad’s delegation and the members of the Christian delegation from Najran were aware of the considerable political and social ramifications that could be attached to their ability – or lack of ability – to reach ‘common ground’ on the issue of their conflicting faith, these parties were nonetheless incapable of holding a **necessary dialogue**, as defined by Leirvik. Instead, due to the major differences in political and military power presented by either party, Muhammad – and his delegation – was able to launch a **spiritual** dialogue and **theological** dialogue (Jane Smith), one which carefully considered the major differences between both nascent Islam and Najranite Christianity, but without focusing on maintaining the ‘common ground’ which would result in such dialogue being used as a vehicle for meaningful (and necessary) social change.<sup>189</sup>

Leirvik’s presentation of *necessary dialogue* forms a crucial point from which the negotiation between Muhammad the Christians of Najran can be contextualized. In his view - connecting to Buber and Levinas' "the space between" concept- he argues that there is a general impossibility of *neutrality* in any “social relations” for which both parties -- in this instance, Christian and Islamic -- have strong vested interests.<sup>190</sup> However, in order to ensure that progress is made in interfaith relations, there is also the necessity of a sense of *reciprocity* between different interests, especially in such instances as there is an “asymmetrical relationship” present between both parties involved.<sup>191</sup> Leirvik mentions his observations

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Leirvik, Oddbjørn, p. 21, *Interreligious Studies: A Relational Approach to Religious Activism and the Study of Religion*, Bloomsbury, London and etc 2014.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid, p. 23.

related to contact between Christian-Muslim Contact Group (from 1993 onwards) where a minority (Muslims) addressed the majority (Christians) to get "recognition" in the a majority society.<sup>192</sup>

Though Leirvik's work considers the asymmetry in social clout between Muslims and Christians in Norway with *Christians* assuming the dominant position, the work can be extended to an interpretation of the Najranite delegation to Muhammad, an encounter in which Islam was dominant. As the holder of the "majority...discursive power," it is in the explicit interests of Muhammad to address the minority concerns of the Najranite Christian delegation, and to establish a sense of both "reciprocity" and "mutuality," as a means of encouraging "active listening and sensitivity" on the part of the majority (and thus, more powerful) actor toward those representatives of the minority group.<sup>193</sup> In this pivotal time of Christian-Muslim contact, Muhammad appears to have recognized many of the explicit reservations which the Najranite Christians had with Islamic dominance, particularly their exhortation that the only God is God, and -- by extension -- the appearance of an explicit and demonstrable castigation of their faith, particularly with respect to their closely-held belief that Jesus is God as well.

To this end, the Leirvik text implies that it is in the explicit interests of Muhammad to find a point of *agreement* which can be reached between both parties, as a means of both reducing the level of contention and in order to provide for a more equitable sense of *negotiation*. The goal of Muhammad in this interfaith dialogue, however, is not necessarily to establish a "verbally expressed consensus" or state of "compromise" between the dominant Islam and the Christians of Najran, but instead to establish a point of *respect* sufficient to facilitate their submission to Islamic political rule.<sup>194</sup> Through agreeing with the Christians with respect to their belief in the personhood of Jesus, and acknowledging that -- if not an iteration of God himself -- Jesus was *created* by God to fulfill a purpose on Earth, there is established the goal of achieving a degree of "personal trust" which would serve to better-facilitate negotiation between these parties.<sup>195</sup> Such negotiation is necessary in order to find a sense of common ground between the different actors in this situation, but it does not "presuppose agreement of opinion."<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*

Through viewing these unseen parties as being crucial to the points of the debate -- both from a political and spiritual view -- Leirvik contextualizes the debate between Muhammad and the Najranite Christians as one which is necessarily being conducted for the greater good of both societies. Though direct refutation and acceptance of conflicting religious belief is not the goal of necessary dialogue, it is crucial for such dialogue to be placed in a larger context of interfaith cooperation and negotiation, though it may not achieve the goals of larger submission from either party. Such negotiation produced a treaty which, though short-lived, would satisfy these requirements.

It is due to this disparity in power between the opposed religious representatives that the debate was always and only **spiritual** or rather **theological** (per. Smith)<sup>197</sup> in nature, and focused not on ways in which interfaith apologetics and points of common ground could be used as a means of solving the territorial and legal disputes faced by these parties, but was instead a religious debate of no greater substance. Thus, Muhammad was able to use the effective lack of resolution (per Eidsvåg's view of debate), as well as his position of considerably greater power to show himself to be a kind and generous leader – through allowing the continued Christianity of Najran – but also proved himself to have no greater interest in interfaith cooperation, through his allowing for the legal ‘consumption’ of treaty-bound Najranite Christianity just two years after the protections were first put into place.<sup>198</sup>

It is in this political context that the necessity of this interfaith apologetic can be considered. In many ways, Islam during its very first years was a faith and religion which was predicated upon violent expansion. For this reason, Muhammad had a vested interest in conveying an appearance of generosity, kindness, and charity to reflect such qualities being appropriate to the leader of a great faith – and a man close to God – rather than the leader of a movement whose actions and advances were often predicated on force and violence. Though in time the Christians of Najran would, through legalistic measures (themselves *supported* by threats of violence) be forced to follow Islamic law, this initial gesture and apologetic is eminently necessary in the context of the *political gesture*. Muhammad can be argued to wish to come across as being generous and beneficent, and by the allowances that he extends to the Christians of Najran, this was – for a time – the case. In addition, the choice to use the *law* as a means of effecting the type of rule over Najran that Muhammad sought in the first place is an extension of the nature of this initial apologetic; Muhammad's leadership was not sullied,

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<sup>197</sup> Smith, Jane Idleman, p. 70, *Muslim, Christians, and the Challenge of Interfaith Dialogue*, Oxford University Press, 2007.

<sup>198</sup> Eidsvåg, Inge, p. 138, *Dialog eller debatt? Samtiden* 4, 2002

as the law is a force which is greater than the will of one man, even one as great as Muhammad. In this way, both this leader – and all Islam – were able to effectuate their political ends while maintaining the diplomatic posture so necessary to provide the appearance of generosity that manifest in this necessary apologetic.

### **4.3 Discussion Between al-Mahdi and Timothy I (781 A.D)**

A far more equitable dialogue is presented in the form of the interaction between the Abbasid Caliph al-Mahdi and Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I, in 781. This debate, though notable for its civility between the parties engaged, might not be considered an example of **spiritual dialogue**, as presented by Leirvik, due to the considerable distance between the debate partners engaged, and the primarily-theological aspects of the debate elements, and though it might have focused on facilitating a peaceful coexistence between Islam and Mesopotamian Christianity, it is nonetheless a dialogue which resulted in no resolution of larger social or political objectives.<sup>199</sup>

That said, this debate was indicative of a major power differential between the two parties, in the favour of the Caliph over Timothy. Neither party was able to present a **monologue**, as they faced such steep opposition, but there were considerable provisions made to establish a thorough grounding in civility and procedure during the course of this debate.<sup>200</sup> Al-Mahdi treated his guest with considerable fairness and charity, and the two men engaged in a lively back-and-forth with respect to a host of contentious topics of a religious nature.

Though this debate did present a considerable grounds for antagonism between the opposing sides, neither participant denied their opponent's views, nor presented their own as stronger than the other; Instead, reflecting the perspectives presented by Eidsvåg, the encounter between Timothy and Al-Mahdi was more indicative of a **dialogue** than a debate, as both sides sought only to present their views effectively and sought a means of also gaining significant common ground.<sup>201</sup>

It is no secret that these two debate opponents were unable to find strong common ground, but this has less to do with their differences of belief as their differences in power. However, unlike the findings presented above with respect to the power differential between Muhammad and the Christians of Najran, it can be argued that the impasse reached by

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<sup>199</sup> Leirvik, Oddbjorn, p.57, *Religionspluralisme, Mangfold, Konflikt og Dialog i Norge*, PAX Forlag A/S, Oslo, 2007

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

Timothy and Al-Mahdi was less about the differences between these two thinkers on matters of theology as it was a conscious choice on Timothy's part to act in a political manner.

It is not impossible to assume that Timothy might have reacted to the arguments set forth by the Caliph in a more stringent way, especially with respect to the nature of Muhammad, but by holding to a diplomatic stance, Timothy was able to placate his opponent in a manner which ensured that no considerable political 'fallout' would result from an answer given without consideration. In this way, though there was no pressing political concern aside from Timothy's own wellbeing (in the court of a powerful Caliph), his posture can indeed be considered somewhat indicative of **necessary** dialogue, in the sense that he was able to make many additional arguments to his own benefit by answering this blatant question – by saying that Muhammad was equal to the prophets of old, but implying that he was inferior – in a highly-diplomatic and dissembling manner.<sup>202</sup>

Under this context, the remainder of the debate can be presented in terms of **spiritual dialogue** (per Leirvik), but not as being focused upon attaining the kind of process of mutual change and dynamic **transformation** (as presented by Grung) which would lead to the attainment of greater social ends.<sup>203</sup> Through patience and careful citation of biblical accounts and sources, Timothy was able to present his perspective (especially with respect to the 'falsification' of Gospels to excise mention or foretelling of Muhammad, as well as the Trinity), in a logical and thorough manner which served to endear him to his host. In addition, through finding areas of common ground, especially with respect to the purpose of religious leadership, Timothy was able to sidestep offense that may have resulted in his expulsion from Caliph al-Mahdi's court, and the inability of the dialogue to reach any fruitful conclusion.

However, in the pursuit of common ground, it must be argued that Timothy was unable to present his unfettered perspective, nor make as stringent an argument for the primacy of Christianity than he might have presented in a situation of greater equanimity. Though Timothy was able to endear himself to the Caliph, through strong consideration of the arguments that al-Mahdi presented, which resulted in the Caliph reacting to Timothy with a great deal of appreciation, the dialogue was nonetheless necessarily not one which reflected a profound exchange of ideas, nor resulted in either party being able to fully appreciate the perspective offered by the other.

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<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> Grung Hege, Anne, p. 59, *Gender Justice in Muslim-Christian Readings: Christian and Muslim Women in Norway, Making Meaning of Texts from the Bible, the Koran and the Hadith*, Faculty of Theology, University of Oslo, Oslo, 2011.

Instead, through this tense and highly-diplomatic discussion, both sides were *guarded* in their posture and perspectives, and perhaps as a result less willing to pursue areas of *theological* common ground, in their pursuit of *diplomatic* common ground. As a result, though this interaction is reflective of **theological dialogue** (per. Smith), the aims of the debate were less about finding spiritual commonality as merely being able to discuss the inherent differences between Christianity and Islam in an open format.<sup>204</sup> Timothy's consideration of his posture and careful presentation of his views indicates a need to appease his host, while his guarded response to the question regarding the primacy of the Muslim prophet indicates his ability – or need – to vacillate diplomatically between his perspective and a more tempered viewpoint which best met the difficult needs of the situation at hand.

In this way, neither men appear to be truly interested in transforming the viewpoints of the other, as the Caliph and Timothy both engineer their viewpoints to reflect the situation: Timothy pares back his ardent Christianity to appease his host, and the Caliph – though perhaps stringent in his insistence that Timothy declare his loyalty to Muhammad as the one true prophet – is willing to argue his views, but recognize the diplomacy with which his opponent presented his own, and as a result, appears intent upon being interpreted by both the **intended** and **implied audience** as being generous and willing to accept the views of this representative of the Christian minority.<sup>205</sup>

It is with respect to the presentation of the debate toward the audience that the dialogue between Timothy and al-Mahdi can best be compared to the interaction between the Christians of Najran and Muhammad, from the first example. In both instances there was a considerable need for the Islamic leaders to present themselves as being willing and capable of fielding and accepting other views, as through such a posture they would seem generous and kind, both of which are key elements which would help in their public perception, both at home and abroad. In addition, in both instances, there was a need for their Christian opponents to appear forthright and strong on matters of theological interpretation – for the consumption of their 'home' audience – as well as deferential and respectful toward both the local audience (in the court of the powerful leaders where such debate took place) as well as for the Muslim community for whom the debate was likely to arouse considerable and passionate interest.

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<sup>204</sup> Leirvik, Oddbjorn, p.57, *Religionspluralisme, Mangfold, konflikt og dialog i Norge*, PAX Forlag A/S, Oslo, 2007

<sup>205</sup> Berg, Bruce L, p. 312-313, *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., Pearson Education, Inc., 2007.



In this way, the necessity of this debate as interfaith apologetic can be shown. Though this debate resulted in no meaningful resolution to the vast gulf of theological rhetoric and belief which separated these two vocal opponents, it is nonetheless *necessary* on both sides for their ability to peaceably attempt to reconcile their differences, in light of the larger audiences to whom their debate was presented. Neither the debate between Timothy and al-Mahdi, or between Muhammad's delegation and the Christian theologians of Najran, truly take place in a *vacuum*, and as a result can be best interpreted as political actions reflective of both the environmental factors which presented during the debate, as well as the wider political atmosphere of the eras in which they took place. Through this interpretation, this interfaith apologetic can be contextualized as a **necessary dialogue**, not because they focus on rectifying the political exigencies present at the time of their commission, but because in both instance, both parties sought to best appease all parties and groups in 'attendance', as well as to show that either party was capable of seeking reconciliation. Through this understanding, the context of the situations described must be fully integrated into the understanding of the actions taken by all parties.<sup>206</sup> A political view then emerges as the most effective interpretation of the events and arguments of this dialogue.

#### **4.4 Abu Bakr Muhammad al-Tayyib al-Baqillani (950-1013 A.D)**

When this consideration of dialogue, debate, and other topics of substance is broadened to the consideration of the interaction between Abu Bakr Muhammad al-Tayyib al-Baqillani (Abu Bakr) and his opponent at the court at Constantine, many of the same conceptual considerations as presented in the prior discussion sections come to light.

First, as with the prior considerations of Muhammad and the Christians of Najran, and Timothy's interaction with al-Mahdi, there was an interaction between a notable representative of a minority group with a leader who held considerably greater power and clout, but in this instance (particularly when contrast with Timothy/al-Mahdi), the roles are flipped, with al-Baqillani acting as the representative for Islam, and the Byzantine Court holding notable representatives of Christianity, not least of which was the Byzantine leader himself. In this instance, there is again a presentation of a considerable power disparity between the two representatives, with both sides having major vested interests in their ability to present and exhort their own values and theological views, while simultaneously doing their best to appear either strong and forthright, but properly deferential – as in the case of

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<sup>206</sup> Leirvik, Oddbjorn, p.57, *Religionspluralisme. Mangfold, konflikt og dialog i Norge*, PAX Forlag A/S, Oslo, 2007

Abu Bakr – or to appear generous and willing to hear opposing arguments in a manner reflective of their power and stature, in the case of the court at Constantine.

In this example, then, it is necessary to consider the encounter through the theoretical basis that has been established through the course of this exploration. First off, this debate might be considered in the context of Berg's model of **sender** and **recipient**<sup>207</sup>. In this instance, Abu Bakr was sent to Constantinople following a protracted debate over the propriety of a series of fortresses in order to display the superior nature of Islam as well as to disparage Christianity. This perspective and view immediately places Abu Bakr on an aggressive footing with the Constantine emperor and court, and as the **sender** in this instance, al-Baqillani's chief priority was ensuring that he entered into this interaction on an even, or superior, footing, despite the vast disparity he held with his audience and the intended **recipient** of his words and argument, namely both the Constantine court and the people of greater Byzantium. It is through this understanding that al-Baqillani's initial actions – which would frame the extent of this encounter – can be better understood.

The authors considered in the previous section reveal that upon al-Baqillani's entry to the court, he was presented with a low door, which would force him to enter upon his hands and knees, and his acquiescence to this physical demand would present an acquiescence to the power of the court, and his submission before the emperor. However, his choice to enter *backwards* can be considered a profound statement, both as an invective toward the power held at that court, but also as a major assertion of his unwillingness to accept its strictures, both of this physical nature, and in the larger debate to follow. This major statement would be matched by al-Baqillani's refusal to appear in modest dress – as he had been instructed prior to his audience – and instead present himself in extravagant clothing. In both of these cases, a major argument can be made with respect to the ways in which Abu Bakr presented himself as *sender* and acted in bold terms with regard to the intended **recipients** of the messages and theological arguments and perspectives to follow.

Rather than acquiescing to these seemingly-minor requests, albeit ones which would debase him physically (and which might be agreed to by a more diplomatically-minded man), Abu Bakr used these points of introduction as an avenue for presenting himself from a position of strength, albeit in a manner which likely risked his life. Al-Baqillani's choice of dress, which is described in the literature as being a point from which he was able to assert the

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<sup>207</sup> Berg, Bruce L., p. 312-313, *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., Pearson Education, Inc., 2007

primacy of his position, are defended on the grounds that this speaker refused to “abase” himself, and *knowledge* itself, as well as “forfeit” his esteem among his fellow Muslims.<sup>208</sup> In this way, al-Baqillani is acting in a manner which serves to elevate himself as **sender** of a message (per Berg’s theory), more so than he is seeking to operate in a manner which would denigrate his opponents<sup>209</sup>.

The other theories considered in the previous section are also illustrated by this interaction. In particular, there is a stark difference between **monologue** and **debate**, illustrated by this affair, with the highly-contentious manner in which Abu Bakr criticized and antagonized his powerful opponents in this court, and had his views refuted in kind, indicating that there is no grounds upon which to present this affair as a monolog, or sermon, and instead there is ample evidence to indicate that a debate took place<sup>210</sup>. In particular, with respect to the protracted discussion between Abu Bakr and the Byzantine leaders and court with respect to the primacy of Islam and whether it allowed for the rise of Jesus – and the legitimacy of Christianity from an Islamic perspective – Abu Bakr takes major exception to whether Jesus was the son of God (or God himself), arguing that Jesus was merely a man, and though he was a prophet, and had miracles attributed to him, these were insufficient evidence to indicate that Jesus was God, and rather that any miracles which were performed *by* Jesus were simply performed with the “permission” of Allah, who is the only God figure whom Abu Bakr would cede such a title.<sup>211</sup> Other arguments raised by Abu Bakr in this context include the ability of Moses to have split the Red Sea, Abu Bakr argues that this was simply *allowed* by God, as a vessel through which the only God – the Allah to which Abu Bakr pledges his faith and defends in this debate – and extends the same ‘vessel’ status to Jesus as well.

Abu Bakr continues this line of logic by arguing that the torture and subsequent crucifixion faced by Jesus was in fact an indicator of Jesus *not* being God – or the godly son thereof – because his having been God would have meant Jesus’ omniscience, a power which would have allowed Jesus to see his betrayal and torture coming, and seek to avoid it at all costs. Through these several pointed arguments which Abu Bakr uses to counter the Byzantine courtiers’ assertion of Jesus’ Godhood – and with it, the tenets of Christianity – a picture emerges of this interaction being a debate between like-minded individuals, with

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<sup>208</sup> Joshi, Tripti, *Al Baqillani*, <http://alchetron.com/Al-Baqillani-1050093-W>, (visited 10.23.2016).

<sup>209</sup> Berg, Bruce L., p. 312-313, *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., Pearson Education, Inc, 2007

<sup>210</sup> Svare, Helge, *Den Gode Samtalen: Kunsten a skape dialog*, PAX Forlag A/S, Oslo, 2006

<sup>211</sup> Bewley, Aisha, *Al-Baqillani*, <https://bewley.virtualave.net/mad6.html> (visited 10.23.2016).

arguments being presented on both sides which are deftly and carefully refuted by either party. This interaction, then, can be described as a **debate**.<sup>212</sup>

Furthermore, when considering this interaction from Dag Hareide's contrasting views of the difference between a **debate** and a **discussion**, a continuation of the argument for this interaction presenting as debate is upheld: In no instance did al-Baqillani seek to establish a 'common ground' with the leaders to whose court he was summoned<sup>213</sup>. This perspective – and the antagonism it reflects – is first and most notably seen in the means of al-Baqillani's entry to the court, as well as his style of dress. Had Abu Bakr al-Baqillani been seeking a conciliatory posture and to enter this debate from a place of *diplomacy* – from which a position of common ground might have been more easily reached – it is likely that he would have first chosen to acquiesce to the demands of the court, both with respect to his mode of entry and style of dress.

In addition, the arguments made by al-Baqillani and the positions he took in the course of this debate might have dovetailed with this more diplomatic posture, and he might have been more likely to have sought *some* means of agreeing with his hosts, if only to ensure a greater position of equity and diplomatic strength. Instead, this interaction carries none of the qualities of a *discussion*, as its frequent presentation of an antagonistic interplay between Abu Bakr and his recipients is not intended to find common ground, but instead reflects Abu Bakr fielding his best arguments in order to convince his opponents of the propriety of his view – and all Islam – and to disparage Christianity at every turn.

The views and rote antagonism presented by Abu Bakr at the court at Constantine extend to his written works, particularly his chief apology, the *Introduction*, through which this theologian's views of his intended recipients, and the propriety of debate (particularly his views of a diplomatic middle ground) can be determined. In this work, Abu Bakr extends the arguments he made at the Byzantine court, namely the idea that there is *any* God aside from the Islamic God Allah, into a straightforward presentation of the reasons why all views aside from his own, and those of Islam, are incorrect or sacrilegious. Through considering Abu Bakr's body of work as an extension of his practices and the perspective he presented at the court at Constantine, a larger picture of the *purpose* of his apology (and the likelihood of conciliation with his rivals) emerges.

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<sup>212</sup> Svare, Helge, *Den Gode Samtalen: Kunsten a skape dialog*, PAX Forlag A/S, Oslo, 2006

<sup>213</sup> Hareide, Dag, *Morgenbladet*, 2010.

Al-Baqillani is not arguing for the primacy of the Islamic faith, and of its view of God, simply from a perspective of antagonistic diplomacy, but rather from a point of *reason*. Through the various arguments which Abu Bakr made, both at Constantine and in his *Introduction*, a view of Islam emerges as a perspective which holds a strict dividing line between the natural and transcendent world, and argues that the Christian and Hebrew perspectives – by which representatives of God would be imbued with supernatural powers, or act as God themselves – are categorically incorrect. In this way, Abu Bakr presents a logical and pared-down version of Islam which argues that the perspectives brought by the other major religions, with whom he has engaged into protracted debate, are categorized by unnecessary extravagance.

Both al-Baqillani's behaviour and actions at the court at Constantinople and in his own writing might be considered reflective of *transformation*, which is opposite of the model presented by Grung Hege, where she defines dialogue as a tool of mutual transformation<sup>214</sup>. My observation is that al-Baqillani seeks to change the minds of his opponents, both through his actions and writing, but the failure of this theologian to seek a point of diplomatic interaction speaks volumes about that he was not seeking to establish a mutual transformation of the views of the intended recipients of his words. Through his categorical rejection of so many of the principal tenets of Christianity (chief among them, the transcendence of Jesus, and the miracles attributed to this figure, as separate from God), Abu Bakr appears to be seeking to utterly convince his audience of the propriety of Islam, from a point of logic.

While this al-Baqillani's arguments may have succeeded somewhat in ensuring the transformational action he sought, this was not the best way to go about seeking to change the minds of those who were just as ardent in their Christianity as Abu Bakr was in his Islamic faith. It is a testament, of sorts, to al-Baqillani's belief in the established elements of Islam that he believed that he would be able to transform his audience through confrontational debate, but the seeming inability of him to do so is reflective of his poor choice to neglect discretion and diplomacy in the course of his presenting his view. An alternate reading of this interaction (and of Abu Bakr's writing) might argue that he was not seeking to make a mutual transformation of his audience whatsoever, and merely sought to exalt Islam, but his role as ambassador to Constantine and his prolific writing indicate that he believed in the ability of the logical arguments he set forth to transform his intended audience's views.

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<sup>214</sup> Grung Hege, Anne, p. 59, *Gender Justice in Muslim-Christian Readings: Christian and Muslim Women in Norway, Making Meaning of Texts from the Bible, the Koran and the Hadith*, Faculty of Theology, University of Oslo, 2011.

To this end, it is important to consider whether this interaction (both between Abu Bakr at the court at Constantine and in his writing) are reflective of a **necessary** dialogue, or are merely **spiritual/theological** in nature. As presented in the work of Leirvik (2007), the purpose of necessary dialogues lie in the need for reconciliation between pitted rivals, especially from a perspective of geopolitics.<sup>215</sup> In this sense, both Abu Bakr's writing and his interaction with his rival debaters in Constantinople can indeed be considered *necessary* dialogue, in the sense that the ardent and stony perspective brought by Abu Bakr was presented from a perspective of utter unwillingness to agree with the perspectives of Judaism and Christianity presented at that court.

This assertion may seem counterintuitive, but it can be defended from the relative place of the different political manifestations of the religious groups considered here: As the inferior party, operating from a position of far lesser strength, Abu Bakr is shown to have felt it to be necessary to extol the virtues of Islam – and the reasoned, logical arguments which supported his view – in the context of the far more powerful Byzantine court and the intended recipients of his view, the people of larger Byzantium. Abu Bakr, through both his writing and his actions and words at the court, appears to be aware of the high level of sophistication within that empire, as well as the high place that reason holds, both in the court and by the recipients of his written words.

Through presenting such bold arguments for the primacy of the Islamic view of the supernatural, and by refuting so clearly the inexplicable or complicated departures from 'logic' which manifest in both the Christian and Jewish views of the world, Abu Bakr is making an appeal to the logical and rational nature of the Byzantine people. Though he masks this view in theological debate, the necessity of the geopolitical perspective cannot be divorced from his claims; Abu Bakr, through his stringent view of the necessity of the Islamic monotheistic perspective, advocates for the certainty with which Islam sees the world as a place dictated by reason and logic. By highlighting the discrepancies between the Christian and Jewish view and those espoused by Islam, Abu Bakr is not necessarily arguing from a place of mutual transformation, but is instead arguing that Islam (and the nations in its thrall) are places where logic and reason reign supreme, and that this factor is best exemplified by the pared-down and reasonable religion maintained there.

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<sup>215</sup> Leirvik, Oddbjorn, p.57, *Religionspluralisme, Mangfold, Konflikt og Dialog i Norge*, PAX Forlag A/S, Oslo, 2007.

When considered from this perspective, Abu Bakr is arguing not just for the primacy of Islam when compared to Christianity and Judaism, but rather for the importance and rationality espoused by nations where Islam is the religion of the people. This is indicative of a broader perspective than merely spiritual dialogue, which can indeed be extended to an argument that Abu Bakr's perspective is one of espousing the *necessary* dialogue – per Leirvik's theory – though not necessarily one which seeks to establish common ground, but instead as a means of asserting the importance and legitimacy of nations which would rival the Christian Byzantium.<sup>216</sup>

To this end, per the views of Eidsvåg, this interaction – both in written form and in the debate at Constantinople – can indeed be considered a debate, as it is the goal of Abu Bakr to win the favor of his intended audience (not necessarily his debate partners, but rather the *people* of Byzantium) through the steadfast presentation of his ideas in a thorough and bold manner<sup>217</sup>. Abu Bakr does not seek to win the favor of the leaders with whom he interacts (this much is clear, especially through his entry gambit and style of dress), but rather to present the views and sophistication of Islamic religion, as well as the countries in which it is practiced, in as positive a light as he is capable. While Abu Bakr's every action (and written word) indicate that his perspective is not one of conciliation or seeking of a common ground, his actions can nonetheless be considered reflective of a profound argument on the behalf of the legitimacy of Islam, as delivered not to the leadership of Byzantium, but to its people.

Through his logic-based arguments and careful dismantling of the areas of Christianity and Judaism which did not appear to hold firm to his pristine logical view (especially the idea that there is no God but God, a view which reflects a profound simplicity and reason), Abu Bakr sought to dismantle the Judeo-Christian perspective espoused most strongly by his official opponents. However, his choice to abandon diplomacy and to refuse to seek a common ground indicates not that he wished to advocate for Islam at the expense of Christianity or Judaism, but merely that he wished to assert that nations in which Islam is practiced, as reflected in this religious perspective, are necessarily places where reason and logic are valued more than maintaining fealty to older mythologies. In this way, Abu Bakr is not presenting a **spiritual dialogue**, but instead a **necessary debate**, the purpose of which goes far beyond religious considerations.

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<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

<sup>217</sup> Eidsvåg, Inge, p. 138, "Dialog eller debatt"? *Samtiden* 4, 2002.

The necessity of this interreligious apologetic can be considered in the context of the legitimacy of Islam in this pivotal period. Absent such a strong advocate as Abu Bakr, the active understanding and sympathy toward Islam – especially in Byzantium – was relatively low, especially among the ‘normative’ members of the Judaic and Christian communities. Through providing both the Byzantine leader, his court, and his people, with a vision of Islam that would not be intimidated, and which would not falter under pressure, this apologetic is shown as reflective of core cultural necessity, and the work of Abu Bakr can be shown to have been pivotal, and beneficial. He met the Byzantine leader on that leader’s own terms, but was able to maintain his ‘footing’, and not fall into the manifold traps (both physical and rhetorical) that that leader presented as a means of making Abu Bakr (and thus all Islam) look foolish or uncivilized. By maintaining his composure, as well as his steadfast determination to present the core tenets of Islam in a forceful and passionate manner, this interreligious apologetic is revealed as eminently necessary for maintaining and expanding the core of Islamic thought during this pivotal period.

And with reference to the principle of “*the necessity of interreligious apologetics (NOIA)*” Baqillani performed his "epistemic and ethical" obligation (as per Paul J. Griffiths) being a representative of Muslim community.<sup>218</sup> This obligation made him fearless in the court of a powerful Christian king and he uttered the statements and expressed his action (by dress and entering backward) to establish his identity and to defend the Islamic doctrine. The discussion made by al-Baqillani can easily be identified as a **defence speech and text** for his creed with an extra ordinary **effort to explain** his creed by multiple arguments. Explanation (as per Jeppe Sinding Jensen)<sup>219</sup> and interpretation is highly available in the text of al-Baqillani and he used his apologetic text as a "**token of identity-formation**" (as per Anders Petersen)<sup>220</sup>. Al-Baqillani expressed his cultural and social traditions/identity through his behaviour in the court and text in the book, and this highlighted his identity in the Byzantine court where he appeared as a minority. The Muslim theologian acted very sharply upon the principle of “**if-then conditional**” (as per Paul J. Griffiths ) where he faced an "if" situation

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<sup>218</sup> Griffiths, Paul J, p. 1, *An Apology for Apologetics, A Study in the Logic of Interreligious Dialogue*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1991.

<sup>219</sup> Jensen, Jeppe Sinding, p, 331, *Religion, Explanation and interpretation in the comparative study of religion* <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0048721X09000839> (visited 07.06.2016)

<sup>220</sup> Petersen, Anders Klostergaard, p. 16, "The Diversity of Apologetics: From Genre to a Mode of Thinking, Critique and Apologetics: Jews, Christians and Pagans in Antiquity", *Early Christianity in the Context of Antiquity*, Frankfurt am Main et al. Peter Lang, 2009.



(a low door) and countered it by "then" action (by entering backward) and successfully launched a positive apologetic which is offensive, according to Griffiths under NOIA principle. The Muslim theologian achieved multiple goals through his quick physical and written actions and top of them was formation of 'Muslim identity'.

#### 4.5 Apology of Abd al-Masih ibn Ishaq al-Kindi (830 A.D)

The written work of Abd al-Masih ibn Ishaq al-Kindi (Al-Kindi) is notable for its presentation of various aspects of the major debate between Islam and Christianity, but also for it being *only* comprised of written work, and absent the in-person interactions which have been considered in the previous sections. Like Abu Bakr, Al-Kindi is notable for his defiant and strong exhortation of the value inherent to Christianity, but there is some controversy with respect to the intended recipient of this message. As described by Muir (1887), the 'colleague' who presents as the chief opponent of Al-Kindi in the course of this written debate may well have been established as a fictional means by which Al-Kindi can present his own arguments, particularly his logical defense of the areas in which Christianity and the Judeo-Christian view can be found wanting<sup>221</sup>.

In particular, Al-Kindi echoes the views as presented by Abu Bakr, especially with respect to his argument for the greater *reason* expressed in the tenets of Christianity, and the arguments to be made against Islamic defense by way of its perceived greater understanding and reflection of logical principles, as well as the altogether *subtler* nature of its core beliefs.

When considered through the perspective and attitudes presented by the theorists explored above, a clear picture emerges. First, with regard to the **sender** and **recipient**, the work of apology drafted by Al-Kindi presents himself as the sender and his colleague (a man named Abdullah b. Ismail al-Hashimi (Al-Hashmi) as an ardent defender of Islam, but whose chief personhood is difficult to verify. It is the view of this work that it is indeed more likely that Al-Hashmi is a fictional representation of the values that Al-Kindi ascribes to those who would defend Islam, and in this way, Al-Kindi's argument emerges as stronger for the measured tone that he brings to the perspective and views that he assigns to his opponent.

Indeed, if Al-Kindi did indeed invent the person named Al-Hashmi, a stronger conclusion can be drawn as to the necessity of this argument, and to the essential nature of the

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<sup>221</sup> Muir, Sir William, p. 32, *The Apology of Al Kindy, Wrritten at the Court of Al Mamun: In Defense of Christianity Against Islam*, J.B. Young & Company, 1887.

debate that it presents: Though Al-Kindi might have been seeking to establish his opponent as a villain, there is no part of the work where Al-Kindi sets up this figure ‘Al-Hashmi’ as a ‘straw man’ opponent, and indeed the measured and legitimate tone that Al-Kindi brings to the perspective and arguments presented by this other figure – if indeed he is a fiction – reflects the high esteem with which Al-Kindi holds not only his theological opponents, but all those who would defend Islam itself. This is not a work which alleges that those who advocate for Islam have *spurious* arguments at their core, but instead one which recognizes the legitimacy of the Islamic point of view, and seeks to dismantle these views using the same rational and reasonable perspective as presented by al-Baqillani.

To this end, while Al-Kindi’s **recipient** is indeed this figure Al-Hashmi, the difficulty in verifying whether or not this figure is real is itself an argument for the larger **intended** and **implied** audience of the arguments which follow. While Al-Kindi might have been seeking to present a work which focuses on the intended audience, if indeed his intended recipient is a fiction, then the work is *entirely* one which seeks to court the implied audience, as illustrated in the work of Berg (2007)<sup>222</sup>. This implied audience, then, is the larger Judeo-Christian community, who would be intended to hear the arguments that Al-Kindi makes in their defense, as well as the wider Islamic community, who he seeks to court and convince of the primacy of the arguments he presents throughout.

However, diplomacy might be a more important consideration in this work than in the others above, as Al-Kindi is shown to seek to present his colleague Al-Hashmi in a kind light, seemingly to act as an appeal to the wider Islamic audience who would be receiving (and whom he hopes would be convinced by) the arguments presented in this work of theology. It is from this perspective that the initial letter can be best understood, as it presents Al-Hashmi as attempting to convert Al-Kindi, not from a perspective of the necessary primacy of Islam (though this is implied), but instead due to Al-Hashmi’s seeming concern with Al-Kindi’s continued allegiance to a faith and theological perspective which was an error that – if not corrected – would cause his friend to suffer “error and misery and calamity.”<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> Berg, Bruce L., p. 312-313, *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., Pearson Education, Inc., 2007.

<sup>223</sup> Block, Corrie, p. 74, *The Qur'an in Christian-Muslim Dialogue: Historical and Modern Interpretations*, Routledge, 2013.

This is not an argument which this ‘Al-Hashmi’ makes out of theological propriety, but rather as a kind friend and colleague who seeks to provide a means by which Al-Kindi can avoid personal misfortune. In this way, the diplomacy of the piece shines through, as Al-Kindi – if indeed Al-Hashmi is a fabrication – presents the proponents of Islam as not a group seeking to push their views as a matter of dogma, but instead as generous advocates of a view they believe as superior.

Al-Kindi’s only major failing in the course of his argument dovetails with many of the arguments made against Christianity in the other works which have been considered. Through his initial rebuttal (within which he thanks his colleague for his concern), Al-Kindi makes a series of arguments which are seemingly rooted in reason – and which were perhaps reasonable for the time – but which do not hold up under modern inspection. When he defends the trinity on a numerical basis, Al-Kindi is at its weakest, arguing that the fact of the number three being greater than the number one is a strong argument for the primacy of the three-part God entrenched in the trinity conception of God presented by Christianity.

This argument can be considered almost spurious in nature, as it reflects not a sense of logic as an argument from the basis of dubious numerical fact. However, in this instance, it appears that Al-Kindi is making an argument from logic (as he interprets this point), and presenting his numerical perspective as being one which proves that Christianity is superior to Islam by deft of this point. Though Al-Hashmi is not given a chance to rebut this point, one might extrapolate from the earlier considerations to argue that if Abu Bakr (from the Byzantine court, as considered above) might have been allowed to intervene, he might have made a similar argument for the primacy of Islam due to the overall simpler logic of *one* being superior to *three*.

When considered from the interpretation – especially as established by Muir (1887) that this argument between Al-Kindi and Al-Hashmi was invented for the purposes of its intended audience (and indeed, that Al-Hashmi is a fictional representation), then the work of Svare (2006) becomes particularly relevant. In this work, Svare argues that where debate contrasts two pitted viewpoints, **monologue** presents one viewpoint with little contrast, in a format which is closer to a sermon.

Though this section has lauded Al-Kindi for the equitable manner in which he had illustrated his possibly-fictional opponent, there is an argument to be made that the absence of effective rebuttal for the ineffective and spurious argument which Al-Kindi presents to defend

the trinity indicates that the work is far closer to a monologue than a debate.<sup>224</sup> Al-Kindi's argument for numerical supremacy is allowed to pass without rebuttal, which either indicates that Al-Kindi believed so strongly in this view that it might be taken for granted, or he was engineering the debate he presents (and his opponent's silence) in order to cast his views and perspective in a stronger light.

There are strong arguments to be made in Al-Kindi's favor, especially when this debate moves past the numerical arguments for the trinity and into the arguments for the primacy of Christianity (and the same trinity) from a point of logic. In this way, it might be argued that Al-Kindi's chief aim in the course of this debate is to assuage doubts of Christian primacy from an Islamic perspective, and thus to present a **transformational** view that could lead to Christian conversion among his Islamic readership, effort was not a mutual-transformation effort as per Grung<sup>225</sup>. Chief among the means by which Al-Kindi achieves this objective is through his further arguments for the primacy of the trinity, this time not from numerical reasoning but rather from arguing against the common claims made by Islam, particularly that the trinity is indicative of Christian polytheism.

Through setting out the common arguments made against Christianity from Islamic circles, Al-Kindi is able to refute these view through arguing that the trinity – that is, one god *in* and *as* three persons – is not the same as the Islamic assertions of polytheism, which he argues are based on Marcionite dogma, which had long since been deemed heretical. Through arguing that the assertions of that sect – whom he categorizes as “ignorant dogs” – are not indicative of the more subtle view of wider Christianity, Al-Kindi is able to criticize Islam as not being *incorrect*, per se, with respect to its view of the Christian trinity, but simply misguided in their interpretation of a concept which is more complicated than it seems.<sup>226</sup>

A major argument from diplomacy courses through this work, and might be indicative of the work's primacy not as a **spiritual dialogue**, but instead as a **necessary dialogue**, the point of which is to extend the olive branch of cooperation and diplomacy to the Islamic speaker Al-Hashmi, who may rightfully stand in for the larger population of Islamic followers who

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<sup>224</sup> Svare, Helge, "Den Gode Samtalen": *Kunsten å skape dialog*, PAX Forlag A/S, Oslo, 2006

<sup>225</sup> Grung Hege, Anne, p. 59, *Gender Justice in Muslim-Christian Readings: Christian and Muslim Women in Norway, Making Meaning of Texts from the Bible, the Koran and the Hadith*, Faculty of Theology, University of Oslo, 2011.

<sup>226</sup> Muir, Sir William, p. 32, *The Apology of Al Kindy, Wrritten at the Court of Al Mamun: In Defense of Christianity Against Islam*, J.B. Young & Company, 1887

had presented similar arguments against the trinity.<sup>227</sup> To this end, Al-Kindi's argument is not one which requires him to lambast his opponent with a string of claims with respect to the primacy of Christianity over Islam; Instead, his assertion that he would have continued his arguments, and cited a string of other claims, but has *chosen* not to do so lends credence to his diplomatic stance while also presenting his argument as being – on the whole – stronger than a similar argument if he had failed to restrain himself. In essence, by calling to light other arguments that he *might* have made, but has chosen not to do so, he both presents himself as being highly respectful of his intended audience, namely Muslims with the capacity to discover those arguments on their own, and emphasizes the diplomatic nature of this presentation. He does not seek to bury his opponent under his arguments, but instead to refute the boldest of claims – particular among them, the myth of Christian polytheism – and then focus upon finding other areas of similarity from which a newfound cooperation can be established. In this sense, whether or not Al-Kindi's exchange is fabricated, it is one which reflects a profound care for the diplomatic nature of such an interaction, and for the necessity of maintaining the utmost respect.

Indeed, Al-Kindi is able to present a series of major arguments against Islam, yet all the while maintains a diplomatic posture and extend a seemingly-heartfelt perspective of *care* for his opponent. When, for instance, he argues that the spread of Islam, unlike Christianity, was largely delivered at the point of a sword, and argues that this is not only an argument for the lack of Islam's legitimacy, but as a grounds for concern for his opponent's livelihood. In the course of his various citations of times during which Muslim fighters were *not* protected by God (and by his contrasting these citations with his own proof of events in the Judeo-Christian canon in which significant aid was rendered to Christians and Jews), he argues that Islam is a dangerous faith whose propagation has not been due to any inherent superiority in terms of its faithful, but merely due to its inherently stronger use of political and military power during its early years and through its advancement.

The core necessity of this interfaith apologetic lies in the degree to which its author couches his argument in *care*. There is little grounds or indication of diplomacy in this work, and though Al-Kindi presents his arguments forcefully, he appears to do so in a manner which extends considerable sympathy for the audience he has either solicited or created out of whole cloth. Furthermore, this care is also necessarily *physical* in nature, as Al-Kindi conveys

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<sup>227</sup> Leirvik, Oddbjorn, p.57, *Religionspluralisme, Mangfold, Konflikt og Dialog i Norge*, PAX Forlag A/S, Oslo, 2007

concern for his friend's life and livelihood, as well as for the supernatural protection he has shirked by staunch fealty to Islam; Al-Kindi seems *concerned* that his colleague has seemingly been caught up in a dangerous cult for which there is little or no theological evidence of supernatural assistance. The assistance he describes (especially in the case of Moses at the Red Sea), is contrast harshly with Abu Obzida's not being protected by Gabriel. Though these arguments are presented in diplomatic terms, and framed from a perspective of *concern*, they also indicate Eidsvåg's view of **debate**, whereby Al-Kindi, in this instance, is presenting various instances when Islam may well have proven itself to be the equal to Christianity and Judaism, but its adherents' only power – and source of faith – was linked to their drive for power.<sup>228</sup> This is a concept which Al-Kindi thoroughly divorces from theological propriety. By linking Islam to the excesses of its early expansion, and by presenting Judeo-Christianity as being more closely linked to the *will* of God, as seen in their proponents defense *by* God, Al-Kindi neatly presents his argument against Islam in terms of the inherent danger of expansionist tyrants following the will of a silent God, and argues that his opponent would be wise to be wary of their faith and those who would see it proliferate.

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<sup>228</sup> Eidsvåg, Inge, p. 138, Dialog eller debatt? Samtiden 4, 2002

# CHAPTER 5

## 5 Conclusion

Moreover, this work has considered in depth four different encounters between proponents of Islam and those who would advocate for Christianity, through a consideration of theoretical perspectives which inform debates and discussions of this type. Several conclusions can be drawn from these debates. The first is that these debates have very rarely been about religious topics *entirely*, though considerable evidence has shown a range of actors who have presented many different theological viewpoints. Instead, the primary vector for debate has been one of political relations.

When considered in the context of the vast power that religion has over the lives and allegiances of a people, theological *debate* and treatises such as apologies are shown to be less academic in nature, and more as a means of exercising political power over a given people or region. This is shown in the debate between representatives of Muhammad and the Christians of Najran, whose encounter was primarily diplomatic in nature and did not lead to any major long-term change in their relationship, despite the initial conciliation provided from Muhammad to those Christians' religious freedom. In this instance, Muhammad's representatives used the debate as a means of presenting their view, but ultimately acquiesced to their opponent's perspective, but only because it was in their political interests to do so, and knowing well that the Islamic law they established would eventually render this decision void. To this end, it was more beneficial for Muhammad to appear generous by reconciling his views with those of the Najranites during this first encounter.

The other debates considered also extend this view of diplomacy and political relations as being greater than mere theological concerns, especially with respect to the intended audiences of the debates considered. In the instance of Timothy and Al-Mahdi, though Timothy made major arguments to defend Nestorian Christianity, the chief objective achieved by this debate was to show that the Caliph and Timothy were capable of reaching a point of common ground.

The debate between al-Baqillani and the Byzantine court illustrates this same point from the opposite perspective; al-Baqillani sought to present his argument knowing well that he would not be able to overcome his opponent, but was so stringent (and confrontational) in his presentation in order to enunciate the power and capability inherent to the nascent and surging

Islam. Finally, the debate between Al-Kindi and Al-Hashmi illustrates the ways in which Islam and Christianity can come together in order to find common themes absent the strictures of theological concern. In each of these examples, there is a larger political and diplomatic point to be made aside from the seeming focus of these debates on theological perspectives; Through their actions and attitudes, the various participants shown in the case studies throughout this work have made their true intentions known.

Another primary point to be made based on this consideration is that there is far less of a **transformational** perspective elucidated throughout these debates than might be found by a cursory study. Though keeping with the view of these works and accounts as being established for the benefit of an *intended* audience, the primary focus of each of these debates is not to find a common ground, nor to actually sway the views of their opponent. Instead, as has been shown by each of these debate encounters, the chief aim of the participants has been to present their own view and to disparage and criticize the views of their opponents. This is not necessarily a poor debate strategy, but it is certainly in keeping with the first point; Through presenting their own views as being paramount and finding ways in which to criticize the views of their opponents, the various debaters and apologists considered are all exalting their own viewpoint without considering ways in which common ground can be found.

Muhammad extended rights to the Najranites for his own benefit, Timothy and Al-Mahdi reached no consensus but found success in cooperation, and Abu Bakr at Constantinople *and* Al-Kindi did not seek consensus (or to validate their opponents views) whatsoever. In each of these cases, so strong and certain were the debaters of the utter primacy of their viewpoints that they did not seek to find a common view, or to establish a ground for mutual transformation of the view of their opponent (or their intended audience) to their own perspective. Instead, by presenting their strongest arguments, it seems that each of these debaters sought only to exalt themselves and their own perspectives. While such actions represent the exertion of a certain degree of political power, they are not appropriate as debate strategies, as both sides of these theological debates are shown to be too entrenched in their own views to allow for these views to be shifted from ideology, logic, or reasonable argument.

To this end, the chief benefit and value to be extracted from these encounters between entrenched ideologues lies in the capacity of such encounters to foster greater cooperation and



understanding between state power and religious communities (as in the case of Timothy and al-Mahdi), or to present the *implication* of interfaith diplomacy. As neither side of any of the debates considered was willing to surrender, even on a minor point, to the views of their opponent, it is clear that apologies and interfaith communication, as presented through these examples, exist chiefly as a means of extending the realm of diplomacy and political relations to a more abstract plane. In the absence of any party *winning* any of these debates – or convincing the other side of their views – the presence of diplomatic relations and civility might be interpreted as sufficient cause for celebration.

## 5.1 Core Findings:

Based on this consideration, answers can be drawn from the initial research questions posed. First, with respect to (1) the larger *purpose* of interfaith dialogues and apologetics, the answer is somewhat muddled: In many cases, the interactions explored are an extension of the principles of power interaction when framed from a purely political standpoint. In this work, various actors are summoned, or appear, before other actors of greater or lesser power. When those of lesser power appear before those of greater power (as the Najranite Christians appearing before Muhammad, or al-Baqillani at the Court of Constantine), those with lesser power can choose to either seek the favor of their powerful opponent, or show defiance.

In each of these cases, the *political* interaction is the primary one on display, with issues of theology clearly secondary to this larger political element. Furthermore, the *purpose* of the interactions between Timothy I and the Abbasid Caliph al-Mahdi can also be put into this context, though the relatively-equal standing of these two actors was shown to indicate that politics and power interaction was less relevant, and as a result they were able to put more time and attention to their considerations of theology. Finally, the interaction with the *least* degree of political interaction (that between Al-Kindi and the possibly-fictional al-Hashmi) is one which is entirely based upon theology, due to the fact of it taking place entirely in writing without any of the political and power relationships of the other encounters.

To this end, the question of whether these works (2) must be considered in the context of politics or theology becomes a question of the relative power disparity between the

different figures who are conducting a given debate. During an interaction of major power disparity, politics is often ‘framed’ through discussions of theology, where those interactions with lesser power disparity (or those where there is no disparity) can provide a grounds for concrete and entirely-theoretical discussion. Based on this consideration, (3) each of the authors considered is particularly germane, with (4) Eidsvåg, Leirvik and Berg, through their explorations of necessary dialogue – in a political context – as well as *intended and implied* audience (as a function of those political interactions) providing a strong theoretical basis for all interactions considered. Finally, (5) each of the interactions are relevant to the world today, in that they provide a basis for understanding how the differences between different religious groups are deeply-steeped in the political power disparities they exhibit, and theology is often secondary to elements of power.

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