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Learning from Muslims and Jews: In Search of the Identity of Christ from Eighth-century Baghdad to Seventeenth-century Hague

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Abstract

In past iterations of ecclesiastical historical writings and teachings, there has not always been sufficient acknowledgment of the encounters between Christians and their religious Others. This article is an exercise in diachronic comparative interreligious encounter: a Muslim-Christian engagement in the eighth century CE and a Jewish-Christian epistolary exchange in the seventeenth century CE. The former took place in Baghdad in the court of a caliph, whereas the latter took place between individuals in London and the Hague, between Baruch Spinoza and Henry Oldenburg. While it might be tempting to highlight the narratives of conversion away from one religion into another—whether from Christianity to Islam, Christianity to Judaism, or vice versa—in current historiography, it also seems that quotidian realities of interreligious exchange often do not lead to such conversions, and yet leave the participants better informed and further enlightened about the practice and pursuit of their own religion. The following two accounts are neither triumphalist nor tragic. Patriarch Timothy and Caliph al-Mahdi's exchange in eighth-century Baghdad shows the degree to which divine identity and Christian *apophasis* mattered. The letter exchanges between Spinoza and his interlocutors also show the degree to which divine mystery as ontological demarcator for both the doctrine of the Trinity and corresponding Christology, as well as Spinoza's repudiation of both, mattered. Lastly, these two examples of interreligious engagements show a pathway of encounter which does not dismiss or cancel the religious Other.

Keywords: Interreligious Engagements; Islam; Christianity; Church of the East; Al-Mahdi; Patriarch Timothy I; Judaism; Baruch Spinoza; Trinity; Christology

I. Introduction

What do Terence, Henry Oldenburg, and Philip Schaff have in common? Terence (195–159 BCE), a Roman playwright of North African descent from Carthage, is perhaps the best known among them. Oldenburg (1619–1677) frequently corresponded with

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Baruch Spinoza concerning the putative errors of the latter's theological perspectives, at least vis-à-vis his own Christian viewpoints, and also served as the first Secretary of the Royal Society of London from 1663 till his death in 1677. Schaff (1819–1893) was a leading ecumenical ecclesiastical historian of the nineteenth century, with a distinguished teaching career that spanned Europe and America, including Berlin, Mercersburg, and Union Theological Seminary in New York. The thread that connects the aforementioned three is the maxim, originating with Terence: “Homo sum; humani nil a me alienum puto,” which he wrote in *The Self-Tormentor*.¹ Oldenburg—as we shall see below—quoted that statement as a way of acknowledging human finitude in his epistolary exchange with Spinoza. Schaff founded the American Society of Church History in 1888, serving as its first president. In his magnum opus, *History of the Christian Church*, Schaff notes that whereas the secular historian “should be filled with universal human sympathy,” guided by the motto of Terence, the church historian should be imbued with “universal Christian sympathy,” which he encapsulated as “Christianus sum, nihil Christiani a me alienum puto.” He also ensured that his revision of Terence's maxim would appear on the title page of the multi-volume history as an expression of the universality and inclusivity of the scope of writing, teaching, and researching *all* aspects of the Christian past for none of it will be deemed alien.²

Writing and teaching about the multi-faceted histories of the church must be self-consciously capacious, critical, and charitable in its scope and interpretation. This task inevitably takes into account the presence of “the Other” or “Others,” yet without regarding them as alien, per Terence and Schaff.³ However, in past iterations of ecclesiastical historical writings and teachings, there has not always been sufficient acknowledgment of the encounters between Christians and their religious Others. Historiographical trends can either veer toward hagiography or heresiography: making saints or heretics. In some ways, talking about encounters or engagement with “the religious Others” has fallen into the same pitfall. I must confess I have not been much better in seeking some semblance of neutrality and objectivity. I went through a phase of learning and teaching my own field of the history of Christianity with a mindset of defending the Christian past while in graduate school in the late 1990s at Cambridge. Subsequently, I found myself moving toward the opposite end of the spectrum: teaching to tear down, to point out Christianity's corrosive errors and intolerance, both of which proved to be hindrances to the progress of society, whether it had to do with race, gender, or sexuality.

However, in the more recent past, particularly in the past ten years or so, I have experienced a renaissance of critical reengagement with the ways various Christians have lived with differences: theological, religious, cultural, or otherwise. Fueled in some significant fashion by the restructuring of the curriculum at Vanderbilt Divinity School and my role as a major proponent of a new curricular concentration, “Global Christianity and Interreligious Encounters,” I was motivated to reinvestigate

¹See Terence, *The Self-Tormentor*, ed. and trans. by John Barsby, Loeb Classical Library 22 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), line 77.

²Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 1, *Apostolic Christianity, A.D. 1–100* (New York: Scribner, 1882), title page.

³For a similar perspective in interpreting the complex trajectories in the history of Christianity, see, inter alia, Euan Cameron, *Interpreting Christian History: The Challenge of the Churches' Past* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005); and Alister Chapman, John Coffey, and Brad S. Gregory, eds., *Seeing Things Their Way: Intellectual History and the Return of Religion* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009).

the way church history had been taught locally. Building on the strength of an already existing course, “History of Jewish-Christian Relations,” a popular class taught by Amy-Jill Levine, a leading New Testament scholar, who also happened to be Jewish, I had the privilege to co-teach that class with Professor Levine and, inter alia, the physical presence of “the religious Other” augmented the quality of discussion, encounter, and education. In a similar vein, along with a medieval Islamicist, Richard McGregor, I also had the pleasure of launching a new course, “Through the Eyes of the Other: History of Muslim-Christian Relations,” and teaching it twice. Once again, the physical presence of “the religious Other,” whether the professor herself or students themselves, made the conversation far less abstract and generalizing and far more humane, respectful, and more deeply engaging. It was in the process of preparing and teaching these aforementioned courses that the idea for this paper came.

I have chosen two vignettes in the history of Christian engagement with other religious traditions where no conversion in either direction occurred. The first encounter happened in Baghdad in the eighth century CE between a Muslim ruler and a Christian patriarch. The second exchange took place between London and the Hague in the seventeenth century as two friends wrote letters defending their own views about God, Jesus, and the God-world relationality. This exchange between Baruch Spinoza and Henry Oldenburg is a chapter in the book I am currently writing on Christological debates in the “Eve of the Enlightenment.” Due to the fact that neither in the eighth-nor in the seventeenth-century debate did conversion happen, they might not have captured the imagination of historians whose interests lie elsewhere: either in the narratives of religious violence, whether physically or spiritually construed, or in narratives of spectacular “mutual conversion and enrichment.” These two following accounts are neither triumphalist nor tragic. None of the interlocutors became what had they not been before: a Jew, Christian, or Muslim. Yet, what is of considerable value is that such outcomes comprise the majority of such encounters. Such encounters might not lead to conversion or enlightenment. Nevertheless, what I hope might have been the outcome for all the interlocutors in the following dialogues is a deeper acknowledgment of the humanity of the Other, whose ideas about self, salvation, and society might diverge in considerable ways from one’s own. Embracing the spirit of Terence or of Schaff, it bodes well in our ever-evolving task of writing about the stories of Christian encounters with the Other, which should continue to form an important facet of the history of Christianity.

Aside from learning about the details and specifics of how two eighth-century worshippers of God or their counterparts from the mid-seventeenth century differed on the identity of Jesus, we will be asking the following questions: What are some possibly salutary consequences of juxtaposing these two accounts of Christological dialogues or divergences? How do the borderlands between two possibly overlapping yet ultimately colliding epistemic regimes—whether Islam and Christianity, or Judaism and Christianity—continue to find their ways of articulating the identity of their deity and of their mediators (whether Moses, Jesus, or Muhammad)?

A number of years ago, Nick Wolterstorff made a prophetic statement in his book *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*:

Many are the scholars who make it their professional occupation to occupy themselves in this towering edifice of culture, exploring its nooks and crannies, developing their responses, making their contributions here and there, and helping to hand it on to succeeding generations. For some the temptation proves irresistible

to go yet farther and make this the concern of their lives, letting society go its own sorry way while they lock themselves away in this abiding, socially transcendent cultural stronghold, acquiescing in society while pursuing *Bildung*. As Rotterdam burns, they study Sanskrit verb forms.⁴

This is truly a clarion call for an “engaged scholarship” by Wolterstorff, something to which we need to be paying closer attention nowadays, especially since the events of George Floyd and the global reckoning of racial justice. Pursuing the academic discipline of the “history of Christianity” or “church history” in our globalized age of multi-faith conversations and contestations, if not conflicts, is where I find myself today, as I would remind us all. How, if at all, would my act of history-writing and teaching contribute to a “better” telling and living into the story of the Church, however multicolored it might be and multi-perspectival its ideology might be?

II. A Tale of Two Cities, Part 1: Baghdad, circa 781 CE

For this first part of the “Tale of Two Cities,” we will visit eighth-century Baghdad. The interreligious encounter we will read about centers on two people, a caliph and a patriarch. Timothy I (740–823) served as the catholicos of the Church of the East from 779–823 CE.⁵ He was born in the village of Hazza in the province of Hadyab (Adiabene).⁶ Under the tutelage and influence of his uncle, Bishop George of Beth Bgash, he was educated in Aristotelian philosophy, the Greek language, the art of translation, hermeneutics, liturgy, and sacred literature, as well as into the shrewd ways of ecclesiastical politics. By the time he was forty, Timothy had risen to the rank of the catholicos, or patriarch. In historical hindsight, many historians consider him the “most skilled leader of the Church of the East.” He was diplomatic and knew the intricacies of court politics as well as ecclesiastical management. One proof of this is the following: Caliph al-Mahdi, about whom we will learn momentarily, commissioned a translation of parts of Aristotle’s works from Syriac into Arabic for the sake of introducing Aristotelian philosophical perspectives to his Islamic population, placing Timothy in charge of this significant multilingual and multicultural project.

The dialogue or exchange between the caliph and the patriarch took place in 781 CE, during the height of the Abbasid Empire. The so-called Islamic Golden Age began with

⁴Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace: The Kuyper Lectures for 1981 Delivered at The Free University of Amsterdam* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1983), 162.

⁵Although, unfortunately, there was a persistence of the use of theologically inaccurate terms such as “Nestorians” and the “Nestorian Church,” a number of scholars have adopted a more theologically accurate, ecumenically inclusive, and less culturally insensitive term “Church of the East.” I am grateful to both David Michelson and Meredith Riedel for bringing this to my attention. See also, inter alia, Sebastian P. Brock, “The ‘Nestorian’ Church: A Lamentable Misnomer,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 78, no. 3 (1996): 23–35; Tjalling H. F. Halbertsma, “On the Term ‘Nestorianism’ and the Early Chinese Terms for Christianity,” in Tjalling H. F. Halbertsma, *Early Christian Remains of Inner Mongolia: Discovery, Reconstruction and Appropriation* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 1–12; and Lucy Parker, “The Ambiguities of Belief and Belonging: Catholicism and the Church of the East in the Sixteenth Century,” *English Historical Review* 133 (December 2018): 1420–1455.

⁶David D. Bundy, “Timotheos I,” in *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage: Electronic Edition*, ed. Sebastian P. Brock, Aaron M. Butts, George A. Kiraz, and Lucas Van Rompay. Digital edition prepared by David Michelson, Ute Possekkel, and Daniel L. Schwartz. (Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2011); online ed. Beth Mardutho, 2018. <https://gedsh.bethmardutho.org/Timotheos-I>. My gratitude to David Michelson for referring me to this trove of resources.

the Abbasid Empire. Furthermore, the Abbasid Empire was marked by its tolerant and relatively peaceful treatment of the conquered Christians, especially vis-à-vis the Sassanid rule, which covered a similar region prior to the Arabic conquest, with much less tolerance.⁷

Abu Abdallah Muhammad ibn Abdallah al-Mansur, more popularly known as al-Mahdī, was the third Abbasid caliph and reigned from 775 until his death in 785 CE. His father was al-Mansur and he was also a descendant of al-Abbas ibn Abd al-Muttalib, an uncle of the Prophet Muhammad, and this family connection became the patrilineal claim to the caliphate, as opposed to the Umayyads. Al-Mahdī was born in 744 and was ten years old when his father became the second Abbasid caliph. His name, “al-Mahdī,” means the “rightly guided one.” His reign as caliph only lasted for a relatively short duration, ten years (775–785). He was one of the first caliphs to order the “composition of books to refute the heretics and atheists,” so it is in that vein that this dialogue was requested and carried out with a complete sanction for freedom of speech to the Christian patriarch as he entered the caliph’s court. His attitude toward Christians was generally one of relative benevolence and respect, particularly because of the scientific advancements made by the Christians of his territory. He was forty years old at his death. As Michael Penn has recently noted, it is important to note the power differential between the caliph and the patriarch, with the balance tilting decisively toward the former, whereas the latter was fighting for the right for the Christians of the East to survive.⁸

The progress of Christianity in the Middle East was severely challenged due to the rise of Islam, thereby making this dialogue even more crucial.⁹ What was particular about East Syrian Christologies, the theological milieu by which Timothy was influenced and which he, in turn, helped shape in dialogical engagements, especially with Islam? And how did they end up all the way in China? While these are important and popular questions that emerge when the name “Church of the East” is mentioned, that will not be the primary focus, although it will naturally come up in the Christological discussion between the caliph and the patriarch, as we shall see below. As a result of the Nicene, Ephesian, and Chalcedonian creedal Christological controversies, a number of branches within Christianity were separated. Through these three major councils, a Christological Rubicon had been established, dividing between Alexandrian Miaphysites and Antiochene Dyophysites. Both parties agreed on the simultaneously full humanity and divinity of Jesus. They diverged, however, on how these two characters—divine and human—were united, whether in one or two natures. These two natures in Christ were distinct from each other. It was this two-nature doctrine of East Syrian Christology that became the de facto Christological principle for the Church of the East. We shall see how Patriarch Timothy adopts a Christological apologetical method that seems to blur the line of distinction between what is popularly known as non-Chalcedonian two-nature Christology and a Chalcedonian one.¹⁰

⁷Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar W. Winkler, *The Church of the East: A Concise History* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), chaps. 1–2.

⁸Michael Penn, “Early Syriac Reactions to the Rise of Islam,” in *The Syriac World*, ed. Daniel King (London: Routledge, 2019), 175–188.

⁹See Daniel Wilmshurst, “The Church of the East in the ‘Abbasid Era,” in *The Syriac World*, ed. Daniel King, 189–201.

¹⁰On Miaphysitism, see Dietmar W. Winkler, “Miaphysitism: A New Term for Use in the History of Dogma and in Ecumenical Theology,” *The Harp: A Review of Syriac and Oriental Studies* 10, no. 3 (December 1997): 33–40; Dietmar W. Winkler, “Monophysites,” in *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the*

The two-day dialogue/debate between Caliph al-Mahdī and Timothy took place in Baghdad, likely in the caliphate court in 781. More than anything else, it shows a great example of engaging with the religious Other about matters of great, common, and shared interest, even though the involved parties might not arrive at the same goal of the dialogue, which, in this case, turned out to be the Trinity, the Incarnation, Jesus, and Muhammad. The caliph's questions and perspectives reflect the emerging Muslim apologetics in its use of the Christian Scriptures as well as the then-popular hermeneutic regarding the Qur'an and the Islamic theo-political traditions. It is important to recognize that what textbooks might say about an official theological position and how it was used in situ in actual situations of dialogical engagements might differ. In James Schall's "Preface" to this dialogue between the caliph and the patriarch, he notes that even though Timothy was an East Syrian bishop, "all of his answers about the two natures and one person in Christ follow the early councils of the Christian Church."¹¹ For example, those in the Church of the East reportedly espoused the idea that Mary could not be called the Mother of God or God-bearer (*theotokos*). However, in the dialogue, Timothy admits that "Christ's human nature is united to the one divine person, not to two different persons or beings." In that light, it is quite remarkable for those who see Christological perspectives through the lens of Chalcedon to see Timothy defending "the unity of two natures, separate but real in the one divine person in Christ."¹² That might demonstrate the situational nature of our theological formulations, which, depending on our interlocutors, can alter the way theological commitments are articulated with a slightly different vector and trajectory.

The dialogue was conducted in Arabic, which then was recorded in Syriac by Timothy in the form of a letter written to a fellow churchman, quite likely Sergius the Metropolitan of Elam. This letter was translated into English from Syriac by Alphonse Mingana in 1928, and most recently by Samir and Nasry in 2018.¹³ This dialogue covers twenty-seven questions, and the first five, as well as questions 12, 13, 26, and 27, focus on Christological matters, Christ's identity and the economy of salvation. Questions 6 through 8 continue on the Christological themes while focusing specifically on the Trinity. Questions 14 through 16 deal with the identity of Muhammad and the message propagated by this reformer of monotheism and prophetic figure who ended up creating a religion that was similar to and influenced by Judaism and Christianity and yet would eventually

Postclassical World, ed. Peter Brown, Oleg Grabar, and Glen W. Bowersock (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 586–588; Johannes Zachhuber, "Personhood in Miaphysitism: Severus of Antioch and John Philoponus," in *Personhood in the Byzantine Christian Tradition*, ed. Alexis Torrance and Symeon Paschalidis (London: Routledge, 2018), 29–44; and Anna Zhyrkova, "The Miaphysite and Neo-Chalcedonian Approaches to Understanding the Nature of the Individual Entity: Particular Essence vs. En-Hypostatized Essence," *Review of Ecumenical Studies* 11, no. 3 (2019): 342–362.

¹¹James V. Schall, "Preface: Dialogue without Resolution," in *The Patriarch and the Caliph: An Eighth-Century Dialogue between Timothy I and al-Mahdī*, ed. Samir Khalil Samir, trans. Wafik Nasry (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2018), xiv.

¹²Schall, "Preface: Dialogue without Resolution," xiv.

¹³For the purpose of this essay, I will be drawing from *both* the Mingana edition as well as the Samir-Nasry edition, with appropriate notations. For the technical discussions on which translation has primacy, and thus, greater likelihood of capturing or best approximating Timothy's recollection of the actual dialogue as it happened, see, inter alia, Clint Hackenburg, "An Arabic-to-English Translation of the Religious Debate between the Nestorian Patristic Timothy and the 'Abbasid Caliph al-Mahdi," (MA thesis, Ohio State, 2009).

influence the politics and practice of Judaism and Christianity. Questions 17 and 25 focus on prophecies, miracles, and their impact on the identity of Muhammad.

For the first part of this section, a summary of the dialogue as well as several direct quotes from both the caliph and the patriarch will be provided, since, despite the availability of a new Arabic/English text published by the Brigham Young University Press in 2018, most members of our society and, for that matter, many readers interested in the way Islam and Christianity sought to understand their own identities vis-à-vis the “religious Other” might not be aware of the significance of this exchange.¹⁴

Between the caliph and the patriarch, we see an early and abiding core of the dialogue/debates between Muslims and Christians about their religions. They tend to converge often on the impossibility of the Christian “theo-logic” concerning the Trinity, Incarnation, and the corruption of the Christian scriptures.¹⁵ The patriarch seems to have had three main reasons for writing down this *ex post facto* account of the dialogue. The first reason was catechetical, offering an intra-Christian instruction. The second was ecumenical, offering an inter-Christian reminder of their common ground, especially vis-à-vis Islam. The third was apologetical, offering theological tools for interreligious encounters.

From the beginning, al-Mahdī is called “O God-loving King,” a title which was designed to be complimentary to the caliph, either as a sycophantic or sympathetic comment directed at the caliph, who was in search of greater truth concerning Allah and his ways.¹⁶ Christological divergence between Muslims and Christians was the initial salvo in this dialogue or debate. The caliph throws down the first challenge, which to him amounts to a theological-cum-philosophical absurdity: “O Catholicos, a man like you who possesses all this knowledge and utters such sublime words concerning God, is *not justified in saying about God that He married a woman from whom He begat a son.*”¹⁷ This is a clear refutation of the possibility of the Incarnation via virgin birth. This perspective is repeated nearly verbatim in a number of texts in the Qur’an.¹⁸

¹⁴It is unfortunately true that, for many Christians in the West, this dialogue, or apology, is not well-known even though this dialogue has appeared in more recent anthologies and sourcebooks of the Muslim-Christian encounters. See *Anti-Christian Polemic in Early Islam: Abū ‘Īsā al-Warrāq’s “Against the Trinity,”* ed. and trans. David Thomas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 31, 198, 199, 201, 205; Charles L. Tieszen, *Christian Identity amid Islam in Medieval Spain* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 157; Mark Swanson, “Folly to the Humafā: The Crucifixion in Early Christian-Muslim Controversy,” in *The Routledge Reader in Christian-Muslim Relations*, ed. Mona Siddiqui (London: Routledge, 2013), 77–80; and John W. Coakley and Andrea Sterk, eds, *Readings in World Christian History*, vol. 1, *Earliest Christianity to 1453* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2004), 231–42.

¹⁵By “theo-logic,” I refer to the way philosophers and theologians had to adapt their logic to allow for the discursive possibility of the real-presence of *Theos/God*.

¹⁶*The Apology of Timothy the Patriarch before the Caliph Mahdi*, ed. Alphonse Mingana, with an introduction by Rendel Harris, Woodbrooke Studies 2 (Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons, 1928), 17 (hereafter cited as *Apology of Timothy the Patriarch*).

¹⁷*Apology of Timothy the Patriarch*, 17 (italics added); In the Samir and Nasry translation from the Arabic, it is rendered more tersely, yet the same polemical gist remains unchanged: “It is not fitting for one like you, with what I observe of your understanding, to say that God took for himself a consort or had a son from her.” *The Patriarch and the Caliph: An Eight-Century Dialogue between Timothy I and al-Mahdi*, ed. Samir Khalil Samir, trans. Wafik Nasry (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2018), 2 (hereafter cited as *The Patriarch and the Caliph*).

¹⁸For the references in the Qur’an regarding the sheer impossibility of God begetting a son through a woman, see 4:171, 5:17–18, 5:71, 5:114, 6:99, 6:101, 9:29, 10:69, 18:1–5, 19:30–37, 19:90, 43:73–83, 72:3. I owe these references to Euan Cameron.

Timothy's answer is that while Christ is the Word of God and Son of God, he is most definitively "not a son in the flesh as children are born in the carnal way."¹⁹ Having drawn up a clear creator-creature or divine-human line of ontological distinction, Timothy offers an apophatic acknowledgment by averring that the generation of the Son was a "divine, eternal, and wondrous birth, *the how of which cannot be fathomed*," or "more sublime and higher than minds and words, as it fits a divine Son to be."²⁰ When pressed further by al-Mahdī as to the specific mechanism of that eternal generation, Timothy leans heavily on mystery and the gift of revelation: "we dare not investigate how He was born before the times, and we are not able to understand the fact at all, as God is incomprehensible and inexplicable in all things." It seems reasonable to infer from this brief exchange that by the end of the eighth century, mystical apophaticism was an established part of the "theo-logic" of a number of Greek, Syriac, and Arabic speaking Christians. By contrast, while most Muslims confessed the utter transcendence and unknowability of Allah *in se* (until one gets to the Sufi tradition), there was little acknowledgment of "apophasis" within Islam.²¹ Nor was it a simply reductive Qur'anic revelatory rationalism—that is to say, all that was needed for human knowledge of Allah was completely revealed in the text of the Qur'an. But within Christian theological traditions—both Eastern and Western, in Pseudo-Dionysius, Gregory of Nyssa, and Cyril of Alexandria—this apophatic component was indispensable in its defense of the Trinity and the Incarnation of the Word.²² Apophatic theology was not, however, the end goal of Christian theological explication, thereby necessitating the development of analogical imagination, as Isaac of Nineveh had manifested a strong penchant for the "monastic apophatic tradition."²³ We see that here with Timothy, who, after emphasizing the incomprehensibility of God *in God's own being*, hastens to add, "but we may say an imperfect simile that as light is born of the sun and word of the soul, so also Christ who is Word, is born of God, high above the times and before all the worlds."²⁴ Thus, the doctrine of eternal generation of the Son is ultimately beyond human comprehension, yet there are analogical similarities found in nature—namely, sun and soul—and this was also true in the development of the *vestigia trinitatis* in a few Christian writers in the first five centuries CE.²⁵

¹⁹Apology of Timothy the Patriarch, 17.

²⁰The Patriarch and the Caliph, 2 (italics added); and Apology of Timothy the Patriarch, 17.

²¹Dejan Azdajic, "Longing for the Transcendent: The Role of Love in Islamic Mysticism with Special Reference to al-Ghazālī and Ibn al-Arabī," *Transformation* 33, no. 2 (2016): 99–109; and Richard J. A. McGregor, *Sanctity and Mysticism in Medieval Egypt: The Wafā' Sufi Order and the Legacy of Ibn 'Arabi* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 2004). Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975) still remains a reliable guide.

²²See, inter alia, Deidre Carabine, *The Unknown God: Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition: Plato to Eriugena* (Louvain: Peeters, 1995); Ivana Noble, "The Apophatic Way in Gregory of Nyssa," in *Philosophical Hermeneutics and Biblical Exegesis*, ed. Petr Pokorný and Jan Roskovec (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 323–339; Henny Fiskå Hägg, *Clement of Alexandria and the Beginnings of Christian Apophaticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Knut Alfsvåg, *What No Mind Has Conceived: On the Significance of Christological Apophaticism* (Louvain: Peeters, 2010); and Karolina Kochanczyk-Boninska and Tomasz Stepien, *Unknown God, Knowing in His Activities: Incomprehensibility of God during the Trinitarian Controversy of the 4th century* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2018).

²³I owe this expression to David Michelson.

²⁴Apology of Timothy the Patriarch, 17.

²⁵Augustine, *De Trinitate* 12.2.6–8; Michel René Barnes, "Divine Unity and the Divided Self: Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian Theology in its Psychological Context," in *Re-Thinking Gregory of Nyssa*, ed. Sarah

The same logic is applied to the way the caliph asks about the sheer impossibility of the Virgin Birth. Timothy again responds by hearkening to divine possibilities which exceed human ken and expectations: “But if we consider not nature but God, the Lord of nature, as the Virgin was able to conceive without marital relations.” And Timothy reiterates the angel’s words during the Annunciation in Luke 1:37: “There is nothing impossible with God.”²⁶ Furthermore, we also see that both the caliph and the patriarch were committed to finding proof for their positions either “from Book” or “from nature.” For Timothy, just “as His eternal birth from the Father is wonderful, so also is His temporal birth from Mary.”²⁷ The example Timothy offers, albeit to no avail ultimately in convincing al-Mahdi, is taken from nature:

All fruits are born of trees without breaking or tearing them, and sight is born of the eye while the latter is not broken or torn, and the perfume of apples and all aromatic substance is born of their respective trees or plants without breaking or tearing them, and the rays are born of the sun without tearing or breaking its spheric form. As all these are born of their generators without tearing them or rending them, so also Christ was born of Mary without breaking her virginal seals.²⁸

Here Timothy appropriates *analogia entis* to buttress the logical adequacy of the mystery of the Incarnation. Later on in the dialogue, Timothy offers another example of *analogia entis*, this time in seeking to elucidate the mystery of the two natures of Christ:

The tongue and the word are one with the voice in which they are clothed, in a way that the two are not two words nor two tongues, but one word, together with the tongue and the voice, so that they are called by all one tongue with the word and the voice, and in them *one* does not expel *two*. This is also the case with the Word-God; He is one with His humanity, while preserving the distinction between His invisibility and His visibility, and between His Divinity and His Humanity. Christ is *one* in His son-ship, and *two* in the attributes of His natures.²⁹

Here, we can see how East Syrian dyophysite theology in situ—regarding the two natures of Christ—looks different from the way it has been mistakenly represented in Western scholarship until recently. Rather than denying a two-nature doctrine of Chalcedon, especially in the context of offering an apologetic response to Islamic critique, Timothy offers a Christological answer—“Christ is *one* in His son-ship, and *two* in the attributes of His natures”—a theological formulation with striking similarity to the Chalcedonian formulation: “one and the same Christ . . . to be acknowledged in two natures, . . . the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son.”³⁰

Coakley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 45–66; David B. Hart, “The Mirror of the Infinite: Gregory of Nyssa on the *Vestigia Trinitatis*,” *Modern Theology* 18, no. 4 (October 2002): 541–561.

²⁶ *Apology of Timothy the Patriarch*, 18; and *The Patriarch and the Caliph*, 4.

²⁷ *Apology of Timothy the Patriarch*, 18.

²⁸ *Apology of Timothy the Patriarch*, 18.

²⁹ *Apology of Timothy the Patriarch*, 19–20.

³⁰ “The Definition of Chalcedon” (451 CE), in *Documents of the Christian Church*, ed. Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 54–55.

The sixth question shows in sharp relief another critical divergence between Islam and Christianity: the doctrine of the Trinity. In a question-and-answer format, we can see how the caliph and the patriarch sought to explore the theological illogicality of the Trinity, especially the putative logical consequence of tritheism (caliph), and to explain the theological adequacy of the same (patriarch).

C: Do you believe in Father, Son and Holy Spirit?

P: I worship them and believe in them.

C: You, therefore, believe in three Gods?

P: The belief in the above three names, consists in the belief in three Persons. . . .

The belief in the above three names, consists therefore in the belief in one God. We believe in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as One God.³¹

Timothy applied the threefold aspect of the One God personally to al-Mahdi. Just as he is one caliph with his word and his spirit, and not three caliphs, so does God exist along with the word and spirit of God, yet not three Gods but one. Further, as the word and spirit of al-Mahdi are inseparable from the caliph himself so “also God with his Word and his Spirit are one God, not three Gods.”³² Similarly, Timothy re-appropriated a prominent example from nature which was used by many pro-trinitarians in the patristic period in their defense of the Trinity: the sun. “In the same way, the sun, with its ray and heat; it is one sun, not three suns.”³³ One of the consistent themes a careful reader will notice in Timothy’s defense of the Incarnation and the Trinity is his use of the qualitative distinction between the Infinite and the Finite, as well as between the Creator and the creature, as a way to show that God’s ways of being, acting, and understanding transcend those of both the caliph and the patriarch: “As God does not does not resemble in His nature the Commander of the Faithful, so also the Word and the Spirit of God do not resemble those of the Commander of the Faithful. We men sometimes exist and sometimes do not exist because we have a beginning and an end.” However, according to Timothy, for God and “His Word and His Spirit, who exist divinely and eternally, that is to say, without beginning and without end, as God with God, without any separation,” there was no time when God did not exist, and God had always been with His Word and Spirit.³⁴

After their dialogical engagement on the Incarnation, Virgin Birth, and the Trinity, the caliph and the patriarch turn their attention to Muhammad, *the prophet nonpareil* for al-Mahdi and all Muslims and a sore point for Christians, since to embrace that notion would give credence to Islam and to repudiate that would give rise to potential mistreatment, let alone misunderstanding. We see that Timothy walks the polemical tightrope without either undue recrimination or inordinate accolade, avoiding both apostasy and martyrdom:

³¹*Apology of Timothy the Patriarch*, 22; and *The Patriarch and the Caliph*, 12.

³²*Apology of Timothy the Patriarch*, 22; and *The Patriarch and the Caliph*, 12.

³³*The Patriarch and the Caliph*, 12. See Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 7.3.6; Gregory Nazianzen, “The Fifth Theological Oration. On the Holy Spirit,” 31.32. Timothy further explores the analogy of the sun with the divine nature of the Son and Spirit: “As light and heat are not separable from the sun, so also (the Word) and the Spirit of God are not separable from Him. If one separates from the sun its light and its heat, it will immediately become neither light-giver nor heat-producer, and consequently it will cease to be sun,” in the same way God, if separated from his Word and Spirit, will cease to be “a rational and living God.” *Apology of Timothy the Patriarch*, 23.

³⁴*Apology of Timothy the Patriarch*, 22–23.

Muhammad walked in the path of the prophets, as well as in the tracks of the lovers of God. All the prophets taught the doctrine of the one God, and since Muhammad taught the doctrine of the unity of God, he walked, therefore, in the path of the prophets. Further, all the prophets drove men away from bad works and brought them nearer to good works, and since Muhammad drove his people away from bad works and brought them nearer to good ones, he walked, therefore, in the path of the prophets. Again, all the prophets separated men from idolatry and polytheism, and attached them to God and his worship. And since Muhammad separated his people from idolatry and polytheism and attached them to the worship and knowledge of one God, beside whom there is no other God, it is obvious that he walked in the path of the prophets.³⁵

Here is a clear juxtaposition of the Hebrew prophets and Muhammad as the final prophet. Just as the Jewish prophets—in their proclamation of the Shema—reminded the Israelites of the radical oneness of God and their corresponding responsibility to worship this God of justice and mercy, so Muhammad called his people in the Arabian peninsula and beyond to castigate polytheism and ethico-political corruption. Such was Timothy's olive branch toward the caliph in acknowledging the prophetic work of Muhammad.

However, there was a limit to the way Timothy would acknowledge Muhammad's special status as a prophet of the One God. For questions 14 and 15, the caliph wanted to press the point, quite popular in early Islamic apologetics that the Paraclete, or the Holy Spirit, spoken of in the Gospel of John was none other than Muhammad. Timothy denies the validity of that view by asserting that since there is no such statement in the New Testament, it was a forced and unwarranted conclusion to say that Muhammad was the fulfillment or incarnation of the Paraclete itself. Early Christians maintained vis-à-vis Judaism that Christianity was the fulfilment, and not an abrogation, of the historical progression of revelation in Judaism. Now as a new religious movement, Islam was adopting a very similar rhetoric of fulfilment and replacement vis-à-vis Christianity. The challenge of Islam against Christianity was unique and new, especially compared to the way Christians had responded to Judaism and Roman paganism in the past.³⁶

The apologetic method employed by the caliph and the early Islamic writers had some substantial overlap with the one adopted by the Christians vis-à-vis the Jews: the new replaces the old, with the new being the fulfilment and correction of the old religious traditions. Among the Twenty-Seven Questions debated between these two, questions 13 through 17 dealt with that thorny issue of Islam being the ultimate fulfilment of Christianity. Question 13 focuses on the "Prophets and the gospel witnessing to Christ," but that does not mean, in question 14, that Muhammad was the Paraclete spoken of in John 14:16, 14:26, 15:26, 16:7, and 1 John 2:1. Thus, we find the caliph asking: "Who is the Paraclete?" The patriarch answers:

He is the Holy Spirit, as the gospel witnessed that he is the Spirit of Truth, who proceeds from the Father; and the Messiah said that he would send him to his disciples once he returned to the Father. The Paraclete then proceeds from the Father and comes from heaven, and the Messiah sends him, and Muhammad comes from

³⁵*Apology of Timothy the Patriarch*, 61.

³⁶*The Patriarch and the Caliph*, 28–32.

Adam and did not come from heaven, and the Messiah did not send him. . . . And the Paraclete taught the disciples the Christian law, which they taught to the people, and Muhammad taught its contrary. And the Paraclete is the Spirit of God, and Muhammad is not the Spirit of God.³⁷

Similarly, the patriarch presses the point in question 15 that “there is no witness to Muhammad in the Gospel.”

After all the apologetic engagement of refutation and defense, it is noteworthy to see how the patriarch ends the dialogue by taking the surprising path of humility and acknowledgment of their common endeavor of seeking the way of God, whether Allah or the Triune God. He has been talking about the pearl of great price, which, through the miracles of Moses, Jesus, and the Apostles, God confirms the veracity of the Christian faith. That elicits a quick rejoinder from the caliph: “We have hope in God that we are the possessors of this pearl, and that we hold it in our hands.” Notice how the patriarch sums up: “Amen, O King. But may God grant us that we too may share it with you, and rejoice in the shining and beaming lustre of the pearl! God has placed the pearl of His faith before all of us like the shining rays of the sun, and every one who wishes can enjoy the light of the sun. We pray God, who is King is Kings, and Lord of Lords, to preserve the crown of his kingdom and the throne of the Commander of the Faithful for multitudinous days and numerous years! . . . May He subjugate before them and before their descendants after them all the barbarous nations, and may all the kings and governors of the world serve our Sovereign and his sons after him till the day in which the Kingdom of Heaven is revealed from heaven to earth.”³⁸ From the textual and subsequent historical evidence, it is quite clear that neither the caliph nor the patriarch experienced conversion to the other religion, whether Islam or Christianity. Yet, the value of interreligious encounters, whether in eighth-century Baghdad or twenty-first-century North America might lie not necessarily in conversion as much as in a renewed appreciation for *both* the religious traditions and commitments of one’s neighbor *and* for one’s own. We are making a claim from a relative silence of the sources themselves. The value of this—and other similar—dialogue lies in the fact that the interlocutors believed in the possibility of persuasion and the need for presence and that it was not necessary to immediately resort to the erasure of the Other from the existential horizon. Such a deepened understanding of how and why each religious tradition differs in the way it appropriated the person and significance of Christ helps us to teach the way we can instantiate a similar *habitus* of openness and possibility of mutual cohabitation and flourishing.

III. A Tale of Two Cities, Part 2: London and the Hague, 1670s CE

For the second part of our version of the Tale of Two Cities, we turn to seventeenth-century Europe, where we will be thinking about Jesus within the context of Jewish-Christian conversations.

³⁷*The Patriarch and the Caliph*, 28.

³⁸*Apology of Timothy the Patriarch*, 89–90. It is also noteworthy to see that, in *The Patriarch and the Caliph*, there is no such ending section, expressing the mutual hope for greater enlightenment and clarity. However, in Clint Hackenburg’s unpublished work, there is a similar verbiage at the end. See Hackenburg, “Arabic-to-English Translation,” 144.

If naming Timothy the Patriarch failed to conjure up any clear image among many, nearly the opposite is the case with Baruch Spinoza, who lived between 1632 and 1677. Recently, there has been a true renaissance of Spinoza scholarship.³⁹ In the mind of Jonathan Israel, for example, although he is certainly not alone in this, modern thinking about biblical interpretation, the God-world relationship, and, indeed, most everything good about modernity could be or should be attributed to this Jewish philosopher who was expelled—however voluntarily or deservingly is beyond the scope of this paper—from his own Jewish community in Amsterdam at age twenty-three on July 27, 1656.⁴⁰

As mentioned in the Introduction, I am presently writing a book that deals with “early modern” and “early Enlightenment” European debates on Christology, one chapter within which focuses on Spinoza’s Christology, *as interpreted* by his Catholic and Protestant interlocutors. Thus, we will examine an epistolary exchange between Henry Oldenburg (1619–1677), who is often regarded as “one of the foremost scientific intelligencers of the early modern period,” and Spinoza. He was also known as an “indefatigable letter-writer and networker among the scientific community of his day,” and he was in London as secretary of the new, ambitious enterprise, the Royal Society. They exchanged letters while Oldenburg was in London and Spinoza in The Hague in the 1670s.⁴¹

If, in the case of Caliph al-Mahdī and Patriarch Timothy, the proverbial upper hand belonged to the caliph, in the case of Oldenburg and Spinoza, it is hard to tell to whom it belonged. To what extent Spinoza was beholden to and supported by radical Protestants, especially the Collegiants—radical Dutch reformers, whose number

³⁹Bibliography on Spinoza and Spinozism is ever increasing, especially in the past two decades or so, fueled in substantial ways by the contribution of Jonathan I. Israel. See, inter alia, Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Jonathan I. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man, 1670–1752* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights, 1750–1790* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). For these volumes in the “trilogy,” the singular significance of Spinoza for Israel cannot be overstated. For a contrasting view, see David A. Bell, “Where Do We Come From?” review of *Democratic Enlightenment*, by Jonathan I. Israel, *The New Republic*, 1 March 2012, 28–32. For other works on Spinoza and his significance in early modern religion, see Steven Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Stephen Nadler, *A Book Forged in Hell: Spinoza’s Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of the Secular Age* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011); Leo Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, trans. E. M. Sinclair (Chicago, Ill.: The University of Chicago Press, 1967); Susan James, *Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion, and Politics: The Theologico-Political Treatise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Carlos Fraenkel, *Philosophical Religions from Plato to Spinoza: Reason, Religion, and Autonomy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Yitzhak Y. Melamed and Michael A. Rosenthal, eds., *Spinoza’s Theological-Political Treatise: A Critical Guide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); J. Samuel Preus, *Spinoza and the Irrelevance of Biblical Authority* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Sherry Deveaux, *The Role of God in Spinoza’s Metaphysics* (London: Continuum, 2007); and Richard Mason, *The God of Spinoza: A Philosophical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

⁴⁰On Spinoza’s excommunication, see Steven Nadler, “The Excommunication of Spinoza: Trouble and Toleration in the ‘Dutch Jerusalem,’” *Shofar* 19, no. 4 (Summer 2001): 40–52; Asa Kasher and Shlomo Biderman, “Why Was Baruch de Spinoza Excommunicated?” in *Sceptics, Millenarians and Jews*, ed. David S. Katz (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 98–141; Reiko Shimizu, “Excommunication and the Philosophy of Spinoza,” *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 23, no. 3 (September 1980): 327–348.

⁴¹Quotes from the biographical essay in “The Correspondence of Henry Oldenburg,” Early Modern Letters Online, accessed 12 November 2020. <http://emlo-portal.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/collections/?catalogue=-henry-oldenburg>.

included Simon Joosten de Vries, Pieter Balling, and Jarig Jelles—is a matter of ongoing scholarly debate.⁴²

It is clear, however, that just as the caliph made no concerted efforts to become a Christian—it would be preposterous, indeed dangerous, for him to do so—Spinoza also saw no reason to convert to Christianity, although it is fascinating that there *were* some who were hoping that he would, and that his refusal to acknowledge core doctrines of Christianity were puzzling and perplexing to them. Henry Oldenburg was one such individual. He was concerned that Spinoza's writings, especially on determinism and divine actions, were causing a number of Christian intellectuals to jettison (or at least be seriously tempted to jettison) time-honored theological truth and traditions. However, most disconcerting to Oldenburg and his circle was Spinoza's refusal to acknowledge the Incarnation of Jesus. Yet, upon further reflection, Oldenburg and his colleagues' discontent must have seemed irrational to Spinoza since they were expecting a Jew who had not disavowed Judaism to embrace the Incarnation of Jesus, which was a cardinal doctrine of Christianity. For him, it was tantamount to a futile act of squaring a circle to believe not only in the Incarnation but, along with it, in the doctrines of the Trinity and the two natures of Christ, both of which Spinoza regarded as absurd. Equally problematic for Oldenburg was this: if God did not become one of us in Jesus Christ, then the redemption wrought by him—through the death, resurrection, and ascension—was also a farce. No Christmas, no redemption; no redemption, then no resurrection; no resurrection, then, why bother with Christianity? So went Oldenburg's theo-logic.

What Spinoza ended up accepting—as he is invited to articulate his mature position on Christological matters—is the death and burial of Jesus as literal, historical events. In other words, if non-believers were present at the scene of Jesus's crucifixion, they would have witnessed the same event as Jesus's followers had. No hallucination took place, contrary to the opinion of those who had purported that the resurrection accounts of Jesus were direct consequences of such mental instability and imbalance!

The resurrection, however, was not to be taken literally but only *allegorically*. Even though Spinoza had ridiculed Maimonides for his allegorical hermeneutic, he was now having to adopt the same hermeneutical method regarding the resurrection of Jesus. Most significantly for Spinoza, such an allegorical move did not take away from what he regarded as the gist of the moral message of the gospel: loving God and loving neighbor, neither of which necessitated the Incarnation or the bodily resurrection of Jesus. One of Spinoza's pivotal Christological dictums was that it is not necessary at all “to know Christ according to the flesh.” Conversely, then, to know Christ according to the Spirit is what truly mattered.

Most of Spinoza's readers, including Oldenburg, would know that this was a Pauline reference. St. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:16 that “though we have [he had] known Christ after the flesh” thus far, his newfound resolution was to know Christ not according to flesh (*kata sarx*) but rather according to the Spirit.⁴³ In his “Chapter on Faith” in

⁴²Wiep van Bunge, “Spinoza and the Collegiants,” in *Spinoza Past and Present: Essays on Spinoza, Spinozism, and Spinoza Scholarship*, ed. Wiep van Bunge (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 51–65. For the controversial thesis that situates Spinoza *within* the stream of radical Dutch Protestantism, see Graeme Hunter, *Radical Protestantism in Spinoza's Thought* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2005). For a critical review of Hunter, see Yitzhak Y. Melamed, review of *Radical Protestantism in Spinoza's Thought*, by Graeme Hunter, *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 45, no. 2 (April 2007): 333–334.

⁴³Letter 78, from Spinoza to Oldenburg, dated 7 February 1676. *Letters*, 42–84, 1671–1676, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley, vol. 2 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2016), 481.

The Theological-Political Treatise (hereafter referred to as *TTP*), Spinoza enumerates what he calls the “doctrines of the universal faith, or the fundamental principles aimed at by the whole of Scripture.”⁴⁴ It required belief in a “supreme being, who loves Justice and Loving-kindness, and who everyone, if he is to be saved, is bound to obey and to worship by practicing Justice and Loving-kindness toward his neighbor.”⁴⁵ From this overarching theological principle, Spinoza deduced the following seven correlated theological and ethical doctrines: (1) God’s existence; (2) God’s uniqueness; (3) divine omnipresence and omniscience; (4) God’s absolute dominion over all things and God’s equally absolute freedom; (5) that worship of this God is only confined to justice and loving-kindness, or expression of *that* love toward one’s neighbor; (6) that “everyone who obeys God by living in this way is saved; the rest, who live under the control of pleasure, are lost”; (7) God’s desire to pardon those who repent.⁴⁶ Here, Spinoza gives a key anthropological-cum-soteriological maxim: “no one is without sin”; thus, all stand in need of forgiveness and redemption. This dark anthropological perspective was redolent of a Pauline first principle taken from Romans 3:9–20, which declares universal culpability: “both Jews and Gentiles . . . are all under sin; As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one.”⁴⁷ Here Spinoza comes quite close to a Christian view on redemption in that for him—as would be true for many of his Catholic and Protestant contemporaries—the ground for redemption was the love of God. So, Spinoza writes: “moreover, whoever firmly believes that God, out of mercy and the grace by which he directs everything, pardons men’s sins, and who for this reason is more inspired by the love of God, that person really knows Christ according to the Spirit, and Christ is in him.”⁴⁸

Knowing Christ according to the Spirit is indicative of someone who knows God correctly and appropriates the forgiving mercies in an efficacious manner to extend justice and loving-kindness to one’s neighbor. In the letters exchanged between Oldenburg and Spinoza, there is a common commitment to and concern for the right use of philosophy and faith so that they do not “weaken the practice of Religious virtue,” especially since this “degenerate and dissolute age chases after nothing more avidly than doctrines whose consequences seem to support the vices running riot among us.” Such were Oldenburg’s words in a letter written on July 22, 1675.⁴⁹

By July of 1675, Spinoza’s magnum opus, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, had been out for five years. Although it was published anonymously, most in the Republic of Letters knew that it was Spinoza’s work, and the name of Spinoza was virtually synonymous with philosophy that bordered on atheism. Hobbes, Spinoza, and, to some extent, Descartes, or Pierre Bayle were regarded as renegade, maverick philosophers whose heterodox, if not heretical, views were best curbed or controlled. What is quite intriguing is whether Oldenburg sincerely believed that Spinoza could be counted upon as an ally in defense of Christianity in a doctrinally anxious and theo-politically

⁴⁴Benedictus de Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, ed. Carl Gebhardt, vol. 3, *Spinoza Opera* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1924), chap. 14, par. 15 (hereafter cited as Spinoza, *TTP*, with chapter and paragraph number from the Gebhardt edition, along with the page numbers from the Curley edition below). All translations of *TTP* are taken from Edwin Curley’s edition in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley, vol. 2 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2016), [xiv, 24], 268.

⁴⁵Spinoza, *TTP*, [xiv, 24], 268.

⁴⁶Spinoza, *TTP*, [xiv, 25–28], 268–69.

⁴⁷Spinoza, *TTP*, [xiv, 28], 269. The quoted biblical text is Rom 3:9–10 (AV).

⁴⁸Spinoza, *TTP*, [xiv, 28], 269.

⁴⁹Letter 62, in *Letters, 42–84, 1671–1676*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, 2:435.

chaotic era. It seems to me that throughout their correspondence, Oldenburg vacillated between a deep admiration for and defense of Spinoza's person and a perplexed irritation concerning Spinoza's putatively dangerous notions, especially those contained in the *TTP*.⁵⁰ Judging from all available textual evidence, Spinoza never actually avowed allegiance to Christianity, although he does not clearly disavow or repudiate the teachings of Christ either. His description of the role of Christ as the teacher of the Sermon on the Mount and the unique role of Christ as the one who reveals—but does *not* redeem—the identity and the will of God was exactly that: descriptive. One does not get the impression in *TTP* and other treatises that he attaches any soteriological significance to Christ's death and resurrection. Here Richard Mason's conclusion is illuminating: "Spinoza's use of the figure of Christ is one of the most puzzling aspects of his work. . . . Yet his remarks about Jesus were almost entirely positive."⁵¹ As commentators such as Leo Strauss and Jonathan Israel have noted, Spinoza seemed far more bent on ridiculing the textual inconsistencies of the Old Testament than those of the New. In his letter of June 1675, Oldenburg expresses considerable relief now that he is persuaded that Spinoza "so far from trying to harm true religion, or solid philosophy, that on the contrary you are [he was] working to commend and establish the authentic purpose of the Christian Religion, and indeed the divine sublimity and excellence of a fruitful philosophy."⁵²

However, Oldenburg might have been naïvely optimistic. Or perhaps his optimism regarding Spinoza's doctrinal sanctity might be more of a reflection of his own latitudinarian sensibilities, thereby reflecting a more capacious bandwidth for orthodoxy. Just as beauty was in the eye of the beholder, so was orthodoxy in the eye of the theological beholder. Albert Burgh was one such example. As an erstwhile friend and admirer of Spinoza's philosophical genius, Burgh's affection for Spinoza experienced a major volte face: from one of ardent devotion to one of vehement excoriation after his own conversion to Catholicism. So we find Burgh urging Spinoza to follow the path away from death to life. Edwin Curley notes that Burgh's tone in the letter was "passionate" and "abusive," with Burgh describing Spinoza as having been "led astray by the Devil." Thus, his philosophy was a "complete delusion."⁵³ Burgh wrote Spinoza from Florence shortly after his conversion on September 11, 1675:

Repent, Philosophic man. Recognize that your foolishness is wise and your wisdom mad. From a proud man, become humble, and you will be healed. Worship Christ in the most holy Trinity, so that he may deign to have mercy

⁵⁰In Letter 30, Spinoza expressly states his hope to Oldenburg that the "treatise on my opinion about scripture," namely, *TTP*, be used to disabuse the "prejudices of the theologians," discredit the villainous accusations of the "common people" regarding Spinoza's alleged atheism, and further cultivate an ethos for the "freedom of philosophizing" without fearing the "preachers [who] suppress" it. Letter 30, Spinoza to Oldenburg, 1 October 1665, in *Letters, 29–41, 1665–1669*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, 2:14–15. See also, Piet Steenbakkers, "The text of Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*," in *Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise*, ed. Yitzhak Y. Melamed and Michael A. Rosenthal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 29–30.

⁵¹Richard Mason, *The God of Spinoza: A Philosophical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 208.

⁵²Letter 61, in *Letters, 42–84, 1671–1676*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, 2:434.

⁵³Edwin Curley, "Spinoza's Exchange with Albert Burgh," in *Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise: A Critical Guide*, ed. Yitzhak Y. Melamed and Michael A. Rosenthal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 11–29 (quotation on p. 11).

on your wretchedness, and receive you. Read the Holy Fathers and the Doctors of the Church, and let them instruct you concerning what you ought to do, that you may not perish, but may have eternal life. . . . I have indeed written this Letter to you with a truly Christian intention: first, that you may know the love I have for you, even though you are a Pagan; and second, that I may call upon you not to persist in corrupting others, too. I conclude with this: God wants to rescue your soul from eternal damnation, provided you are willing. Don't hesitate to obey the Lord, who has called you so often through others, and now calls you again, perhaps for the last time, though me. . . . Do not refuse."⁵⁴

Thus ends the letter; it is hard to imagine a harsher letter, or a stranger combination of expressing putative brotherly love and unmitigated disdain of Spinoza's contumacy vis-à-vis God and the Church. Spinoza's response to Burgh reflects less of his aversion to organized religion—as noted by Edwin Curley—but rather more of his ecumenical sensibilities and a lowering of particularistic Christology for redemption and mediation.⁵⁵ First of all, Spinoza writes—with rhetorical flair—that although he can excoriate the Catholic Church for the innumerable “vices of the Priests and Popes,” which many do bring up in order “more to irritate than to instruct,” Spinoza instead takes a higher road which ends up kicking the Achilles' heel of the Catholic Church: salvation mediated exclusively through Rome. He acknowledges that “in the Roman Church there are more men of great erudition, who had led commendable lives, than in any other Christian Church.”⁵⁶ Nevertheless, an undeniable truth is that “in every Church there are many very honorable men, who worship God with justice and loving-kindness.”⁵⁷ For we know many men of this kind among the Lutherans, the Reformed, the Mennonites, and the Enthusiasts.”⁵⁸ Spinoza's conclusion was as pithy as poignant: “So you ought to concede that holiness of life is not peculiar to the Roman Church, but is common to all.” And at this juncture, Spinoza offers an ethically grounded Christology without any sort of ontological baggage, whether Nicene or Chalcedonian. To further bolster his point, Spinoza paraphrases 1 John 4:13 as it states that if “we remain in God, and God remains in us, it follows that whatever distinguishes the Roman Church from the others is completely superfluous.” Furthermore, “justice and loving-kindness are the unique and most certain sign of the true Universal faith.” Seen from this perspective, these two were true “fruits of the Holy Spirit,” so the inexorable conclusion was that wherever one finds justice and loving-kindness, then “Christ is really present; wherever they are absent, Christ is absent.” Here is a tantalizingly elusive statement, immediately following the foregoing sentence: “For only by the Spirit of Christ can we be led to the love of justice and loving-kindness.”⁵⁹ Is Spinoza implying a human inability to rectify our own mistakes, peccadillos, and sins? Or was he saying that the

⁵⁴Letter 67, in *Letters, 42–84, 1671–1676*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, 2:450.

⁵⁵Edwin Curley, “Editorial Preface,” to *Letters, 42–84, 1671–1676*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, 2:366; see also Curley, “Spinoza's Exchange with Albert Burgh,” 11–29.

⁵⁶Letter 76, in *Letters, 42–84, 1671–1676*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, 2:474.

⁵⁷For Spinoza, to “worship God with justice and loving-kindness” was demonstrable proof of true religion, regardless of ecclesial affiliation or denominational commitments. And, for Spinoza, it was entirely possible to worship God thus *without* Christ's mediation through the death and resurrection. See Jonathan Israel, “Introduction,” to Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, ed. Jonathan Israel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), xvii–xxi.

⁵⁸Letter 76, in *Letters, 42–84, 1671–1676*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, 2:474.

⁵⁹Letter 76, in *Letters, 42–84, 1671–1676*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, 2:474.

ability to remedy ourselves was universally available, thus no one can lay exclusive claim to it? It seems Spinoza's universalistic Christology was leaning in that direction.

We should return to Oldenburg, the vacillating correspondent of Spinoza here. In his letter of November 15, 1675, he sounds far more vexed. Having applauded Spinoza's plans to publish a second edition of *TTP* with clarifying notes in order to parry the besmirching blows of his enemies, Oldenburg offers a litany of things on the minds of such theological fearmongers. They were acrimonious about Spinoza's putative equating of God and nature, elevating the latter to the status of the former and about the alleged denial of the "authority and value of miracles," which were the "only possible support for the certainty of Divine Revelation." As we have seen in the dialogue between the Caliph al-Mahdi and Patriarch Timothy earlier, the putative absence of miracles in Prophet Muhammad's life was the linchpin to deny the status of special revelation for Islam, at least from Christian apologists' vantage point. In the eight hundred years between Baghdad and London, some things had not changed—namely, the unique role accorded to miracles as proof of the special revelatory identity of a religion. Most worrisome for Oldenburg was that a number of people were critical of Spinoza's concealment of his true "opinion concerning Jesus, the Redeemer of the World and only Mediator for me [Oldenburg], as well as your [Spinoza's] opinion concerning his Incarnation and Atonement."⁶⁰ What Oldenburg could have possibly meant by this last sentence is puzzling, to say the least: "If you do this, and if in this matter you please intelligent Christians, who value reason, I think your affairs will be safe." That immediately raises these questions: Why should Spinoza care about what Christians think about his views on Jesus? Were some of them his financial supporters and patrons? Were most of his readership learned Christians, rather than Jewish intelligentsia? Was it a vain threat? Or what did Spinoza actually stand to lose?

It took less than fifteen days for Spinoza to respond to Oldenburg's concern, and, in his response, Spinoza offers a point-by-point rejoinder in order to allay the fears of his London friend and his circle. As Yitzhak Melamed has adroitly noted, this letter contains a great summary of Spinoza's mature metaphysical, theological thinking. It would be instructive for us to take a listen to Spinoza's self-defense.⁶¹ Regarding the ontological confusion between nature and God, Spinoza recruits St. Paul for his defense and avers: "That all things are in God and move in God, I affirm, I say, with Paul, and perhaps also with all the ancient philosophers." Furthermore, this notion already emerges in *TTP*, which is to say "that God is one and the same as Nature (by which they understand a certain mass, or corporeal matter). This is a complete mistake."⁶² Concerning the area of confusion, that is, miracles, Spinoza offered this rejoinder:

I am convinced that the certainty of divine revelation can be built only on the wisdom of the doctrine, not on miracles, that is, on ignorance. I've shown this in sufficient detail in Ch. 6, on miracles. Here, I only add this, that I understand this to be the chief difference between Religion and Superstition, that the latter has ignorance as its foundation, and the former wisdom. And I believe that is the reason why Christians are distinguished from non-Christians, not by faith, not by loving-kindness, not by the other fruits of the Holy Spirit, but only by opinion. Like everyone

⁶⁰Letter 71, in *Letters, 42–84, 1671–1676*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, 2:464–465.

⁶¹Yitzhak Y. Melamed, "Christus secundum spiritum: Spinoza, Jesus, and the Infinite Intellect," in *The Jewish Jesus*, ed. Neta Stahl (New York: Routledge, 2012), 140–151.

⁶²Letter 73, in *Letters 42–84, 1671–1676*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, 2:467.

else, they defend themselves only by miracles, that is, by ignorance, which is the source of all wickedness. And thus they turn faith, even though true, into superstition. But whether kings will ever permit using a remedy for this evil, I doubt very much.⁶³

Here, similar to Hobbes, Spinoza's perspectives on miracles could be read as reflective of anti-Catholic sensibilities. With the emphasis on *sola scriptura* and its repudiation of Tradition and Transubstantiation—and, in some cases, the Trinity as well—radical Protestantism corresponded so much better with Spinoza's own radical philosophical perspectives, whether on the God and nature distinction or the nature of miracles. To require miracles as a proof or a preparatory step for faith was to turn faith into superstition. Arguing thus, Spinoza was “preaching” to a choir of an increasing number of radical Protestants and skeptics.⁶⁴

Answering the third question from the coterie of Oldenburg's friends—namely, Christological issues—Spinoza articulated a perspective which marked a radical departure from Nicene or Chalcedonian Christological formulations. Such a “departure” is actually no departure at all, for the word “departure” suggests that Spinoza was once part of the Christian community, although Graeme Hunter and others have assiduously argued that Spinoza was more of a Christian than we have hitherto acknowledged. While it seems incontrovertibly clear that his primary interlocutors were Christians of various types, it is equally clear that Spinoza never alleges religious commitment to the faith that was established upon the singular redemptive accomplishment of Jesus, the Son of God, and vindicated by his resurrection from the dead. However, what is nonetheless intriguing is that Spinoza offered his minimalistic, non-creedal Christology. It was the case that while Spinoza might have been influenced by certain strands of radical Protestant thought, especially that of the *Geist* of the Quakers and the Collegiants, he certainly influenced their Christological thinking down the road. Spinoza passionately argues to that effect:

I say that it is completely unnecessary for salvation to know Christ according to the flesh. We must think quite differently about that eternal son of God, i.e., God's eternal wisdom, which was manifested itself in all things, but most in the human mind, and most of all in Christ Jesus. No one can attain blessedness without this, as that which alone teaches what is true and false, good and evil. And because, as I said, this wisdom was manifested most through Jesus Christ, his disciples preached the same thing, insofar as he revealed it to them, and they showed that they could pride themselves beyond other people in that spirit of Christ.⁶⁵

Three questions emerging from this quote for Oldenburg were: “What does it mean to know Christ according to the flesh?” Secondly, “Did Spinoza make the Word as the eternal wisdom of God, or as the universal principle which governed the Cosmos perfectly throughout eternity and in time, and which, in the appointed time, manifested in

⁶³Letter 73, in *Letters, 42–84, 1671–1676*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, 2:468.

⁶⁴See, inter alia, Richard H. Popkin, “Spinoza's Relations with the Quakers in Amsterdam,” *Quaker History* 73, no. 1 (Spring 1984): 14–28; Daniel J. Lasker, “Reflections of the medieval Jewish-Christian debate in the *Theological-Political Treatise* and the Epistles,” in *Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise: A Critical Guide*, 56–71; *Spinoza's Earliest Publication? The Hebrew Translation of Margaret Fell's A Loving Salutation to the Seed of Abraham among the Jews, whether they are scattered up and down upon the Face of the Earth*, ed. Richard H. Popkin and Michael A. Signer (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1987); and Graeme Hunter, *Radical Protestantism in Spinoza's Thought* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2005).

⁶⁵Letter 73, in *Letters, 42–84, 1671–1676*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, 2:468.

Christ Jesus?” In other words, for Spinoza *all* human beings have the wisdom of God in them via the *imago Dei*, which he substitutes as *imago Christi*. Lastly, “What did this eternal wisdom of God teach?” What is crystal clear is that Spinoza repudiates in no uncertain terms the ecumenically espoused Christological doctrine of the Incarnation of the Word: “As for that certain Churches add to this—that God assumed a human nature—I warned expressly that I don’t know what they mean. Indeed, to confess the truth, they seem to me to speak no less absurdly than if someone were to say to me that a *circle has assumed the nature of a square*.”⁶⁶

Squaring the circle has been the bane of Christological doctrines for the Church, historically speaking. The alleged or actual absurdity of God becoming flesh in Jesus Christ was the very reason for the dialogue between al-Mahdi and Timothy, as it was also for the dialogue between Oldenburg, Burgh, and Spinoza. Both Timothy and Oldenburg were convinced that the God who can create everything *ex nihilo* not only can but has indeed “squared the circle” in the Incarnation. Here, in response to Spinoza’s spiritedly equating belief in miracles to ignorance and a radical truncation of Christological doctrines, Oldenburg writes that both the raising of Lazarus from the dead and the resurrection of Jesus itself “seem to surpass the whole power of created Nature,” which, by definition, could only belong to “divine power”⁶⁷ Thus, Oldenburg was perfectly willing to go where Spinoza feared to tread: acknowledge his logical limitations and transcend them by faith. Put differently, both Timothy, a patriarch from the Church of the East in the eighth century, and a peripatetic Lutheran in London in the seventeenth century were willing to allow for divine mysteries as an operational category in philosophical reasoning and theological discourse. Such was not the case with the Islamic caliph and the Jewish philosopher. Claiming that God was the ultimate mystery was a case of special pleading, thus it was illogical and superstitious. Oldenburg writes “that this necessarily exceeds the limits of a finite intelligence, bound within certain constraints, does not argue a culpable ignorance.” And at this point, Oldenburg paraphrases Terence’s maxim this way: “We are men, and it seems that nothing human should be considered alien to us,” including acknowledging and accepting one’s human epistemic finitude and ethical fragility.⁶⁸ Furthermore, the whole tenor of the gospel, according to Oldenburg was encapsulated in John 1:1–4: “That the only begotten Son of God, the λόγος, who both *was* God and *was with* God, showed himself in human nature and by his passion and death paid the ἀντίλυτρον [the ransom] for us sinners, the price of our redemption.”⁶⁹

To this quick response by Oldenburg, Spinoza wasted no time in offering yet another counter-rejoinder. What Spinoza decided to do was to emphasize the fact that Christ did not appear to the Senate, Pontius Pilate, or any “of the unfaithful,” but only to the “saints,” which, while true, was not truly consonant with the thrust of New Testament teaching—as Oldenburg would respond—especially 1 Corinthians 15, where

⁶⁶Letter 73, in *Letters, 42–84, 1671–1676*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, 2:468 (emphasis added).

⁶⁷Letter 74, in *Letters, 42–84, 1671–1676*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, 2:469.

⁶⁸Terence wrote: “Homo sum: humani nihil a me alienum puto.” See Terence, *Heautontimorumenos: The Self-Tormentor*, act 1, scene 1, line 25, accessed 15 November 2020, <http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:latinLit:phi0134.phi002.perseus-lat1:1.1>.

⁶⁹Letter 74, in *Letters, 42–84, 1671–1676*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, 2:470. On the significance of the Johannine prologue in early modern English religious debates, see Paul C. H. Lim, *Mystery Unveiled: The Crisis of the Trinity in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 271–319; and Paul Cefalu, *The Johannine Renaissance in Early Modern English Literature and Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

Paul sought to establish the public nature of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus Christ. To this, Spinoza's riposte was that even the five-hundred individuals who witnessed the resurrected Christ were part of the faithful. In other words, they were already predisposed to believe in Jesus's Resurrection, irrespective of actual evidence. Then, Spinoza offered a remarkable spiritualizing or allegorizing of the significance of the "symbolism" of Jesus's resurrection. To the question, "Did Jesus really rise again from the dead?" Oldenburg would answer in the most emphatic affirmative, whereas Spinoza would answer, "That would depend on who the audience was." While Spinoza's answer might have sounded novel to the early modern Christian, it was already an established part of the Jewish anti-Christian apologetic, especially regarding the putative veracity of the resurrection plus the validity of Christianity, as Daniel Lasker and Leo Strauss have shown from a number of medieval antecedents to Spinoza.⁷⁰ Spinoza wrote:

You will say that all the Apostles believed completely that Christ was resurrected from the dead, but really ascended into heaven, I don't deny this. For Abraham himself also believed that God had dined with him, and all the Israelites believed that God descended from heaven to Mount Sinai, surrounded by fire, and spoke immediately with them [Exodus 19:18–24]. Nevertheless, these and many other things of this kind were apparitions, or revelations, accommodated to the grasp and opinions of those men, by which God willed to reveal his mind to them.⁷¹

In other words, Abraham's putative dining with God and the fire and storm on Mount Sinai were considered *as if* they were vindication of God's presence and power, regardless of whether they were objectively and publicly demonstrable as historical facts. Here, Spinoza seems to acknowledge the doctrine of divine accommodation in revelation: that God accommodates God's own being to our weak, creaturely capacity and reveals his presence and purposes to us. The Jewish and patristic idea of divine accommodation has interesting early modern divergent trajectories of interpretation.⁷² For instance, John Calvin used the idea of divine accommodation to buttress the doctrines of the Incarnation, Trinity, and all of Scripture itself, since the act of accommodation in no way made the doctrines any less real.⁷³ For Spinoza, however, that same act of putative

⁷⁰Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, trans. E.M. Sinclair (Chicago, Ill.: The University of Chicago Press, 1997); Daniel J. Lasker, "The Jewish Critique of Christianity under Islam in the Middle Ages," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 57 (1991): 123–153; Daniel J. Lasker, "Jewish-Christian Polemics at the Turning Point: Jewish Evidence from the Twelfth Century," *Harvard Theological Review* 89, no. 2 (1996): 161–73; and Daniel J. Lasker, "Jewish Anti-Christian Polemics in the Early Modern Period: Change or Continuity?" in *Tradition, Heterodoxy, and Religious Culture: Judaism and Christianity in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Chanita Goodblatt and Howard Kreisel (Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University Press, 2006), 469–488. Lasker's first contribution was his monograph, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics against Christianity in the Middle Ages* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Ktav Publishing, 1977).

⁷¹Letter 75, Spinoza to Oldenburg, 1 January 1676, in *Letters*, 42–84, 1671–1676, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, 2:472.

⁷²See Stephen D. Benin, *Footprints of God: The Divine Accommodation in Jewish and Christian Thought* (Buffalo: State University of New York Press, 1993).

⁷³Jon Balsarak, in *Divinity Compromised: A Study of Divine Accommodation in the Thought of John Calvin* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), builds upon and expands the argument made by Ford Lewis Battles, "God Was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity," *Interpretation* 31, no. 1 (January 1977): 19–38; Randall C. Zachman, "Calvin as Analogical Theologian," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 51, no. 2 (May 1998): 162–187.

accommodation meant that what was presented was a radically truncated version of God's own being and act, not an objective and demonstrable reality, intelligible to all. Instead, it was a subjective accommodation to fit the weak capacity of the credulous. Abraham thought he was entertaining God; Israelites were delusional in thinking they were witnessing God; Spinoza interpreted the true meaning of the resurrection in a similar manner:

The resurrection of Christ from the dead was really spiritual, and was revealed only to the faithful, according to their power of understanding, that is, that Christ was endowed with eternity, and that he rose again from the dead, and at the same time that he gave, by his life and death, an example of singular holiness, and to that extent, he raises his disciples from the dead, insofar as they follow this example of his life and death.⁷⁴

For Spinoza, the literal, bodily resurrection never took place; thus, the “resurrection of Christ . . . was really spiritual” and this spiritualized hermeneutic was the way to interpret Paul's teaching on the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15. It is precisely in this way that Spinoza's dictum, “Christ according to the spirit” needs to be understood as well.

IV. Conclusion

As far as we can tell, none of the four major characters we have engaged with—Caliph al-Mahdi, Patriarch Timothy, Baruch Spinoza, or Henry Oldenburg—became convinced of the veracity of their religious Other's perspectives and switched from Christianity to Islam or to Judaism, or vice versa. It is also perhaps likely that all of them finished their dialogue or epistolary exchange convinced that they had won the contest themselves. As mentioned at the outset of this article, my primary interest in these interreligious encounters and engagements is pedagogical, to teach the history of a Christian-Muslim relationship and then one of a Jewish-Christian relationship. This is the first foray for me into writing about the way each participant from his respective part of the Abrahamic tradition engaged with the Other. Especially in light of what some call “cancel culture,” here we find possibly helpful examples wherein different practitioners of religions disagreed quite strongly—if not fundamentally—about the self, society, and salvation, yet did not end up dismissing or cancelling the Other. My task as a historian who has to care about the present, even if only in some marginal ways, then becomes one of a synthetic process of mimesis and of seeing that at least a small part of my historiographical aim can be identified as “restorative.” I do that for two weeks when we talk about these two episodes in “interreligious encounters” as a part of a course I teach, “History of Theodicy in Christian Traditions.” I am juxtaposing these two sets of texts for the first time as a way of embodying a better ethic of being humans created for something beyond ourselves. The other aspect of these dialectical engagements to which we should pay close attention is the dynamic of power, especially the differential thereof. For the Baghdad dialogue, the collective survival of a Christian community was likely at stake. Similarly, the epistolary exchange between Spinoza and his friends shows the dominant position of Christianity and the tenuous struggle toward hegemony. Especially since we are engaged in the task of teaching and writing the

⁷⁴Letter 75, Spinoza to Oldenburg, 1 January 1676, in *Letters*, 42–84, 1671–1676, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, 2:472.

history of Christianity vis-à-vis the context of a global reckoning of the power differential along racial lines since the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis in July 2020, it is all the more imperative to see how interpretations of past actions of Christians, Jews, and Muslims might perpetuate the power gap, our best intentions to do otherwise notwithstanding.

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