

SARA LEILA HUSSEINI:

*Early Christian–Muslim Debate on the Unity of God: Three Christian Scholars and their Engagement with Islamic Theology (9th Century C.E.)* (History of Christian–Muslim Relations.) ix, 242 pp. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014. €110. ISBN 978 9004 27838 7  
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Two centuries after the rise of Islam, Christians in the Middle East had made considerable progress in formulating their beliefs in such ways that they became comprehensible – albeit not acceptable – to Muslims. In order to do so, they searched for common theological and philosophical concepts and terminology, and above all, for arguments with which they could defend their belief in a God whose dimensions exceeded the strict monotheistic conception of God in Islam. The three great Christian thinkers of the early ‘Abbasid period who are well-known for their experimentation with Christian apologetics in Arabic are Theodore Abū Qurra (d. c. 830), Abū Rā’īta al-Takrīfī (d. c. 835) and ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī (d. c. 840). They belonged to different Christian traditions: Abū Qurra was a Melkite (i.e. Arab Chalcedonian); Abū Rā’īta was a Syrian-Orthodox (“Jacobite”); and ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī belonged to the Church of the East (“Nestorian”). Although there are a number of detailed studies into the theology and apologetics of each of them, Sara Leila Husseini’s lucidly structured book is new in that she compares their thought on the doctrine of the Trinity in detail. After a brief discussion of earlier Christian theologians’ approaches to Trinitarian theology, and a discussion of the early Muslim theologians’ thought on the unity of God, she proceeds with three tripartite chapters on each of the theologians, focusing on (a) their historical and intellectual background, (b) their theological explorations in which their discussions of the Trinity are embedded, and (c) their explanations of the doctrine of the Trinity. These chapters are followed by a second part, in which the methods of the three apologists are compared and discussed in more detail against the background of Islamic *kalām* of the same era, especially in the light of Mu‘tazilī ideas.

Husseini discusses how each of these thinkers employed analogies from nature to explain that one can mean three without any sense of division. She also describes how they used biblical proof texts, despite the Muslim accusation of biblical corruption, and to a lesser extent the Quran. Most importantly, the apologists tapped into intra-Islamic debates on the attributes of God. Much of the study deals with the ways in which their engagement with contemporary Islamic *kalām* shaped their thought about Christian doctrine. The second part of the book is an attractive synthesis of the research into these three thinkers, who have been the subject of many studies in the recent decades (notably by Sidney Griffith, John Lamoreaux, Sandra Keating). Readers may want to concentrate on that comparative part, because it retells most of the discussions of the first part, but in a more compact and insightful way. It appears that ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī went farthest in formulating Trinitarian terminology along the lines of Muslim *kalām*, when he tried to argue that God’s attributes of word and life are the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Although the author is somewhat hesitant about the matter in the early chapters, towards the end of her work she seems quite convinced that earlier scholars have wrongly interpreted the apologetic works as primarily intended for internal Christian consumption. She rightly argues that the works may also have been envisioned for Muslim readers and discussants. Yet, despite the close engagement with Muslim thought that she highlights, she seems to harbour a fixed conviction that

these thinkers operated in the belief that Islamic and Christian doctrine are twain that shall never meet. Although this may have been the case, it is not known for a fact. Doctrines can evolve and the many doctrinal forms of early Christianity constitute proof of that. Moreover, Islamic theology was still very much in flux and it cannot be excluded that some Christians ultimately hoped to bring out the latent Trinitarian element from the Quran to *kalām*. The fact that the Muslim theologian Ibn Kullāb found himself in a grey area between the two religions may show that at times the borders between the two religions were not as sharply delineated as one might think a millennium down the line.

This book was originally a dissertation defended at the University of Birmingham in 2011. It has undergone a minimal round of corrections and was not bibliographically updated. Numerous inconsistencies and errors remain. The dreadful transliteration of Arabic leads to distracting guesswork on the part of the reader (p. 84 “*bidha*” = *bihā* (?); p. 126: “*al-kalāqa*” = *al-khallāqa*, p. 133: *rawiyyat* = *ru’ya*, p. 177 *jamīa’ ha* = *jamī’ uhā* (?) etc.). Inconsistent referencing to the source material is confusing, with strange mixed forms such as the *Risāla al-ūlā*, where one would expect “The first letter” or *al-Risāla al-ūlā*, with Arabic and English titles mixed in one line (p. 192) or even given in French (!) (p. 120, n. 46). There are boundless infelicities and lacunae in the index and the bibliography as well. One might want to raise the question to editors and publishing houses as to what role they see for themselves, when their three-figure priced books contain the same poorly edited texts as those downloadable for free from a dissertation database.

Finally, it should be noted that any further studies on this topic need to take into account two further recent studies: Thomas W. Ricks’s *Early Arabic Christian Contributions to Trinitarian Theology* (Minneapolis, 2013) and Najib G. Awad’s *Orthodoxy in Arabic Terms: A Study of Theodore Abu Qurrah’s Theology in Its Islamic Context* (Boston and Berlin, 2015).

**Barbara Roggema**  
King’s College London

DIMITRI GUTAS:

*Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition: Introduction to Reading Avicenna’s Philosophical Works*, second edition.

(Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science. Texts and Studies.) xxxi, 617 pp. Leiden: Brill, 2014. €167. ISBN 978 90 04 25580 7.

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Any scholar would be pleased to have written a book that shaped all subsequent research on the same topic, becoming at once a standard reference and a guide for subsequent publications. One can only imagine how Dimitri Gutas must feel, having written two such books (or even three, if you include his pioneering *Greek Wisdom Literature in Arabic Translation*, 1975). His *Greek Science, Arabic Culture* (Routledge, 1998), a pivotal monograph on the Greek–Arabic philosophical translation movement, came a decade after *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, which may have had an even more dramatic impact on the study of philosophy in the Islamic world. Consider three of the most important books on Avicenna to appear since the turn of the century: David C. Reisman’s *The Making of the Aristotelian Tradition* (2002), Robert Wisnovsky’s *Avicenna’s Metaphysics in Context* (2003), and Amos Bertolacci’s *The Reception of*