

“May He be Blessed and Exalted!” Witness and Inculturation in Theodore Abu Qurra’s *Theologus Autodidactus*

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Introduction

Doctrinal or theological polemics have their limits. At once strident and pronounced, treatises that take on an unnecessarily aggressive edge often suggest that perhaps there is less substance than form and frequently fail to achieve their intended ends. A reasoned critique, on the other hand, may enjoy equanimity of tone and, through less coercive means, wind up accomplishing more. Theodore Abu Qurra, a bishop, theologian, and apologist living in contemporary Turkey (Asia Minor) in the late eighth and early ninth century, exemplifies the latter approach.¹ Serving under the Patriarchate of Antioch, Abu Qurra was among the first to write in Arabic. His work provides a fascinating insight into the dialectic (*kalām*) between Christians and Muslims in the early Abbasid period. Following the work of Sydney Griffith and John C. Lamoreaux, the ensuing essay will examine Abu Qurra’s most famous work, *Theologus Autodidactus* and demonstrate the way Abu Qurra both provided a reasonable defence of the Christian belief to his Muslim interlocutors and sought to bolster the faith of his

¹ The spelling of Theodore Abu Qurra varies depending on the author. Variant spellings include Abu Qurra, Qurrah, and Abū Qurrah. This paper will default to the plain usage of “Abu Qurrah” but will preserve variant spellings used in the secondary literature.

Christian audience.² Abu Qurra argued for the truth of Christianity against several sects, but most notably, against challenges mounted from Islam and Judaism. Relative to the question of inculturation, Abu Qurra is unique in using Islam's language and thought categories to testify to the perduring truths of the Orthodox faith. The paper will begin with a brief sketch of Abu Qurra and then explain the basic tenets of *Theologus Autodidactus*. Abu Qurra's apologetic arguments in defence of Christianity viz a viz Islamic critiques will then be explored. The paper will briefly consider the advantages and disadvantages of Abu Qurra's apologetic method.

Theodore Abu Qurra: A Biographical Sketch

It is nearly axiomatic to note the disparity between how well-known Abu Qurra's theological works are and little known are the events of his actual life.³ Neither Abu Qurra's date of birth nor death can be ascertained with certainty, yet an approximation of 750-830 seems appropriate.⁴ Additional facts that seem reasonably well established include his birthplace of Edessa and that he held the Bishopric of Harrān for a short time.⁵ Previously thought to be a monk at the monastery of Mar Sabas and erstwhile pupil of John of Damascus; John Lamoreaux has argued persuasively that the historical record does not sustain such a claim.⁶ Nevertheless, as Husseinini rightly points out, this correction does not obviate the possibility (indeed, the evidence!) that Abu Qurra was, in fact, influenced by John of Damascus, and in particular, his use of apophatic demonstrations in his doctrine of God.

² Sidney H. Griffith, "Faith and Reason in Christian Kalām: Theodore Abū Qurrah on Discerning the True Religion" in *Christian Arabic Apologetics during the Abbasid Period (750-1258)* (Leiden: Brill, 1994); Theodore Abū Qurrah, Trans. John C. Lamoreaux, *Theodore Abū Qurrah* (Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2005).

³ Abū Qurrah, Trans. John C. Lamoreaux, *Theodore Abū Qurrah*, xii.

⁴ Sara Leila Husseinini, *Early Christian-Muslim Debate on the Unity of God* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 47.

⁵ Husseinini, *Christian-Muslim Debate*, 47.

⁶ John C. Lamoreaux, "The Biography of Theodore Abū Qurrah Revisited," in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* vol 56 (2002), 25-40.

Theodore Abu Qurra lived and wrote throughout the flourishing of the first Abbasid Caliphate, a time of extraordinary religious tolerance, particularly for the community of Melkite Christians, of which Abu Qurrah was a part. In the early 8th century, Arab armies had conquered a significant portion of the Levant and, as a result, came to rule over lands that had sizable Christian populations.⁷ Instead of eradicating Christian practice, however, the Caliphate tolerated a circumscribed Christianity following the latitude afforded in the Quran. As Hugh Goddard noted,

The age of al-Ma'mūn [ruled: 813-833] thus represents what may perhaps be called an early example of dialogue between Christians and Muslims, where representatives of each community were enabled to outline the principles and practices of their faith with a remarkable degree of candour and honesty, after being given assurances of having the freedom to do so with no threat to themselves or to their community.⁸

This context of toleration and dialogue gave rise to “the definitive development of the *ilm al-kalām*,” which may be considered an exercise partly in apologetics and partly one of polemic, with the tone considerably more charitable than more inflammatory.⁹ Griffiths observed that “Christian *kalam* was an exercise in what modern-day commentators might call ‘inculturation,’ a process in which the doctrinal development explored new dimensions of Christian truth when that truth was considered from a hitherto unavailable or unexploited frame of reference.”¹⁰ Among the Christian *mutakallimūn*, Theodore Abū Qurra is one of the earliest to write a defence of Christianity in Arabic.

⁷ Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 11. Griffith estimated that “perhaps 50 percent of the world’s confessing Christians from the mid-seventh to the end of the eleventh centuries found themselves living under Muslim rule.”

⁸ Hugh Goddard, *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations* (Chicago: New Amsterdam Books, 2000), 52, 54.

⁹ Griffith defined the discipline as “the reasoned justification of the truths of divine revelation and to the exploration of the implications of revealed truth for human thought in general.” Griffith, “Faith and Reason,” 1.

¹⁰ Griffith, “Faith and Reason,” 5.

Theologus Autodidactus

Theodore Abu Qurra, John Lamoreaux noted, “was forced to rethink the foundations of Christian theology.”¹¹ No longer able to enjoy the benefits of establishmentarian circumstances, “things were not so easy once Islam had subjugated much of the territory that had once belonged to the Christian empire Byzantium.”¹² Abu Qurra’s writing reflects a delicate balance. On the one hand, Abu Qurra was tasked with defending Christianity from Islamic critiques (most notably against the Trinity, and the correlated notion of Jesus as the “Son of God”). On the other hand, as a bishop, Abu Qurra was certainly mindful of the prospect of Christians converting to Islam, both from the prospect of a more fulsome integration into society and to escape the uncomfortable realities of being a Christian under Muslim rule.

Theodore’s popular work *Theologus Autodidactus* (self-taught theologian) addresses these twin concerns.¹³ In the work, Abu Qurra constructs a thought experiment. The unnamed main character of the story “grew up on a mountain where I knew no other people.”¹⁴ One day, he descended the mountain, only to come across many varied religious sects claiming to worship the correct god genuinely.¹⁵ Obviously, all the sects contradicted each other, leaving the protagonist with a problem: how to discern the true religion? One might reasonably interject here and ask *if it is, in fact, possible* to discern the true religion. Still, the protagonist is confident: “Because God is kind and generous, when he saw his creation deviating from the true worship, he would have sent them messengers and a book, both in order to show them the true worship and to

¹¹ Abu Qurrah, *Abu Qurrah*, xviii.

¹² Abu Qurrah, *Abu Qurrah*, xviii.

¹³ The treatise is sometimes called “On True Religion” or “Discerning the True Religion.”

¹⁴ Abu Qurrah, “Theologus Autodidactus” in *Abu Qurrah*, 1.

¹⁵ Griffith handily summarizes these: “ancient pagans, the Mājūs, i.e., the Zoroastrians, the Samaritans, the Jews, the Christians, the Manichaeans, the Marcionites, the followers of Bardaysān, and the Muslims.” Griffiths, “Faith and Reason,” 13-4.

return them to it from their sins.”¹⁶ The problem is plain: with so many “books” and so many “messengers”—how can the protagonist know which is correct?

Here, the protagonist considers an analogous situation in the “parable of the Hidden King.” A King’s son ventured into a far land away from his father and became ill. Hearing of his son’s illness, the King sent him a letter describing three things: “First, he described himself. Secondly, he described for the youth his disease and what habits had brought it about, forbidding him also from continuing to practice them. Thirdly, he described for him a medicine and how it would heal him.”¹⁷ The difficulty, however, is that the King’s enemies also heard of the King’s plans and sent messengers with their forged letters. Hence the predicament: whom to believe? Which is the correct messenger—which is the correct letter? Mercifully, according to Abu Qurra, the son had an attending physician who was well acquainted with both the King and the practice of medicine. The physician sought to evaluate the claims of all the messengers and the letters, essentially being able to determine the correct one.

The analogy is colourful if a little heavy-handed. Interestingly, however, is the physician’s role (namely, the faculty of reason) in evaluating the claims of competing religions; in the case of the parable, the messengers with their forged letters. In what appears to be a case of rationalism *avant la lettre*, Abu Qurra was confident that subjecting the competing claims of religion to reason-based scrutiny would be sufficient to discover the truth. As Griffith observed,

The modern reader will immediately recognize the essentially rationalist, even Neo-Platonic character of this scheme. But present too is what by Abū Qurrah’s day would already have become a traditional Christian optimist about what the unaided human intellect can know about God.¹⁸

While Abu Qurra’s epistemic optimism might seem misplaced, perhaps, it serves an apologetic purpose. Recalling Abu Qurra’s audience, his appeal to reason serves

¹⁶ Abu Qurrah, “Theologus Autodidactus,” 6.

¹⁷ Abu Qurrah, “Theologus Autodidactus,” 7.

¹⁸ Griffith, “Faith and Reason,” 10-1; 35.

two ends. On the one hand, it demonstrates the reasonableness of Christianity in response to Muslim critiques, particularly regarding the doctrine of the Trinity. On the other hand, there is also the need to bolster the faith of Christians considering conversion to Islam. As Griffiths rightly pointed out, to hear a defence of Christianity using the Arabic idiom would have been undoubtedly encouraging. Their faith with Greek roots could also grow in the soil of a foreign thought world.¹⁹

Returning to Abu Qurra's defence, the physician weighs the medicinal approaches of the false messengers and (to little surprise) finds them wanting: "They collected the medicines, and the physician examined them. All were contrary to one another."²⁰ All, of course, except for one. It was the medicine which comported with the three facts listed above that was proven to be true: it accurately described the King, it forbade what was harmful, and endorsed what would be ultimately beneficial, both in this life and in the next. Abu Qurra spends the remainder of the treatise arguing for the way in which Christianity might be discerned to be true. It is Christianity alone that accurately describes God and the good life. Abu Qurra surveys several ways in which this is the case, but two of the most interesting arguments are the ones that identify Christianity as unique among the two other monotheisms: Judaism and Islam. It is to these arguments that we now turn.

Contra Islam: "Begetting and Headship" in Adam

The enduring challenge that Abu Qurra faced in his time as bishop would have been the defence of Christianity against Islam, particularly concerning the doctrine of God. In what sense could Christianity be deemed to be rational in its claim that God was one in essence and three in person? In *Theologus Autodidactus* pursues an innovative defense of the Christian doctrine of God, developed through the analogy above. To the first fact, the correct "messenger" must accurately describe the King. Abu Qurra notes that the messenger of reason shows us that we

¹⁹ Griffiths, "Faith and Reason," 4.

²⁰ Abu Qurrah, "Theologus Autodidactus," 8.

can comprehend aspects of God's character when considering the "nature of Adam." Now, to be sure, it is only in Adam's virtues, not his vices, that we may see the character of God: "God is not comprehended through defects in Adam's nature, nor does God resemble Adam in those defects. It is only with regard to his virtues that Adam resembles God."²¹ Consummate among the virtues that Adam possesses, according to Abu Qurra, are "begetting and headship." Abu Qurra is here referring to both Adam's begetting of children and also, in a sense Eve (one who is "like him"—Abu Qurra is referring to nature here—"flesh of my flesh" as Adam says). Through this begetting, Adam maintains headship, as it was *from* Adam that Eve was created and, subsequently, the children were borne to him. Reasoning from this principle, Abu Qurra argues that it is inconceivable that we could predicate these virtues of Adam and yet somehow deny that they are in God: "No sane mind can accept, however, that Adam has virtues that are not in God, as this is something absurd." And from this principle, the reality of God's Tri-unity may be inferred:

If this is so, then God—may he be blessed and exalted!—is surely head, not over his creatures, but over one like him. And if he is head over one like him, he, too, has begotten a Son and there has proceeded from him a Spirit, and he and Adam resemble one another with regard to begetting and headship.

Thus, among the many things the mind can infer from the likeness of Adam's nature is that God is three persons: one who begets, another who is begotten, and another who proceeds.²²

Abu Qurra's argument here is notably more subtle than it seems. It might be argued that Abu Qurra is arguing from "three-ness" to distinguish Christianity from Islam. Yet it is imperative to recall that Abu Qurra initiates his argument from the "oneness" principle—that of the "one King" that sends the messenger of reason. There is the one King, yet we may discern that there is diversity, fellowship, and a kind of plurality within that unity. Furthermore, it is from the consideration of Adam and his virtues that one may come to true knowledge about

²¹ Abu Qurrah, "Theologus Autodidactus," 10.

²² Abu Qurrah, "Theologus Autodidactus," 13.

God. The principles of begetting and headship are found within the one Adam and are not virtues to be found within a plurality of persons. There are overtones of St. Augustine's "psychological" analogy for the Trinity here (memory, intellect, and will). Yet Abu Qurra focuses more on what might be termed an "economic" consideration of the unified person (in distinction to Augustine's more decidedly "immanent" frame). Abu Qurra's argument may expose him to certain liabilities (such as that of subordinationism, which might be entailed by notions of "headship" wrongly applied), yet his analogy here is able, even elegant, defence of the trinity within a rationalistic framework.

Contra Judaism: Christological Hermeneutics and the "Problem" of Moses

Abu Qurra's critique of Judaism in *Theologus Autodidactus* places him in an awkward position. He sought to demonstrate that Christianity was a superior revelation of God to the religion of the Jewish people. However, Abu Qurra had already refuted the Marcionites and so did not want to lapse into their error in his refutation of Judaism.²³ How then, to deal with the Old Testament?²⁴ Abu Qurrah addresses the criticism head-on, phrasing the critique accordingly:

If all this is so, then you have denied that the prophet Moses was sent by God and have declared what he brought to be sin and defect for he did not bring what the gospel brought. Rather, what he brought was contrary and quite defective. Thus, it must be that you think Moses not to have been sent by God.²⁵

²³ Marcionites were a subset of Christians that followed the teachings of Marcion of Sinope (85—160 CE) and believed that the revelation of God in Jesus Christ was superior to that of the God of the Old Testament. Marcionites rejected the Old Testament and its depiction of the God of Israel.

²⁴ A more fulsome account of Abu Qurra's views on Judaism may be found in the polemically titled "Against the Jews," Abu Qurrah, "Against the Jews," 27-39.

²⁵ Abu Qurrah, "Theologus Autodidactus," 23.

Abu Qurra waved aside the objection simply by declaring that “in this book, we have sought to confirm our religion by reason, not by scripture.”²⁶ Abu Qurra did not believe that reason dictated accepting the prophet Moses—it only compels us to accept the gospel, because it comports so fittingly with our nature. Abu Qurra was not rash in his pronouncement, however. He gave some notion of credibility to the way in which the gospel speaks of Moses and how Moses spoke of Christ. That aspect of Moses’ ministry was properly said to be of God. Abu Qurra’s approach here is, once more, a slightly subtle one. Abu Qurra could at once denounce complete reliance upon the Old Testament prophets and laws (Judaism, in his mind). Yet, he could rehabilitate aspects of it and even a sense of its fullness since the gospel confirmed it.²⁷ Abu Qurra saw the revelation of the Old Testament as a kind of intermediary step. Before the gospel could be disclosed, the people had to forsake the gross errors of religion: “It was [God’s] hope that when they had abandoned their god and come to worship God, God would reveal to them his Son and Spirit, at a time when it was necessary that they worship him perfectly.”²⁸ Noteworthy in Abu Qurra’s approach here is a two-pronged polemic, for in “refuting” Judaism in this way, Abu Qurra is also able to critique Islam by stating that any revelation outside of the gospel is necessarily deficient, and could only serve to point back to the full disclosure of reason and religion, Christ Jesus.

Conclusion

What value does studying a thinker like Abu Qurra hold today? One essential advantage is that Abu Qurra is an effective example of an “inverted diaspora” situation. Instead of a people group displaced by oppression, war, or famine, we see instead that the Melkite Christians found themselves within their lands but under an occupying power with a distinctly different religious outlook. Instead of simply succumbing to cultural pressure, Abu Qurra is a lively example of engaging in a debate and conversation with the dominant culture, and, most

²⁶ Abu Qurrah, “Theologus Autodidactus,” 23.

²⁷ Abu Qurrah, *Abu Qurrah*, xxii.

²⁸ Abu Qurrah, “Theologus Autodidactus,” 24.

importantly, using the idioms, language, and cultural artifacts of that people. Analogously, in a world where Orthodox Christianity might find itself “not at home” in the shifting sands of hyper-modernity, Abu Qurra is an inspiring testimony.

There are drawbacks, of course. Abu Qurra and his works are perpetually on the defensive. Because the Islamic critique “sets th[e] agenda,” Abu Qurra was unable to engage in constructive dogmatics or at least provide an account of the Christian faith that was non-reactionary.²⁹ Moreover, Abu Qurra’s overly rationalistic schema shows signs of weakness even within his context. Some of the nuances are lost in translation, yet the text gives the impression of trying to reassure those struggling with the onslaught of Islamic critique at the expense of a robust argument. Even in this charitable form of dialogue, the traces of polemic remain. It can be difficult to escape the feeling that some of the reassurances offered by Abu Qurra would not stand up to scrutiny even in his day. And yet, perhaps, that conclusion is too far-reaching. After all, over a millennium later, Abu Qurra’s winsome presentation of the Gospel and able shepherding of the people of Harran has still gained an appreciative audience.

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²⁹ Griffiths, “Faith and Reason,” 3.

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