

CHRISTIANITY AND JUDAISM UNDER ISLAM IN MEDIEVAL IRAQ

Da'ūd al-Muqammas
and Sa'd b. Mansūr Ibn Kammūna¹

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ABSTRACT In the present paper two attitudes towards Christianity among Jews in Medieval Iraq are discussed, viz. Da'ūd al-Muqammas (second half of the 9th century) and Sa'd b. Mansūr Ibn Kammūna (second half of the 13th century). Da'ūd al-Muqammas was writing in a period when Christianity may have been an attractive alternative for intellectual Jews. His major work still available, 'Ishrūn Maqāla, »Twenty chapters«, is an anti-Christian tract demonstrating the continuing validity of Judaism. Addressing a Gentile readership in his Tanqīh al-abhāth li'l-milal al-thalāth, »The examination of the inquiries into the three faiths«, Sa'd b. Mansūr Ibn Kammūna upholds the validity of Judaism and Christianity against the claims of Islam in a period when Islam had been reduced to the same status as Judaism and Christianity in the early period of Mongol rule of Iraq.

With the rise of Islam the status of Christians and Jews in the Fertile Crescent changed dramatically. While Christianity was to remain majority religion for several centuries, Christians were reduced to the status of *dhimmi*, formally on par with Jews whose legal status undoubtedly was ameliorated. Christians were, however, to remain in key positions. This was also true in case of learning, and so they were to play a decisive role in shaping scholarly culture. The best known feature is, of course, their role in the transmission of Greek learning by their activity as translators in the first centuries of the

Islamic era. A parallel to this role of the Christians in this period is the role of the Jews in the transmission of Arabic learning to the Christian West in the late Middle Ages. The Jews as well were to enter this culture in the process of their arabisation. The first works by Jews in Arabic for Jews are thus from the second half of the 9th century. Also from this period are oldest private letters in Arabic, viz. a number of business letters from Egypt written by Jews to Jews.² All this suggests that the arabisation of the Jews was well under way by that time. The scope of the surviving specimens likewise not only indicates the geographical outlines of this arabisation but also that it had penetrated different social strata.

Despite the legal disabilities, which marked the status of the non-Muslims, scholarship provided a neutral space. Two features enhanced this, viz. the method of philosophical instruction and the *majlis*. »Greek learning«, i.e. broadly speaking philosophy, was studied privately for a teacher. In the early period Christian teachers naturally were prominent, later giving way to Muslims. The *majlis* or the salon of a prince or a dignitary was the place where he would gather intellectuals in order to entertain him with their discussions and disputations. Quite frequently the topic was literature but also religious topics were discussed. Also non-Muslims took place in these discussions and this to such an extent that »The Monk in the Emir's *majlis*« became a favourite genre in Medieval Christian literature. Also Jews took part in such debates, as incidental remarks confirm, and at least two manuals preparing Jewish participants debating with Muslims have been preserved just as there are reports of disputations between Christians and Jews and between Muslims and Jews.³

Da'ûd al-Muqammas and Christianity

Among the oldest works by Jews in Arabic either to have come down wholly or in fragments or to be known by their titles are a number of works dealing with Christianity. Of them *Qissat mujâdalat al-usquf*, »The account of the disputation of the priest«, is an anti-Christian pamphlet, which was to become one of the most popular anti-Christian Jewish pamphlets in the Islamic world. It circulated later in Christian Europe in Hebrew garb as *Sefer Nestor ha-Komer*, »The book of Nestor the priest«. Its framework is that an *usquf*, a priest,

has converted to Judaism and now argues against his former faith.⁴ In the 10th century Saadiyah Gaon discussed Christianity in his *Beliefs and opinions*, viz. in the chapter dealing with God's unity, in the context of the eternity of the Torah and in the chapters on Divine retribution as well as in his commentary on Daniel. In the same century the Karaites al-Qirqisânî and Yefet b. Eli and in the 11th century another Karaite, Joseph al-Basîr discussed the Christian doctrines of trinity and incarnation in their works.⁵

Central here is Da'ûd al-Muqammas from Raqqa in what is now northern Syria. What is known of him we have from al-Qirqisânî (early 10th century),

Da'ûd ibn Marwân al-Raqqî known as 'al-Muqammas', was a philosopher. He was at first a Jew, and was then converted to Christianity by a certain Nânâ in Nisibis. This Nânâ, a physician by training, was much respected by the Christians because he was an accomplished philosopher. Al-Muqammas studied with him for many years, became acquainted with the dogmatics and esoteric teachings of Christianity, and mastered the study of philosophy. He wrote two anti-Christian books, in which he polemicised with the Christians. Those two books are well known. He also translated, from the Christians' exegetical books, a commentary on Genesis called *The Book of Creation* and a commentary on Ecclesiastes.⁶

Nânâ has been identified as the Jacobite Nonnus in Nisibis, arch-deacon, commentator and polemicist against the Melkite Thâbit Abû Qurra and known to have been alive in 867. Da'ûd al-Muqammas was obviously not the only Jew to have studied with a Christian in this period. Precisely Thâbit Abû Qurra is reported to have had a Jewish disciple, a certain Judah b. Joseph who also is said to have been from Raqqa. Nor was Da'ûd al-Muqammas the only Jew said to have converted to Christianity in this period. Bishop Timothy I (Baghdad, 8th century) thus mentions in a letter that he had a Jewish novice. It may be that Christianity fascinated intellectual Jews in the early Islamic age, even prompting them to convert.⁷ One interesting point to be raised here is that not only conversion to Islam was possible in this period but obviously also conversion to other religions. This is noteworthy against the background of Islamic law, which only accepts conversion to Islam.

Da'ūd al-Muqammas obviously returned to Judaism later in his life, as it is understood that he wrote anti-Christian works. Fragments from *Al-radd 'alā l-nasârâ min tariq al-qiyâs*, »Logical refutation of Christianity«, have tentatively been identified from the Genizah. Judging from them this was a polemical book in a low style aiming at demonstrating the absurdity of Christianity. Al-Qirqisânî quotes a second book of his, *Kitâb al-Narâ'a*, »The book of urging on to attack«, which seems to have been a review of the history of Christianity and obviously written in a more sober tone. The only work of his substantial parts of which have survived is *'Ishrûn Maqâla*, »Twenty chapters«. This is a work of *Kalâm* constructed upon five main themes, Epistemology, The world, God, Humanity and revelation and an exposition and refutation of other religions. Not only has the bulk of the Arabic original of this work survived, parts of a Medieval Hebrew translation are also available.

'Ishrûn Maqâla is not a polemical work but rather a *Summa Theologica*. But discussions – and refutations – of other religions were the topics of the day, and so it is not surprising to find these elements here. Discussing God's unity, he thus refutes dualism (and every kind of polytheism) as well as Christianity of his day, viz. the Jacobites, the Melkites and the Nestorians. The Christians are reported to say that the One God is »one substance, three hypostases«. The corollary of his discussion is that the Christians have to admit to polytheism or to abandon the trinitarian dogma, a conclusion which al-Kindi also reached in his refutation of Christianity. Of interest is also that his refutation of trinitarianism can only be understood against the background of Christology as elaborated by Thâbit Abū Qurra. One chapter is wholly devoted to refute the idea of incarnation. Peculiar here as well as in his other discussions of Christianity is his adaptation of Christian arguments for Christian tenets to refute these very tenets as well as the lack of arguments drawn from Rabbinical scriptures and from the Jewish-Christian disputes in Antiquity. As Sarah Stroumsa, the editor of *'Ishrûn Maqâla* who also has discussed the concepts of Da'ūd al-Muqammas in detail stresses, he displays everywhere his familiarity with Christian theology of his own days and from his own training. Above was also mentioned that he, according to al-Qirqisânî, translated (no doubt from Syriac into Arabic) commentaries on Genesis and Ecclesiastes, probably

also adapting them for a Jewish readership. Such a recycling of arguments was not unique in the triangular discussions on religion in the Middle Ages. There are, in fact, several examples where Jews were recycling such arguments and just as Christians and Muslims did the same. Defending Judaism Da'ūd al-Muqammas thus argues that Judaism is the true religion since »this Torah exists in Syriac and Persian and Greek and Arabic« – an argument fashioned by Christians against Judaism. Later Maimonides re-tailored this argument to fit in his argument against Islam, disproving the Muslim claim that the Jews eliminated references to Muhammad, since all these translations were made long before the rise of Islam just as it was to be used by Christians against Islam.⁸

Christianity in Ibn Kammūna's *Tanqīh al-abhāth li'l-milal al-thalāth*

In 1258 the Mongols conquered Baghdad. After that Islam was reduced to the status of one of several religions under the rule of pagan and Buddhist invaders some of whose chieftains showed an interest in (Nestorian) Christianity. In 1295, however, the Mongols converted to Islam and Islam was re-instated as state-religion. These were some of the historical settings of the time of 'Izz al-dawlā Sa'd b. Mansūr Ibn Kammūna.

What is known of him is told by his contemporary, the chronicler Ibn al-Fuwaṭī. He mentions that Ibn Kammūna was a prominent Baghdad scholar and author, well versed in science, philosophy and letters as well as in mathematics and logic. He also tells the story of the death of Ibn Kammūna,

In this year (683/1284) it became known that the Jew 'Izz al-dawla Ibn Kammuna had written a volume entitled *The Inquiries into the Three Faiths*, in which he displayed impudence in the discussion of the prophecies. God keep us from repeating what he said. The infuriated mob rioted, and massed to attack his house and to kill him. The amir Tamaskai, prefect of Iraq, Majd al-Din b. al-Athir, and a group of high officials rode forth to Mustansiriya madrasa, and summoned the supreme judge and the [law] teachers to hold a hearing on the affair. They sought Ibn Kammuna but he was hiding. That day happened to be a Friday. The supreme judge set out for

the prayer service but, as the mob blocked him, he returned to the Mustansiriya. Ibn al-Athir stepped out to calm the crowds, but these showered abuse upon him and accused him of being on the side of Ibn Kammuna and of defending him. Then, upon the prefect's order, it was heralded in Baghdad that, early the following morning, outside the city wall, Ibn Kammuna would be burned. The mob subsided, and no further reference to Ibn Kammuna was made. As for Ibn Kammuna, he was put in a leather-covered box and carried to Hilla where his son was then serving as official. There he stayed for a time until he died.

Ibn Kammûna is the author of some thirty works, including handbooks on chemistry and on logic, a mirror for princes, a treatise on the immortality of the soul and a number of philosophical commentaries. Although he is called *faylasûf al-yahûd*, »a Jewish philosopher«, the work most widely read was his commentary on *Talwihât* by the founder of Illuminationism, the school of philosophy founded by the Iranian philosopher al-Suhrawardî (murdered in 1198). There has also been an ongoing discussion whether he converted to Islam or not.⁹

Only two works of his deal wholly or in part with Judaism, viz. a discussion of the differences between Rabbanites and Karaites and *Tanqih al-abhâth li'l-milal al-thalâth*, »The examination of the inquiries into the three faiths«. Written in 1280, the assumption of *Tanqih* is that the three religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, could all be authentic. After an introduction, it is divided into four chapters.¹⁰ The first chapter is a discussion of the nature of prophecy. Among Jews, the question of prophecy was re-opened with the rise of Islam which challenged the traditional Jewish view that prophecy ceased with Malachi. For Ibn Kammûna, the prophet's credential is miracle working, which is performing acts, which are extraordinary in relation to a set of conditions. Of these conditions, the most decisive condition is *tawâtur*, i.e. unbroken, trustworthy transmission. In this chapter he adheres to tenets concerning prophecy, which were common in the period, drawing upon Ibn Sina, al-Ghazâli, Maimonides and Fakhr al-Dîn al-Râzi. In the sequel he discusses the three religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, in chronological order. The space he devotes to Islam indicates, however, that his discussion of Islam is central to him. The method of discussion is

similar in each case. To begin with he presents the basic tenets of each religion. After that he presents arguments against each religion followed by replies to these arguments. Here his method reminds of the Andalusian Ibn Hazm (dead 1064), who in his *Kitâb al-fisal* first described the religions and sects known to him only to refute them.¹¹ Finally he presents a final verdict upon the discussion. Each chapter may thus be said to be the protocol of a fictive disputation in a *majlis*. Peculiar is also that he frequently draws his arguments, both *pros* and *cons* from earlier writings. In this way his discussion may be described as debates and disputations between scholars of different ages.

The discussion of Christianity opens with a description of the basic tenets of Christianity as they appear in the first book of *Kuzari* by Judah ha-Levi. After that follows the Nicene creed. A discussion of differences and agreements between Jacobites, Nestorians and Melkites follows next as well as observations on discrepancies between the gospels. The first objection to Christianity is the concept of »one substance, three hypostases«. In the sequel he is drawing upon *Qissat*, from which Ibn Kammûna has made a number of selections of arguments.¹² Taken together the objections concern the *divinity* of Jesus and they follow the current objections in the Medieval Jewish and Islamic critique of Christianity. Of interest is also that his refutation of *loci classici* of the christological interpretation of passages in the Old Testament basically also is a refutation of an Islamic interpretation of the Old Testament as they also figured in Medieval Jewish-Islamic polemics. Crucial in his objections is that the arguments for the divinity of Jesus (according to Ibn Kammûna) do not rely upon *tawâtur*. As for his discussion of the *historical* Jesus, on the other hand, he admits that in that case there is such a tradition. According to him, Jesus lived and died a Jew, fulfilling the commandments. For him it was Paul who is to be seen as the real founder of Christianity by introducing a number of changes. It was also Paul who introduced the notion of the divinity of Jesus as well as the belief that Jesus was the Messiah. Once more Ibn Kammûna here follows a way of arguing, which has its roots in earlier Medieval Jewish and Islamic critique of Christianity. His final remarks are worth quoting. Discussing the miracles of Jesus and of his apostles as proofs of the veracity of Christianity, he says,

... This is an argument of the convinced, not convincing of certainty, but perhaps it may confirm a prevailing notion once their transmitted tradition is accepted. But if the argument is supported by viewing all the details of the life of Jesus and his companions – their asceticism, piety and endurance of great suffering in establishing the church and organizing their religion so thoroughly – then from the totality of these concomitants it becomes clear that their cause depends on divine support and concern from on high.

Da'ūd al-Muqammas and Ibn Kammūna are at the chronological edges of Jewish discussions of Christianity under Islam. Their discussions are also greatly different. Da'ūd al-Muqammas was a champion of Judaism against Christianity which may have been an attractive alternative for intellectual Jews of the 9th century. Ibn Kammūna, on the other hand, has been hailed as a surprisingly disinterested inquirer into the relationship between the religions. While recent scholarship questions this, he nevertheless leaves space for a positive evaluation of Christianity.¹³ Whether or not Da'ūd al-Muqammas directed his discourse only to Jews remains unknown. Manuscript evidence suggests, however, that only Jews actually studied his works. One possibility is that they at least were used as manuals for Jews taking part in the discussions in the *majlis*. As for Ibn Kammūna, manuscript evidence confirms that *Tanqīh* circulated among Jews, Christians and Muslims. The earliest manuscript is thus of Muslim provenance and copied in 1286 in Shiraz, another manuscript was copied in Mosul in 1297, one manuscript of Jewish provenance was copied in Mardin in 1341 and another one of Jewish provenance was copied before 1353 while one manuscript of Christian provenance was copied in 1354. Written refutations are also known viz. three by Muslims and one by a Christian by name Ibn al-Mahrūma. Of the Muslim refutations, only one seems to be extant today. As for Ibn al-Mahrūma, not much seems to be known about him except that he lived in Mardin and probably was a Jacobite and that his comments seem to have been written in 1333. This is not the place to enter into a discussion of this Christian refutation. It is sufficient to note that Ibn al-Mahrūma discusses the chapters on Judaism and Christianity, polemicising against Judaism. According to one review of this refutation, Ibn al-Mahrūma adopts an aggressive tone attack-

ing Judaism and defending Christianity.¹⁴ One point of difference is the ultimate purpose of Da'ūd al-Muqammas and Ibn Kammūna. The purpose of Da'ūd al-Muqammas was, undoubtedly, to defend Judaism against Christianity. But why did Ibn Kammūna write *Tanqīh*? In the chapter devoted to Judaism, he upheld its authenticity just as he left space for a positive evaluation of Christianity. In the final chapter, i.e. in his discussion of Islam, however, he reaches the conclusion that Islam cannot prove its authenticity. Here it has been suggested that Ibn Kammūna tried to influence the Mongol rulers in a Kuzari-like manner – the book was written in 1280, well before they converted to Islam.¹⁵ Be this as it may, *Tanqīh* is rather a vindication of Judaism *and* Christianity against the claims of Islam and thus reflecting the sectarian milieu of the period just like the works by Da'ūd al-Muqammas reflect the milieu of his period, the second half of the 9th century.

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Notes

¹ Lecture at the *Karl-Johan Illman Memorial Symposium*, Turku, Finland, June 1–June 3, 2005.

² = Gil, 1997, nos. 102–104 (with references to other private letters of the period).

³ Griffith, 1999 (for Christian apologetical and polemical writings) and Sklare, 1999 (for Jewish manuals from Iraq), Gil, 2004, 293 (disputations between Christians and Jews).

⁴ = Lasker & Stroumsa, 1996.

⁵ Jewish critique of Christianity under Islam in the period is treated in Lasker, 1990/1991, and in Stroumsa, 1997. The period is also treated in Rosenkranz, 2004 (non vidi).

⁶ Quoted from Stroumsa, 1989. The discussion here follows her observations.

⁷ Stroumsa, 1995, 183–185, Glick, 2004 (for scholarly interaction), and Gil, 2004, 346 (for conversions to Christianity).

⁸ For the »linguistic« argument in Christian-Muslim polemics, see Ebied & Thomas, 2005, 73, 255 and 273–275.

⁹ Cf. Roggema, 2005, 48f. For what is published of his works, see Roggema, 2005, 48 (footnote 5) and Schreiner, 1996, 477. So far there is no full inventory of his works. Professor Tzvi Langermann (Bar Ilan, Israel) is, however, preparing this together with Dr Sabine Schmidtke (private communication from Professor Langermann in July 2001).

¹⁰ The discussion here draws upon Perlmann, 1967, Perlmann, 1971, Schreiner, 1996 and Roggema, 2005.

¹¹ A Spanish translation is provided in Ibn Hazm, 1932.

¹² This is discussed in Lasker & Stroumsa, 1996, *passim*.

¹³ See here Roggema, 2005, where the ultimate purpose of his inquiry is treated.

¹⁴ = Bacha, 1984 (edition), Ternant, 1985 (review). See also Perlmann, 1965.

¹⁵ Baneth, 1925, 307.