

**A Pearl in a Dark House:
Theology and Politics in the Debate
between Patriarch Timothy I and Caliph al-Mahdi**

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Abstract

The famous debate between the Muslim Caliph al-Mahdi and Patriarch Timothy I of the Church of the East in 781 AD, which was transcribed by the Patriarch afterward in Aramaic and which is retained in various Aramaic and Arabic manuscripts till today, took place over the course of two days (at least in the original Aramaic version). It is the contention of this essay that while the overall organization of the recorded debate is difficult to decipher, there is a shift in focus between the first and second days: while the content of the first day is almost entirely theological, the second day shifts its focus toward political tensions while keeping a theological veneer. This premise will allow me to offer a new, somewhat esoteric, interpretation of Timothy's concluding image of the "pearl in the dark house."

History

Around the year 781 AD,¹ in the newly-founded city of Baghdad, one of the first recorded debates between a Christian and a Muslim allegedly took place.² The Christian was the illustrious Patriarch Timothy I of the Church of the East (the Apostolic Church that has since branched into what are now called the Chaldean and Assyrian Churches). The Muslim was Caliph al-Mahdi, the third Abbasid ruler of Baghdad. Timothy was a frequent advisor to the Caliph and no stranger to his court.³ Indeed, in the midst of the historically critical but oft-forgotten translation movement of Greek texts into Aramaic/Syriac⁴ and then into Arabic, al-Mahdi had commissioned Timothy himself to re-translate Aristotle's *Topics* for him, since earlier attempts had been "barbaric."⁵ Christian or not, Timothy made every attempt to be a true citizen of the empire, respectfully addressing the Caliph as "God-loving King," "victorious King," and "defender of the faithful."⁶

This debate,⁷ which is available in a readable English translation by Alphonse Mingana, should be of great interest to those of many different fields. Most obviously, those interested in ecumenical dialogue will find inspiration in the mutual respect but powerful reasoning of the two interlocutors. Students of

¹ Moffett ventures a "probably 781." Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, vol. 1 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 352; Clint Hackenburg gives other possibilities, in *An Arabic-to-English Translation of the Religious Debate between the Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I and the Abbasid Caliph al-Mahdi* (M.A. Thesis: Ohio State University, 2009), 11-12.

² Similar debates of the time-period are discussed by Kristina Awdish, *The 781 A.D. Debate between Patriarch Timothy I of the Church of the East and Caliph Mahdi* (M.A. Thesis: Sacred Heart Major Seminary, 2010), 7-9. At least one scholar doubts the debate really took place and posits it as a literary composition, but this seems to be a minority view, and irrelevant to my overall thesis. See David Wilmshurst, *The Martyred Church: A History of the Church of the East* (London: East and West Publishing, 2011), 178.

³ He might even be called "minister of Christian affairs" within the empire. See Martin Heimgartner, "Contexts of Christian Education in Baghdad: The Letters of the East Syrian Patriarch Timothy I," in Sidney H. Griffith and Sven Grebenstein, eds. *Christsein in der islamischen Welt. Festschrift für Martin Tamcke zum 60. Geburtstag* (Geburtstag: Herausgegeben, 2015), 176.

⁴ Though the term "Syriac" is often used by scholars to designate the particular dialect of Edessa, I prefer using the term of the language itself, Aramaic. For an account of the translation movement see Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1998), especially 61-68. Also Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 106-125. More specifically to Timothy, see Sebastian P. Brock, "Two Letters of the Patriarch Timothy from the Late Eighth Century on Translations from Greek," in *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 9 (1999): 233-246.

⁵ Timothy's search for a good Greek manuscript of the *Topics* is well described by John Watt, "Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and Political Thought in the Christian Orient and in al-Farabi, Avicenna, and Averroes," in Vasileios Syros, ed., *Well Begun is Only Half Done: Tracing Aristotle's Political Ideas in Medieval Arabic, Syriac, Byzantine, and Jewish Sources* (Tempe, AZ: ACMRS, 2011), 27-28.

⁶ Alphonse Mingana, *Christian Documents in Syriac, Arabic, and Garshuni volume 2: Timothy's Apology for Christianity* (Cambridge: Heffer and Sons, 1928), 17.

⁷ Critical edition by Martin Heimgartner, *Timotheos I., Ostsyrischer Patriarch: Disputation Mit Dem Kalifen Al-Mahdi CSCO 631, Scriptorum Syri 244* (Louvain: Peeters, 2011).

Aristotle or of the history of philosophy in general would do well to remember the till-recently neglected early movement of Christian Aramaic translations and commentaries on Aristotle's works which Timothy was a part of, and which is reflected in the type of reasoning found in the debate. Finally, those concerned with the relationship between theology and politics will find more in this debate than they might expect - indeed, they will find there a paradigm worthy of close study. It is my hope that Patriarch Timothy in particular, and this era of ecumenism, history of philosophy, and theology and politics, in general, gain more scholarly and popular attention.

The debate itself, which was transcribed by the Patriarch afterward in Aramaic and which is retained in various Aramaic and Arabic manuscripts till today,⁸ allegedly took place over the course of two days (at least in the original Aramaic version). The historicity of the debate, however, is not the topic of this essay, and I will refer to its characters and events with existential neutrality (though it seems that the majority consensus that this is an embellished account of a true event is right). Rather, it is the contention of this essay that while the overall organization of the recorded debate is difficult to decipher, there is a shift in focus between the first and second days: while the content of the first day is almost entirely theological, the second day shifts its focus toward political tensions while keeping a theological veneer. This premise will allow me to offer a new, somewhat esoteric, interpretation of Timothy's concluding image of the "pearl in the dark house."

Day 1: Friendly Theology

The first day of the dialogue is introduced by Timothy, in his capacity as narrator, as beginning after he was allowed to speak of "the nature of God and eternity" in the Caliph's court. The challenging question posed by the Caliph (whether it is proper to say that God "married a woman from whom he begat a son"⁹) is reported as something never happening before, implying that the opening address preceding it

⁸ The Aramaic being far older and more thorough, while the Arabic versions are both more compact and more refined in language and content. See Samir Khalil Samir and Wafik Nasry, *The Patriarch and the Caliph: An Eighth-Century Dialogue between Timothy I and al-Mahdi* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2018), xxxvi-xl.

⁹ Mingana, 17.

was expected, or at least not unusual. Up until then, focusing on commonality between the Christian and Moslem faiths in terms of the one, eternal Godhead, was typical; here, the distinction between the two faiths becomes the focus, and this is initiated not by the Patriarch (who, as we will learn, is guarded in such matters) but by the Caliph, who, theology or not, holds all the political power, and indeed the Patriarch's very life, in his hands.

The Patriarch must walk the edge of a knife. For his Church to continue existing, it cannot be persecuted into oblivion, and so he must not provoke the Caliph or explicitly break Islamic law (which includes denying that Mohammed is a prophet).¹⁰ On the other hand, he must give more than adequate responses to the theological challenges posed to him, lest the Christian Faith itself be dismissed as false. If he goes on the attack, his people could be killed; if he shows any weakness, his people have no reason not to convert to Islam. Strong theology is therefore critical for political survival.

The first challenge posed by the Caliph is Christological, even Mariological, posed with the ornamentation our imagination might expect in the court of an Abbasid king: "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."¹¹ Though the meaning of the challenge is obvious, Timothy feigns ignorance: "And who is [it], O God-loving King, who has ever uttered such a blasphemy concerning God?"¹² This response alone is reflective of Timothy's personality: restrained rather than defensive, while at the same time cutting and clear. He does not guess, even when it is quite clear, what the Caliph intends by his words, but rather lets him speak for himself.

Though my purpose here is to investigate the political tension more than the theology itself, it is worth noting that Timothy's answer is not only clever and clear, but perfectly orthodox according to the Calcedonian standard, and betrays no hint of the "Nestorian" heresy after which his Church was later

¹⁰ "One should note that at no time does Timothy become involved in any personal attack against Muhammad. The patriarch, one might imagine, is aware of the prohibition against speaking ill of the Prophet, the Koran, or Islam." Thomas Richard Hurst, *The Syriac Letters of Timothy I (727-823): A Study in Christian-Muslim Controversy* (PhD Dissertation: Catholic University of America, 1986), 214.

¹¹ Mingana, 17.

¹² Mingana, 17.

named. In the same exchange, Timothy affirms that “Christ is the Son of God, and I confess Him and worship Him as such...The very same Christ is the Word born of the Father, and a man born of Mary.”¹³ Soon after he continues that “Christ is not two beings, nor two Sons...there are in Him two natures, one of which belongs to the Word and the other one which is from Mary.”¹⁴ Though he utilizes the Pauline metaphor of “clothing” and the Church of the East’s typical Christological terminology, his explanations all fit within Chalcedonian orthodoxy.¹⁵ Unsurprisingly, Timothy affirms the virgin birth (which is mentioned also in the Koran¹⁶), Mary’s perpetual virginity,¹⁷ and her dormition and assumption.¹⁸

Of course, Christology is only the tip of the iceberg in regards to the question of God having a Son. The question of the Trinity takes up a great deal of the debate as well, since it is not Christ’s humanity that is being questioned but his divinity. How is it that God can be both three and one? It would certainly not go well for Timothy and his people if the Caliph could establish that Christians were polytheists. Thus Timothy’s defense must be thorough and decisive.

What it cannot be, however, is presumptuous. Timothy, in responding to the Caliph’s challenges, does not allow his desire for verbal victory to defeat his intellectual humility. When the Caliph asks about the way in which the Son is begotten of the Father, Timothy’s response begins: “O our King, that He is a Son and one that is born, we learn it and believe in it, but 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.” He continues: “But we may say in 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.”¹⁹

He again walks a fine line: the generations of the Persons of the Trinity are beyond any human understanding, but at the same time must be expressible in some way if there is to be conversation or debate

¹³ Mingana, 17.

¹⁴ Mingana, 19.

¹⁵ See the Preface to Samir and Nasry by Fr. James Schall, SJ, xiv: “Though Timothy is a Nestorian bishop, all of his answers about the two natures and one person in Christ follow the early councils of the Christian Church that dealt with these questions.”

¹⁶ Mingana, 18.

¹⁷ Mingana, 18.

¹⁸ Mingana, 53.

¹⁹ Mingana, 17.

about them at all. He cannot prove the Trinity to the Caliph, but if he has no defense at all, he cannot avoid the charge of polytheism. He is left with “imperfect similes” from nature, as well as Biblical texts. The simile of the sun, its light, and its heat; the simile of the soul, its word, and its life or spirit; the simile of an apple, its scent, and its taste, are all examples that fall short of expressing the Persons of the Trinity, and yet they are examples of threeness proceeding from unity.²⁰ Showing that such a thing is in principle possible is enough, especially in addition to the abundant passages expressing or implying the Trinity in both the Old and New Testaments.²¹ As we shall see, more will be required of him on the second day of the debate.

While other topics in the debate, such as the status of the Jews, the Old Law, or the Christian practice of prayer toward the East, need not concern us here, the question of Mohammed is important both as an essential difference between the two faiths of our interlocutors, as well as the connection between the first and second days of the debate. The topic is introduced abruptly, midway through the first day: “Our God-loving King ended the above subject here, and embarked on another theme and said to me: ‘How is it that you accept Christ and the Gospel from the testimony of the Torah and of the prophets, and you do not accept Muhammad from the testimony of Christ and the Gospel?’”²²

Timothy’s first response is that, unlike Christ, who was foreshadowed and prophesied numerous times before his coming, “so far as Muhammad is concerned I have not received a single testimony either from Jesus Christ or from the Gospel which would refer to his name or to his works.”²³ A general outline of the Caliph’s response is that, first, Mohammed is the Paraclete promised by Christ; the fact that Mohammed is not mentioned more explicitly is that the text of the Old and New Testaments has been corrupted in order to remove these references; Mohammed is also the “rider on a camel” mentioned in Isaiah 21:7; finally, Mohammed is implicitly referenced when God says to Moses in Deuteronomy 18:18

²⁰ Mingana, 25-26.

²¹ Mingana, 23-24.

²² Mingana, 32.

²³ Mingana, 33.

that he will raise up a prophet “from your brethren,” since (in the Caliph’s interpretation) the “brethren” of the Jews are the Arabs.

Timothy responds to the proposal that Mohammed is the Paraclete promised by Christ²⁴ by using a mixture of Scripture quotes, dialectical syllogisms, and even references to the Koran: “If Mohammed were the Paraclete, since the Paraclete is the Spirit of God, Mohammed would, therefore, be the Spirit of God...Further, the Paraclete searches the deep things of God, but Mohammed owns that he does not know what might befall him and those who accept him...Mohammed is therefore not the Paraclete.”²⁵ After this, the Patriarch is justified in reiterating his initial point that “we have not accepted Mohammed because we have not a single testimony about him in our Books.”

At this point the Caliph makes the next claim, that “there were many testimonies but the Books have been corrupted, and you have removed them.”²⁶ Timothy’s response is to ask how the Caliph could know this, and inquires “where is that uncorrupted Book from which you have learned that the Books which we use have been corrupted?”²⁷ He continues, denying there could have been a valid motive for such an act of corruption:

What possible gain could we have gathered from corrupting the Gospel? Even if there was mention of Mohammed made in the Gospel, we would not have deleted his name from it; we would have simply said that Mohammed has not come yet, and that he was not the one whom you follow...we would not have dared to remove the name of Mohammed from our Book if it were found anywhere in it; we would have simply quibbled concerning his right name and person like the Jews do in the case of Jesus.²⁸

In the same vein, even if Christians could have changed their own copies of the Old Testament, they could not have made the Jews change theirs.²⁹

Anti-Jewish sentiment aside (and, frankly, irrelevant to either side’s argument), the next section of the debate showcases Timothy’s remarkable tact and intellectual honesty: “To tell the truth, if I had found in the Gospel a prophecy concerning the coming of Mohammed, I would have left the Gospel for the Kuran,

²⁴ Mingana, 33.

²⁵ Mingana, 33-34.

²⁶ Mingana, 35.

²⁷ Mingana, 35.

²⁸ Mingana, 36.

²⁹ Mingana, 36.

as I have left the Torah and the Prophets for the Gospel. And our King said to me: ‘Do you not believe that our Book was given by God?’ And I replied to him: ‘It is not my business to decide whether it is from God or not.’”³⁰ This is no mere evasion on Timothy’s part. He is putting himself at serious risk: after stating that he would, in fact, convert to Islam if he were convinced of its truth, and then claiming (tactfully) that “it is not his business” whether or not the Koran is from God, he proceeds to argue that he does not see a reason to believe it is from God, since it was not confirmed “by a single sign or miracle,”³¹ which is the case for the Gospel. Rather than stating a flat denial of the divine origin of the Koran (which would have placed him in legal trouble), he makes his argument and allows the Caliph to draw his own conclusion.

The arguments that follow, concerning Mohammed being the “rider on a camel” of Isaiah, and the Arabs being the “brethren” of Deuteronomy 18:18,³² are given similarly thorough answers by Timothy, and are clear enough from the text without my commentary, as is Timothy’s Scripture-based argument that there is to be no prophet following the Christ.³³ The first day ends with the Caliph being called off on the business of ruling his kingdom, and the Patriarch-narrator of the debate praising him for his wisdom in administration and praying for his long life. He had shown intellectual integrity, openness to the Caliph’s arguments, tact in responding with politeness, and intelligence in answering with gusto. The debate at no point became personal or even emotional, and as an intellectual exercise, ended serenely. The second day awaits.

Day 2: Politics and Theology

The second day’s debate is introduced by Timothy differently than the first. Whereas day one had been preceded by the Patriarch speaking of the nature of God and his eternity, day two is given this heading: “The next day I had an audience of his Majesty. Such audiences had constantly taken place previously, sometimes for the affairs of the State, and some other times for the love of wisdom and learning.”³⁴ Here political affairs are mentioned in the immediate context of the day’s debate, and it is politics that

³⁰ Mingana, 36.

³¹ Mingana, 36.

³² Mingana, 37 and 50, respectively.

³³ Mingana, 38-39.

³⁴ Mingana, 60.

overshadows, much more than on the first day, every issue discussed. Significantly, the Caliph had requested Timothy bring a copy of the Gospels on the second day. We are no longer in the abstract world of God and eternity - now it is religion in the concrete, on paper and enfleshed in empires, that is our topic.

It is no surprise, then, that the question of Mohammed comes up almost immediately. As the four evangelists are named as authors of the four Gospel books, but the ultimate author is God, “in the same way,” says Timothy, “the Muslims say that they have received the Koran from Mohammed, but since Mohammed received knowledge and writing from an angel,” the ultimate authorship belongs to God.³⁵ Here the Caliph asks the Patriarch point-blank: “What do you say about Mohammed?”³⁶

Timothy’s answer is clever: without directly affirming or denying Mohammed’s prophetic status, since both would be fatal (the first religiously, the second perhaps literally), he praises him for four different reasons. First, Mohammed taught the doctrine of one God, for which reason Timothy can say that “he walked in the path of the prophets.” Second, and similarly to the prophets, Mohammed drove people away from bad works and encouraged them to do good works. Third, he followed the prophets in pushing against idolatry and polytheism. Fourth, “Mohammed taught about God, His Word, and His Spirit, and since all the prophets had prophesied about God, His Word, and His Spirit, Mohammed walked, therefore, in the path of all the prophets.”³⁷ Anyone, in Timothy’s rhetoric, who fulfills any of these four criteria, can be praised insofar as they are similar to the prophets of the Old Testament.

Timothy’s evasive enthusiasm, however, goes further than our sensibilities might approve today:

Who will not praise, honor, and exalt the one who not only fought for God in words, but showed also his zeal for Him in the sword? As Moses did with the children of Israel when he saw that they had fashioned a golden calf which they worshipped, and killed all of those who were worshipping it, so also Mohammed evinced an ardent zeal towards God, and loved and honored him more than his own soul, his people and his relatives...those who worshipped idols and not God he fought and opposed, and showed to them the torments of hell and of the fire which is never quenched and in which all evildoers burn eternally.³⁸

³⁵ Mingana, 60.

³⁶ Mingana, 61.

³⁷ Mingana, 61.

³⁸ Mingana, 61.

It is not only in his monotheism, but specifically in his violent assault of pagan nations, that Mohammed is to be praised, according to Patriarch Timothy. This is, of course, the equivalent to praising the zeal not only of someone loving democracy, but waging wars with civilian casualties in order to bring about new democratic regimes, which of course we in the civilized West of today would unequivocally condemn.

This does, under any standard, seem to be an over-extension on Timothy's part, and the Caliph attempts to catch him in a corner: "You should, therefore, accept the words of the prophet."³⁹ This alone, in the context of the debate considered as a pedagogical document, can be instructive: those living and defending their faith in the midst of a different culture should not fawn over their rulers, even while being polite.

Timothy has enough philosophical training to answer this question with another question: "Which words?" The Caliph replies: "That God is one and that there is no other one besides him." Timothy affirms that he accepts this, but has learned it from the Torah, without need for Mohammed. The Caliph retorts that he does not believe that God is one if he believes that God is three.⁴⁰ This leads to another extended debate about the Trinity, somewhat more technical than the first day's, in which the nature of causality, plurality, and number, are discussed.

While these details need not concern us here, the Patriarch adds to his previous pieces of evidence for the Trinity, this time from the Koran itself: "it is also possible that the three letters placed before some Surahs in the Kuran, as I have learned, such as A L R and T S M and Y S M and others, which are three in number, refer also in your Book to God, His Word, and His Spirit."⁴¹ This is remarkable for two reasons. The most obvious is that a Christian Patriarch is making use of mysterious sets of letters in the Koran in order to provide evidence for the Trinitarian Nature of God. What is equally of interest is where this claim leads.

³⁹ Mingana, 62.

⁴⁰ Mingana, 62.

⁴¹ Mingana, 67-68.

The Caliph asks the Patriarch: “And what did impede the Prophet from saying that this was so, that is that these letters clearly referred to God, His Word, and His Spirit?” The Patriarch’s response introduces, for the first time in this debate, the idea of esoteric writing:

The obstacle might have come from the weakness of those people who would be listening to such a thing. People whose ears were accustomed to the multiplicity of idols and false gods could not have listened to the doctrine of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, or to that of one God, His Word, and His Spirit. They would have believed that this also was polytheism. This is the reason why your Prophet proclaimed openly the doctrine of one God, but that of the Trinity he only showed it in a somewhat veiled and mysterious way...he showed it symbolically by means of the three letters that precede the Surahs.⁴²

This concern for hiding the full truth due to the ignorance of the uneducated, and expressing it in a way manifest only to the learned, is a key component of (among other things) what later came to be Averroism, where it took its most extreme form of “two truths.” We need not accuse the Patriarch of Averroism, of course, since the Gospel writers say something analogous about the parables of Christ.⁴³

This is not simply a political point, however. Though the Patriarch introduces the notion of esoteric writing in his claim that Mohammed implicitly taught about the Trinity, there is a deeper theological point to be made. The next large portion of the debate is another defense of Trinitarian theology, but one which continually alternates between natural metaphors for the Trinity and discussions of the ineptitude of natural metaphors. At some point the Caliph explicitly asks “Why then do you wish to demonstrate with bodily demonstrations One who has no body and is not composed?” To which Timothy replies “Because there is no other God like Him, from whom I might draw a demonstration as to what is a being that has no beginning and no end.”⁴⁴

This naturally leads to an accusation of total skepticism, since if we should not use natural analogies in describing God, and natural analogies are all we have, then we would be “in complete ignorance of God...If we remove Him from such demonstrations and do not speak of Him through them, with what and

⁴² Mingana, 68.

⁴³ For example, in Luke 8:10. Averroism in the context of the debate is discussed by the Preface of Schall in Samir and Nasry, xiii.

⁴⁴ Mingana, 70.

through what could we figure in our mind Him who is higher than all image and likeness?”⁴⁵ There is an analogy even within these analogies: just as the great prophets and allegedly even Mohammed could not reveal the full truth of the Trinity due to the limitations of uneducated people, God cannot fully reveal himself to any human intellect, due to the limitations inherent in it being tied to the senses: “If God appeared and spake to the ancient in bodily similitudes and symbols, we with stronger reason find ourselves completely unable to speak of God and to understand anything concerning Him except through bodily similitudes and metaphors.”⁴⁶ Thus even though politics and theology work on different planes, there is a real similarity between them. The same goes for both reason and revelation as they are used in theology: there is, by necessity, something hidden and something revealed in everything they say.

The Introduction and Conclusion

I think we can broadly view the first day of this debate as “friendly theology” with political pressure in the immediate background, and the second day as a more (but not entirely) explicit discussion of the political relevance of religion. Both days, however, are framed by Timothy’s introductory narration (in the form of greeting the correspondent of the letter which contains the account of the debate - a cleric named Sergius⁴⁷) and the conclusion of the second day. Before concluding this essay, I will briefly discuss, first, the introduction, then the image near the end of the second day of the pearl lost in a dark house, and thirdly, the final exchange between the Caliph and Timothy.

Timothy begins his account of the debate by expressing frustration: “I feel repugnance, on account of the futility of the outcome of the work.”⁴⁸ As the reader knows, while reading Plato’s *Republic*, that despite his best attempts at describing justice, Socrates ends up executed by the city, the reader of this debate knows that, despite the debate, not only is the Caliph not converted to the Christian faith, but the

⁴⁵ Mingana, 70.

⁴⁶ Mingana, 80.

⁴⁷ Mingana, 15.

⁴⁸ Mingana, 15-16.

Christian Church in his empire is still in the same precarious position.⁴⁹ The Patriarch therefore feels repugnance in writing the account, but still does it. The relationship between philosophy (or, in this case, a non-ruling religion) and the state follows a similar course. While its interactions with the state are ultimately losing battles, to not interact at all would be much worse. Timothy can't win the debate in any meaningful way, but if he refuses to debate, his loss will be all the greater. He can't convert the Caliph, but he can't refuse to answer for his own theology. Hence his feeling of futility and repugnance, but also his writing of the account despite them.

The debate takes place in this context, over the course of the two days described above. It concludes with two significant exchanges. The first is the image of the pearl that I've alluded to already, and deserves to be quoted at length:

O our victorious King, in this world we are all of us as in a dark house in the middle of the night. If at night and in a dark house a precious pearl happens to fall in the midst of people, and all become aware of its existence, every one would strive to pick up the pearl, which will not fall to the lot of all but to the lot of one only, while one will get hold of the pearl itself, another one of a piece of glass, a third one of a stone or of a bit of earth, but every one will be happy and proud that he is the real possessor of the pearl. When, however, night and darkness disappear, and light and day arise, then every one of those men who had believed that they had the pearl, would extend and stretch his hand towards the light, which alone can show what every one has in hand. He who possesses the pearl will rejoice and be happy and pleased with it, while those who had in hand pieces of glass and bits of stone will only weep and be sad, and will sigh and shed tears. In the same way we children of men are in this perishable world as in darkness. The pearl of the true faith fell in the midst of all of us, and it is undoubtedly in the hand of one of us, while all of us believe that we possess the precious object.⁵⁰

The Caliph retorts, in consistency with the Patriarch's own image, that "the possessors of the pearl are not known in this world." To which Timothy replies that they are partially known "by good works and pious deeds, and by the wonders and miracles that God performs through those who possess the true faith. As the lustre of a pearl is somewhat visible even in the darkness of the night, so also the rays of the true faith shine to some extent even in the darkness and the fog of the present world."⁵¹

⁴⁹ The Church during Timothy's time, despite his seemingly intimate place in the court of the Caliph, went through persecutions of varying intensity. See Griffith, 48 and Wilmshurst, 145.

⁵⁰ Mingana, 88.

⁵¹ Mingana, 89.

This image seems to have many implications. The darkness of the house in which the pearl is dropped allows the Caliph to retain the dignity of his office despite the fact that the Patriarch had now bested him two days in a row in the debate. Of course, what we are reading is Timothy's admittedly biased, or even embellished, account, if not a complete fabrication. What may be happening is that Timothy, in providing the image of the pearl, is advising his Christian audience to give their theological adversaries a similar opportunity to avoid embarrassment. If the political situation they find themselves in is too tense, even a purely theological victory could have deadly consequences, and so it could be prudent for them to soften their own victory by using a similar tactic in their own situations. Timothy might be showing, with the example he illustrates in his account of the debate, how not only to win a debate, but win graciously.⁵² This graciousness takes the form, in this case, of an esoteric story told to comfort one who has lost the verbal battle.

Because images can be viewed from many different angles, Timothy allows himself, as the clear victor of the debate, one last, almost contradictory, use of the image for his own satisfaction: "God has placed the pearl of his faith before all of us like the shining rays of the sun, and everyone who wishes can enjoy the light of the sun."⁵³ If this seems to imply the exact opposite meaning of the image of the dark house, it does. No longer is the true Faith a matter of mystery, unknown until the final revelation of God, but something as blatantly obvious as the shining sun. And yet the Caliph leaves it be. Either he is too tired of the debate to continue, or, if this is the account of a real debate, this last sentence was a pure interpolation on the part of the Patriarch.

This image, clever as it is, does not conclude the account of the debate. The final topic, which seems entirely out of place, is that of miracles, and it is introduced by the Caliph: "Miracles have been and are sometimes performed even by unbelievers."⁵⁴ Timothy responds laconically, citing the examples of

⁵² See Wilmshurst, 179: "[The debate] also provides - and this was surely Timothy's intention - a model of how Muslims and Christians should discuss their differences with one another." See also Hackenburg, 10: "Timothy's debate functioned as a medieval guidebook for tactfully criticizing Islam and Muhammad, while defending and encouraging the doctrines of Christianity," as well as Hurst, 252.

⁵³ Mingana, 90.

⁵⁴ Mingana, 90.

Moses and the Egyptian sorcerers, as well as Peter and Simon Magus, that the miracles performed by unbelievers are deceptive and possibly originate in demonic power, and, moreover, that they are always defeated by the true miracles of God. After hearing this, the Caliph arises and goes to his daily business.

With this seemingly random final question, Timothy reveals the true concern of the political leader, which is power. Having been defeated, the Caliph cannot conceivably concede the point to the Patriarch – since if he did, not only his life but his very empire would be at stake. Instead, he wonders whether even one who holds to a false faith, who has something other than the pearl in his hands, can still accomplish mighty deeds, such as are useful to retain political power. The Patriarch’s reasoning and Scriptural citations demonstrating otherwise, the Caliph has nothing left that concerns him. Truth remains truth, and power remains power, and each goes on to his work with repugnance, aware of the futility of the work.

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