Christian and Muslim Dialogues: The Religious Uses of a Literary Form in the Early Islamic Middle East

David Bertaina
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In his first book David Bertaina, assistant professor of religion in the University of Illinois' History Department (Springfield), makes an important contribution to our knowledge of Christian-Muslim relations in the first five centuries of the Islamic era. Also a scholar with the Institute of Catholic Culture in McLean, VA, he is critical of many interreligious dialogues today, as they tend to be straightjacketed by liberal ideals of tolerance and neutrality. The result is that, unlike the robust and dynamic dialogue literature in the early centuries of Islamdom that took "seriously the truth claims of its participants in matters of faith and reason," much of which passes now for interfaith conversation avoids what is most precious to each side in the name of "neutrality." Another lesson we can draw from the past is the importance of highlighting the issue of power when different communities of faith come together to de-

bate. Not surprisingly, much interfaith dialogue today, he notes, can often feel "oppressive" to Muslims, at least to some extent, as it did for Christians living under Islamic rule – even in the heyday of cosmopolitan Abbasid Baghdad.

An historian and Semitic languages specialist, Bertaina trains his sights on the ancient Near Eastern literary genre of interreligious dialogue, which can be traced back to Plato and other early Greek writers, and which Christians leveraged in their own polemics with Jews in the fifth and sixth centuries CE. Between the second and fifth centuries AH, both Muslims and Christians used the dialogue genre to communicate their own convictions about religious truth, in both apologetic and polemical modes. While they were mostly addressing their own communities, they also sought to persuade the religious other. In fact, this was a discourse that also functioned as "a means to fulfill epistemic commitments such as that of Christians to evangelization and Muslims to mission (*da'wa*)" (p. 3).

Much has been written over the last couple of decades about the various manuscripts that scholars have unearthed, edited, and commented. Leaders in the field include Sidney Griffith, David Thomas, Jean-Marie Gaudeul, Barbara Roggema, and others. Among this vast literature so far, over twenty Muslim-Christian dialogues in Arabic or Syriac from the seventh to the eleventh century have come to light, from either perspective. Bertaina's goal here is to find patterns among these texts as he takes a step back and engages in comparative work.

The author has chosen to classify these texts according to seven different purposes – hence, seven chapters with a final one that briefly examines two sets of interreligious dialogues written by two Christians in the two centuries leading up to the Crusades. That last chapter is poorly named, in my estimation ("The End of Dialogue?"). True, the genre was clearly waning by then, but the chapter is mostly about summarizing the book's findings.

The first purpose Bertaina proposes is "Dialogue as Christological Debate," where he seeks to analyze this literary genre's form and content, trace its historical evolution, and show how Christians used it before the Islamic era. In so doing he offers a wonderful summary of the differences among the three main branches of Christians in this part of the world (pp. 34-36): the Melkites (the ex-Byzantine, Orthodox Christians who later lived under Islamic rule), the Jacobites (the Coptic and Syriac-speaking Christians of "West Syria"), and the "Church of the East" (the Nestorians who had lived in the Sasanian Empire). And yes, the tradition of Greek and Syriac disputations on the nature of Jesus Christ among these schools of thought in the fifth and sixth centuries have been well documented. Through their *kalām*-like forms of ar-

gumentation, they lay the groundwork for emerging dialogues in the next century between them and the Muslims.

Bertaina's next chapter may well be his most interesting contribution: "Dialogue as Divine Exegesis: The Case of the Qur'an." No doubt, a good portion of the Qur'an is written in dialogue style, in which God debates with Jews, Christians, and polytheists, upbraiding them for their false beliefs and admonishing them to accept His message. But as he shows through a variety of passages using different registers, the Qur'an likely gives voice to authentic debates both in Makka and Madina between the Christians and the new believers in its message. At the very least, this indicates that Christians were a presence to be reckoned with, and more numerous than it has been generally recognized. Finally, in those discussions about Christology, the Qur'an also displays some knowledge about the wider intra-Christian disagreements.

In the third chapter ("Dialogue as Conquest and Conversion"), Bertaina argues that although Christians were not dramatically affected by the sweeping Muslim conquests and the campaigns of Islamization did not start till the end of the Umayyad period (without yielding many conversions until the next century), Christian dialogues of the period reveal a noticeable anxiety about conversions. Their function, therefore, is to strengthen ordinary believers' faith and knowledge and equip them to answer Muslim polemics.

On the Muslim side, Bertaina offers five examples of proto-Shi'i dialogue texts throughout the book in which "the virtues of Ali" and the other imams easily defeat Christian teachings; however, these have the obvious goal of sidelining Sunni claims. Mainstream Islamic dialogues that found their way into Ibn Ishaq's *Sīrah*, whether about the Christians of Najran or the legend of the monk Bahira, for example, function to establish a historiography that competes with the Christian one (chapter 4).

As he combs through various dialogues belonging to the "theological education and didactic," the "hagiographic," or the "scriptural reinterpretation" modes, one event particularly stood out for medieval Eastern Christians: the debates between Theodore Abu Qurra, Bishop of Harran (Melkites), and the Caliph al-Ma'mun and several Muslim scholars at his court over two days in 829. More than anything else, they depict a passionate and yet courteous dialogue, one in which both sides know and search the other's scriptures to better advocate for their own convictions. This is precisely the message Bertaina wants to commend to his readers in a book that is both solidly researched and skillfully organized.

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