# Christian Apologetics in An Islamic Milieu, Ancient, Yet New

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**Abstract**
This article examines the central theological conflicts between Christianity and Islam, focusing on the nature of God (Trinity vs Tawhid) and the significance of Jesus Christ. It proposes a proactive biblically based apologetic that addresses the Islamic rejection of the crucifixion, resurrection, and the nature of God, arguing that these are not merely historical facts but essential components of divine grace. The methodology involved in apologetics usually employs distinct methods to defend and compare religious truth-claims, focusing on the nature of God, the person of Jesus Christ, and the authority of scriotures. In this article, presuppositinal and deconstructive approach features mostly in the works of our chosen protagonists and antagonists. This method challenges the foundational assumptions of the opposing worldview, rather than just debating individuals.

**Key words:** Christianity, Islam, Apologetics, Trinity, Tawhid

## 1.0. INTRODUCTION

By reason of history and geographical affinity, Christianity and Islam have succinct theological choices through which they define themselves politically in their relations with one another. The rapid rise and expansion of Islam in the 7th and 8th centuries placed Christian thinkers in a position they were not accustomed to. Christianity had defined itself from its nascence against classical paganism on one hand, and Judaism on the other, but the religion of the Prophet of Arabia demanded a different approach (Gokum, 2022). The damage in the relationship between Christianity and Islam is further accentuated by the claim of Islam as the 'restoration' of the Abrahamic faith to its pristine purity; therefore, a correction of both Judaism and Christianity (Cucarella, 2014). Both Christianity and Islam have had complex histories of confrontation and coexistence, which have influenced how they have understood each other over the centuries. Apart from cultural differences, both religions from their very beginning were confronted with schism occasioned by theological and political conflicts. In Christianity, this became manifest mainly with the split between

Eastern Orthodox Church and Western or Latin Roman Catholicism. The Protestant Reformation of the 16th century, brought another dimension to the saga.

In the Islamic tradition, the Sunni and Shia sectarian divide is the major split, but many other contesting groups and factions have risen through the ages (Sadiq, 2013).

According to Diego Cucarella, Carl Heinrich Becker was probably one of the first scholars to point out the extent to which "key issues relating to the history of Islamic dogmas were connected with Christian apologetics and polemics against Islam." (Cucarella, 20). Islam, he says, as the latter of the two faith traditions developed both in confrontation, and conversation with Christianity. Expanding on the same topic, he says, Sydney Griffith and others explored how Christian writers in an Arabic milieu developed their own theological discourses and doctrines in parallel, and almost in tandem with the Islamic thoughts of the same epoch and vice versa. The Christians and the Muslims use the "same religious idioms as employed by their Muslim interlocutors and counterparts" (Cucarella, 2014).

It is "difficult to emphasise any one political or theological type of encounter that is dominant between the two faiths and their diverse civilization, although, certain themes have continued to recur as prevailing points of debate and polemics over the centuries" (Sadiq, 2013, p.1). While theological discussions have an inner life of their own, they cannot be taken out of the context of the political and sociological milieu that define them (Sadiq, 2013).

Our intention in this article is to provide a glimpse into the different kinds of *conversations* and writings that took place between Christian and Muslim authors in the so-called 'polemical wars' where each religious tradition tries to prove its superiority or over the other, by the condemnation of the doctrines and practices of that religion.

The word 'apologetic' can be seen as the systematic, rational defence of a specific belief system or doctrine. It stems from the Greek word *apologia* which means a speech in defence of, but it is commonly used to refer to the intellectual defence of one's faith or doctrine.

The research question that this article seeks to address is how do Christian apologists evaluate the historical transmission of the Qur'an and conversely, how do Muslim apologists approach the textual integrity of the New Testament and Christian doctrines linked to the New Testament? Another issue to be addressed here, relates to how Muslim scholars argue against the Crucifixion 9Surah 4; 157), and how Christian apologists defend its historical and theological necessity.

## 2.0. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework for Christian-Muslim apologetics involves two distinct often conflicting approaches to truth, Scripture and the nature of God. These focuses on the person of Jesus Christ. While both faith traditions use systematic, rational arguments to defend their conviction (s), they operate on different theological foundations. Christianity focuses on The Trinity, Jesus Christ and the atonement, while Islam emphasizes absolute monotheism (*Tawhid*) and the prophetic, rather than the divine nature of Jesus Christ.

## 3.0. CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM APOLOGETICS

The Christian-Muslim polemical debates that occurred in the early years of Islam with Christianity were mostly in written form through letters (Sadiq, 2013), and not the conventional understanding of the word debate. "The tandem metaphor is indeed a better image to describe Christian-Muslim theological conversation during the formative years of Islam" (Cucarella, 2014). An example is the claim of Islamic *prophetology* that,

> Mohammed was the seal of a line of prophets that included Abraham, Moses and Jesus, these Christian writers constructed a scheme of negative criteria 'devised specifically to exclude Islam for any claim to be the true religion.' some of these criteria—such as the requirement that prophets be authenticated by miracles—affected in Muslims' own vision of the prophet Mohammed, eventually transforming him into a worker of miracles comparable or even superior to those of the previous prophets. But also important for our purpose here is that these criteria in themselves reflects the fact that Christians were already thinking inter-religiously and rectifying previous positions. The vehement rejection of the 'sword' on the part of these Christian apologists as being incompatible with true religion contrasts with the apparent ease that earlier churchmen like Eusebius of Caesarea (d. 339) or Augustine of Hippo (d.430) showed in welcoming the Christianization of the Roman Empire as a sign of divine favour and as a platform for spreading the Christian message (Cucarella, p, 23, 2014).

The point of significance from the foregoing is that "Christianity and Islam have always seen and understood themselves in theological opposition to each other. This has happened in times of political and military confrontations and in periods of social *convivencia*, and it's no less true in today's globalized world than it was in 9$^{th}$ century cosmopolitan Baghdad or 11$^{th}$ century multi-religious Cordoba" (Cucarella, 2014). as the following discourses will show.

### 3.1. John of Damascus

We begin with no other than the eloquent John of Damascus (d.749) who in the Latin West became an icon with his authoritative dogmatic composition of massive theological work *The Fountain of Knowledge* that was translated into

Latin in the twelfth century.[1] His refutation of Islam is special because it was the first serious response by the *patristic* to the new religion. (David & Valkenberg, 18). In his scathing attack on Islam found in his work *De Haeresibus* he called Islam "the deceptive superstition of Ishmaelites and the forerunner of the Antichrist" (Gokum, 2022) He touched on issues such as the divinity of Jesus Christ, His death and resurrection, the Islamic scripture and Muhammad's claim to prophethood, which were taken up by later Christian writers of the subsequent generations.

On the refutation of the Tradition from the Qur'an about Jesus's divinity, his crucifixion and death, John says:

> … He says that there exists one God maker of all, who was neither begotten nor has he begotten. He says that Christ is the Word of God, and his spirit, created and a servant, and that he was born without a seed from Mary, the sister of Moses and Aaron. For he says, the Word of God and the spirit entered Mary and she gave birth to Jesus who was a prophet and a servant of God. And that the Jews, having themselves violated the Law, wanted to crucify him and after they arrested him, they crucified his shadow, but Christ himself they say, was not crucified nor did he die; for God took him up to himself into heaven because he loved him (Q. 4: 157).
>
> And he says this, that when Christ had ascended into heaven God asked Him: 'O Jesus, didst thou say: 'I am the Son of God and God '? And Jesus he says, answered: 'Be merciful to me, Lord. Thou knowest that I did not say this and that I do not scorn to be thy servant. But sinful men have written that I made this statement, and they have lied about me and have fallen into error.' And he says God answered Him: 'I know that thou didst not make this statement (Q 5: 116-118).'

On the refutation of the Tradition that the scripture came down to the prophet of Islam he says:

> But when we ask, 'And who is there to testify that God gave him a scripture? Or which of the prophets foretold that such a prophet would rise up? They are at a loss. And we tell them that Moses received the Law on Mount Sinai, with God appearing in the sight of all the people in cloud and fire, and darkness and storm; and that all the prophets from Moses onwards foretold the coming of Christ and how Christ, God and incarnate Son of God, was to come and be crucified and die and rise again, and how He was to be judge of the living and the dead.

[1] John of Damascus in the 8th century provided the first coherent treatment of Islam. His encounter with Muslims in the Umayyad administrative and military centre of Damascus led him to regard Islam not as an alien tradition but as a Christian heresy.

> The when we say: And how is it that this prophet of yours did not come in the same way, with others bearing witness to him? ... They answered that God does as He pleases. 'This' 'we say we also know, but we are asking how the scripture came down to your prophet.' Then they reply that the scripture came down to him while he was asleep. Then we jokingly say to them that as long as he received the scripture in the sleep and did not actually experience the operation, then the popular adage applies to him ... (Gokum, p, 162, 2022).

On Mutual accusation: 'Associators' versus 'Mutilators' John of Damascus says:

> Moreover, they call us 'Associators', because they say, we introduce an associate alongside God by declaring Christ to be the Son of God and God. 'The prophets and the scriptures have delivered this to us and you, as you persistently maintain, accept the prophets. So, if we wrongly declare Christ to be the Son of God, it is they who taught this and handed it down to us.' Some of them say that we have added such things, by allegorising the prophets, while others say that the Hebrew deceived us out of hatred by writing in the name of the Prophets so that we might be lost.
>
> And again, we say to them: 'As long as you say that Christ is the Word of God and Spirit, why do you accuse us of being Associators?' For the word and the spirit are inseparable from that in which they naturally have existence. If, therefore, He [Christ] is in God as His Word, then it's obvious that He too is God. If, however, He is outside of God, then according to you, God is without word and without spirit. Consequently, by avoiding the introduction of an associate with God, you have mutilated Him. For it would be far better for you to say that He has an associate than to mutilate Him and introduce [Him] as a stone or a piece of wood or some other inanimate object. Thus, you speak untruthfully when you call us 'Associators'; we call you 'Mutilators' of God.[2]

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[2] The Qur'an states that Jesus is Allah's 'word' which he cast into Mary, and 'spirit' from him (Q. 4:171). Jesus is also called a word from Allah in Q. 3: 39, 45.

Some see in these titles a mark of distinction for Jesus (*Īsā*), among the many messengers of Allah. There are Christian missionaries who have made much of these terms, claiming they point to the uniqueness of the qur'anic Christ and using them as springboard for evangelism.

The phrase "Jesus the word of God" according to Islamic tradition is understood that Jesus came into being by the 'word' of Allah and not because he's the Word of Allah. In the same vein 'Jesus' the 'spirit' of Allah is to be understood as Jesus was brought into being by Allah's creative blowing *rūh* (spirit). See Matthew Bennett, "Muslim Insider Ecclesiology Part 2", *Journal of Biblical Missiology*, (July 20, 2020), https://biblicalmissiology.org/2020/07/20/muslim-insider-ecclesiology-2/, accessed Wednesday 14 September 2025.

The theological implication of the way that John of Damascus treats Islam in *De Haeresbus* shows the *heresiological* context in which he refers to Islam but that also alludes some reference to Judaism. He uses a Christological criterion to religious phenomena; thus, he does not differentiate the heresies in Judaism and Islam, since to him both are deviation from Christological truth. This construction of orthodox Christian identity determines his approach to Islam, which became the standard of judgement by Christian theologians of Islam over the centuries (Davids &Valkenberg, 2013).

A pit fall of John of Damascus' argument is that, not resisting the temptation to ridicule the prophet of Islam, whom his interlocutors said had received his revelation when he was asleep; he points out that even Muhammad could not testify to the circumstances in which he received God's message. He said "a sleeping recipient is the exact opposite of a trustworthy recipient" (Davids & Valkenberg, 2013), forgetting the theological implication of this charge on his own faith. The Old and New Testaments are replete with ideas that "God reveals the God-self to people when they were asleep." (Davids & Pim Valkenberg, 2013) Besides, that Muhammad was asleep during the *Laylāt al-Qadr*[3] is used by Muslims to argue that he [Muhammad] could not have contributed anything of his own to this revelation since he was asleep (Swanson, 2013).

3.2. The Discussion between the Caliph al-Mahdī and the Catholicos Timothy
The religious apologetics between the 'Abbasid Caliph al-Mahdī (d.785) and the Great Catholicos of the (Nestorian) Church of the East Timothy (d. 823) has been described as the most famous of the early exchange between the two great religions (Swanson, 2013) The discussion below is reckoned to have taken place around 781. The Syriac report, which Timothy is said to have sent to his friend, the priest Sargīs is dated around 786 and 795. Various copies of the text were produced both in Syriac and Arabic for the latter extending back to the 10th century. The text is of great importance for the history of Christian-Muslim encounter not least for the fact that for first time, there was a direct and sophisticated Christian response to *al-Nīsā* Q.4:157, but that it answers the Caliph' and Muslims' question about Christians' veneration of the cross and Timothy in his response naturally spoke of the redemptive importance of the death of the Son of God in the flesh. The Caliph asked Timothy if this means that God could die. After hearing Timothy's careful exposition and distinction between Christ's divinity and humanity, the Caliph quoted *al-Nīsā* 4:157, 'they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but he made a likeness for them' (Swanson, 2013). Timothy's response to this is summarised as follows: The Qur'an itself bears witness to the fact of Jesus's death, while the prophets

[3] *Laylāt al-Qadr*, variously rendered in English as the night of Decrees, Night of Power, Night of Value, Night of Destiny, Night of Measures, in Islamic belief, the night when the first verses of the Qur'an were revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. It is one of the nights of the last ten days of Ramadan, the month of fasting for Muslims.

foretold the manner of this death. To show that the Qur'an bears witness to the fact of Jesus' death he quotes two verses: *Sūrat al-Maryam* 19:33, where Jesus said: 'Peace be upon me the day I was born and the day I die, and the day I am raised up alive!' And *al-Imrān* 3:55, 'When God said, 'Jesus, I will cause thee to die and will raise thee to me' (Swanson, 2013).

The Caliph is ready with a response: Jesus had not yet died but will die in the future. To this Timothy responded as follows: "And likewise, he has not yet ascended into heaven, and he has not been raised up alive, but will ascend and be raised later! But you have it that he ascended into heaven alive. He did not ascend until he died and was raised, as we saw earlier. So, if he ascended then he had probably died [...]" (Swanson, 2013).

According to Timothy the sequence of the occurrence of the key verbs in the narrative: death, resurrection and ascension, establishes the logical and temporal sequence. It is therefore on qur'anic grounds that he argues. One cannot he says; affirm the ascension of Jesus into heaven without also affirming that his death had already occurred. He also referred to the Old Testament prophets who foretold the death of Jesus from Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Zachariah.[4]

The second argument of Timothy deals with the mysterious word *Shubbihā lahūm*. According to the Syriac debate narrative, the Caliph al-Mahdī responded to Timothy's reference to the Old Testament' prediction of the crucifixion by saying, 'He made a likeness for them in this way', ['but it (only) seemed like (that) to them'] (Q.4: 157). According to the narrative, the Caliph understood the qur'anic *shubbihā lahūm* as meaning that any evidence which the Christian might advance to support their claim that Christ was crucified is but an instance of *tashbīh*,[5] and therefore an appearance with no basis in reality (Swanson, 2013). Timothy responded to this with a dilemma-question:

> If the prophetic and apostolic claims about Christ's crucifixion are but *tashbīh*, who then is the author of this *tashbīh*: God or Satan? For Timothy, it is obvious that the answer cannot be God: 'It is entirely unfitting for God that He deceitfully shows one thing in the place of another'. Can the *tashbīh*, then, be ascribed to Satan? Timothy thinks not, for one would then have to be prepared to admit not only that Satan

[4] Reference to the Old Testament prophets may in some way be a concealed reference to the lack of support in the previous scriptures to the coming of Muhammad. A charge that Christian apologists used as the reason why Muhammad could not be considered a prophet.

[5] *Tashbih*, (Arabic: 'assimilating'), in Islam, anthropomorphism, comparing God to created things. Both *tashbih* and its opposite, *ta'tīl* (divesting God of all attributes), are regarded as sins in Islamic theology. The difficulty in dealing with the nature in Islam arises from the seemingly contradictory views contained in the Qur'an. On the one hand God is described as unique and not similar to anything that the mind can imagine; on the other hand, He is referred to in language of anthropomorphism—having eyes, ears, hands, and face, and sitting on His throne and talking and listening, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, https://www.britannica.com/topic/tashbih, accessed on Thursday 31 Sep., 2025.

> played a role in the divine economy but was also able to deceive the disciples—who, according to the New Testament, had the power to cast out demons (Swanson, p, 79 2013).

Further-more on the discourse on the crucifixion, according to the Syriac report, *al-Mahdī* asks:

> Which of the two do you say: was Christ willing to be crucified, or not? If he was willing to be crucified, why then are the Jews who fulfilled his will cursed and despised?
>
> But if he was not willing to be crucified, and he was crucified [all the same], he was weak, whereas the Jews were strong. How can he be called 'God' who was unable to deliver himself from the hands of his crucifiers, who's will appear more stronger than his? (Gokum, p, 167 2022).

Timothy responded with several instances that shows the mystery of creaturely obedience and divine-sovereignty, or that distinguish between intention and result, since good outcomes can result from that which is intended for ill. For instance, the Muslim who is killed fighting *fi sabīl Allah*, is prepared to die and expects paradise as a reward from the divine whose cause, he fights; but this does not remove blame from the one who kills him (Gokum, 2022),.

Timothy also stressed the freedom with which Christ went to his crucifixion. He said Christ was capable of escaping from his captors, but:

> If he had delivered himself from the Jews, then he would not have been crucified. If he had not been crucified, neither would he have died. If he had not died, neither would he have risen to everlasting life. And if he had not risen to everlasting life, then people would have remained without a sign of or argument for [the reality of] everlasting life.
>
> Today, because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, the eyes of all people are looking towards everlasting life. So that this expectation of everlasting life and of the world to come be firmly impressed upon the people, therefore, it was fitting and right that Jesus Christ rises from the dead; and so that he rises from the dead, it was fitting and right that he first die; and so that he rises it was right first that his death, as also his resurrection, will be witnessed by all. [Therefore], it was fitting that he died the death of the cross (Swanson, p, 80, 2013).

Although the topic of the crucifixion, death and resurrection was taken up by subsequent generations of Arabo-phone Christian apologists, Timothy stands as head and precursor of the series of Christian apologists. His direct response to the qur'anic denial of Christ's crucifixion in *al-Nisā* 4:157 notwithstanding,

"his greatest contribution to a Christian 'theology-with-a-mind-for-Islam' was an indirect response; a way of narrating the salvation work by Christ, that placed Christ's crucifixion at the very centre of the story and made a plausible case that—in his words—'it was fitting that he died the death of the cross'" (Gokum, 2022).

**3.3. Theodore Abū Qurra**

Harran is located in the south of modern-day Turkey near the Syrian border was the See of Theodore Abū Qurra (d. ca. 820-825); living in Harran among the adherents of many religions was a small community of Christians, and caring for the souls of this community in the late 8th and early 9th centuries was its bishop Theodore Abū Qurra (Lamoreaux, 2014).

Theodore is a figure well known to experts in the study of Arab Christian literature, and for good reason. He was both one of the first Christians to write in Arabic and one of the first to undertake a sustained theological defence of Christianity to the rival claims of Islam. Very little is known about his life and education, but both Christians and Muslims remember him as the bishop of Harran (Lamoreaux, 2014).

The body of Theodore's surviving works is large. "In his attempt to articulate and defend his faith in a milieu transformed by Islam, he was forced to rethink the foundations of Christian theology" (Gokum, 2022)

Whereas in earlier centuries the Christian had sometimes been quick to point to the political success of their faith as a guarantor and authenticator of its truth, it was difficult to hold on to such claim without losing face once Islam had over-ran and subjugated much of the territory that was once under the threshold of the Byzantine Empire. Majority of people who were once in a Christian territory, overnight found themselves under the rule of a proselytizing and assertive foreign religion. Now dispossessed of their empire, they were no longer adherents of an imperial faith but merely one sect living alongside a number of others (Lamoreaux, 2014).

In such climes, how was one to articulate and defend Orthodoxy against other sects of Christianity and against other faiths, especially Islam, was the question that bishop Theodore Abū Qurra had to deal with. In a milieu in Harran where Zoroastrians, Manicheans, Jews, Samaritans, Christians, Muslims and so on, co-habit, with each group claiming to possess the 'true revelation of God' and declaring the others to having gone astray, Theodore reasoned that one of these must be the true religion. His reason being that God wouldn't have left all humanity to wander in error (Lamoreaux , 2014). The tone of Theodore's polemics is devoid of the scathing sting of John of Damascus's because living in a so-called occupied territory, his arguments only sort to convince rather than to attack, as demonstrated below.

Abū Qurra uses three arguments to demonstrate the reasonableness of the Incarnation. The qur'anic picture of God seated on a throne; "that the body indwelt by the divine nature was perfectly adapted for the purpose so that no imperfection could cross over from the human to the divine; and thirdly the anthropomorphism of the Qur'an and fatherhood and sonship are not in the physical sense but in relational terms" (Beaumont, 2013). According to Mark Beaumont, the first argument of Abū Qurra for the Incarnation reads as follow:

> Discussion among Muslim scholars in the early 'Abbasid period about the anthropomorphism of the Qur'ān provided Abū Qurra with an opportunity to engage in an Islamic debate as a Christian. If the *Mu'tazilites*[6] thought that nothing could be learnt from the anthropomorphism of the Qur'ān about the nature of God, and if the Traditionalists held that is not possible for us to know how God sits on a throne and is present elsewhere at the same time, then Abū Qurra offers a third interpretation which could be more satisfying. If the Incarnation is true, then it becomes a key to interpret God's relationship with the created world, because God restricted Himself to a human body while at the same time leaving Himself free to be elsewhere ruling the world.

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[6] *Mu'tazilah*, (Arabic: Those who withdraw, or Stand Apart). English Mutazilites, in Islam, political or religious neutralists; by then10th century the term came to refer specifically to an Islamic school of speculative theology that flourished in Basra and Baghdad (8th-10th centuries AD). The name first appears in early Islamic history in the dispute over 'Alī's leadership of the Muslim community after the murder of the 3rd caliph, *'Uthmān* (d. 656). Those who would neither condemn nor sanction 'Alī or his opponents but took a middle position were termed Mu'tazilah.

The theological school is traced back to Wāsil ibn 'Atā (699-749), a student of al-Hasan al-Basrī, who by stating that a grave sinner (*fāsig*) could be classed neither as believer nor unbeliever but was in an intermediate position (*al-manzilah bayna manzilatayn*), withdrew (*i'tazala*), hence the name Mu'tazilah from his teacher's circle. The same story is told of 'Amr ibn 'Ubayd (d.762), variously maligned as free thinker and heretic. The Mu'tazilah in the 8th century were the first Muslims to use the categories and methods of Hellenistic philosophy to derive their three major and distinctive dogmatic points: First, they stressed the absolute unity or oneness (tawhid) of God. From this it was logically concluded that the Qur'ān could not be technically considered the word of God (the orthodox view), as God has no separable parts, and so had to be created and was not coeternal with God. Under the 'Abbāsid Caliph al-Ma'mūn , this doctrine of the created Qur'ān was proclaimed (827) as the state dogma and in 833, a *mihnah* or tribunal was instituted to try those who disputed the doctrine (notably the theologian Ahmad ibn Hanbal); the Mu'tazilī position was finally abandoned by the caliphate under al-Mutawakkil c. 849. The Mu'tazilah further stress justice (*'adl*) of God as their second principle. While the orthodox were concerned with the awful will of God to which each individual must submit himself without question. The Mu'tazilah posited that God desires only the best for man, but through free will, man chooses between good and evil and thus becomes ultimately responsible for his actions. The third: the threat and the promise (*al-wa'ad wa al-waīd*), or paradise and hell, God's justice becomes a matter of logical necessity: God must reward the good (as promised), and must punish the evil (as threatened).

Among the most important Mu'tazilī theologians were Abū al-Hudhayl al- 'Allāf d.c.841), and an-Nazzām (d. 846) in Basra and Bishr ibn al-Mu'tamir (d. 825) in Baghdad. It was al-Ash'ari (d. 935 or 936), a student of Mu'tazilī al-Jubbāī, who broke the force of the movement by refuting its teachings with the same Hellenistic, rational methods first introduced by the Mu'tazilah. The movement' beliefs were disavowed by the *Sunnī* Muslims, but the Shia accepted their premises, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* https://www.britannica.com/topic/Mutazilah, accessed on Saturday 18 Sep. 2025.

> According to Abū Qurra, this Christian reading of God's session on the throne is ultimately more satisfactory than any interpretation offered by Muslims because it allows us to say that this is how God works in His world. There is a solution to the apparent paradox of God limiting Himself to a particular place, and it is believed that God is at one and the same time limited and unlimited. But only the Incarnation gives this solution. Only the fact that that the divine becomes limited to the human body without becoming trapped there allows this third way of reading the throne texts. By engaging with Muslim form of argumentation he forced intellectual Muslims to take him seriously as an equal and offered an apologetic that worked as long as Muslims themselves debated the interpretation of anthropomorphism (Beaumont, p, 51, 2013).

Abū Qurra' second argument for the Incarnation is presented as follows: the body's indwelling by the divine nature was perfectly suited and adapted for that purpose in such a way that Muslims' opposition that God could not dwell in a corrupt body is disarmed. He had the Muslims raised the issue of the impurity of the body (Beaumont , 2013). 'It is undeniable that God sits on the throne, but He does not take up residence in the human body. The throne is pure, but the human body is not suitable for God'. Here is the heart of the problem for Muslims. God's purity has to be preserved at all cost, but Incarnation destroys this purity. And the transcendence of God has to be protected against the contrary claim of immanence by the Christians. Abū Qurra defended divine enfleshment by removing 'impurity' out of the equation (Beaumont, 2013). This he does by alluding to the belief in the purity of Christ as attested to by the Muslims and the Qur'an in Q.19:19, as grounds for his argument that in the case of Christ, there is no suspicion of impurity in His nature. The human flesh is cleansed by the Holy Spirit before the eternal Son united with it, thus God Himself guaranteed the purity of the human body by His own action. This is a very significant argument in the light of Q.19:19, because it offers to Muslims a way of seeing human flesh as fitting for God's indwelling (Beaumont, 51). The announcement by angel Gabriel to Mary that she was to bear a 'pure boy' follows that Christ was conceived without any defect (Beaumont, 51). This purity is a perfect condition for the union of the divine with human nature. It removes the argument by Muslims that indwelling in this pure human body taints God's pure character. The Incarnation is therefore not as unreasonable as it implies a union of divine and human nature. Abū Qurra's exposé could possibly have provoked a rethink by the Muslims about the Incarnation, which they say undermines God's transcendence, and their distaste for such a union, and lays bare to the Muslims one of the reasons why Christian believed in the Incarnation (Beaumont, 2013).

The third treatise on Sonship is also built on anthropomorphism of the Qur'an. It deals with the Muslims' suspicion that the Incarnation implies physical begetting by God. The Muslims' question is: 'how can God give birth in the light

of the fact that a man can only have offspring after intercourse with a woman?' Abū Qurra answers with a counter question.

> 'If you accept that God can be called the One who hears and the wise, why can't you accept that he can be called the father?' He appeals to the *Mu'atazilites*' interpretation of the divine attributes in this question, since if they are correct in supposing that God does not actually have ears with which to hear, then Christians are correct in holding that God does not actually have a child in the normal way. Christians are not guilty of attributing physical fatherhood to God. They speak of fatherhood and sonship in a non-physical sense because the relationship of the father and the son exist outside time and space. Therefore, God cannot have given birth to a son in the sense that human fathers do, since the son lives forever with the father. The logic of the Incarnation is dependent on the definition of God as Father of the Son from all eternity (Beaumont, p, 51, 2013).

Abū Qurra's argument support Griffith's opinion that Christian apologists in the early 'Abbasid period, were preoccupied with upholding the non-contradictory nature of the Incarnation. He used the debate among the Muslims to draw the resources for his apologetics, especially the conceptual difficulties encountered by his interlocutors in the understanding of God's operation in the world. A purely transcendental interpretation of the anthropomorphism of the Qur'an leads to the emptying of such meaning says Griffith. On the other hand, if we accept that God acts in the world without the disposition to understand how he acts leads to a total misunderstanding of God's character. The Christian belief in the Incarnation gives us a way of bringing God's transcendence into ordinary human life without sacrificing His immanence and also shows how God operates in the world without being restricted to it. Abū Qurra's arguments are still valid for Christians who want to hold on to the doctrine of the Incarnation within a Muslim context (Beaumont,2013), and they are valid for Christians who may be faced with defending their believe in the Incarnation within a Muslim context or environment.

**3.4. Abū Mansūr al-Māturīdī al-Radd**

Abū Mansūr al-Māturīdī (d.944), titular head of the Māturīdīyah school of theology, which came to be one of the most important foundations of Islamic doctrine. Little is known about the life of Al-Māturīdī. He lived during the time when the Mu'tazilites, were using the techniques of Greek logical argument to attack what had come to be accepted as orthodox Muslim theology. It is not clear why Māturīdī came to be accepted as the protagonist of such thought over and above Abū Hanifāh (d. 767), the Muslim theologian who seemed to have been the first to adopt the methods of the Mu'tazilites.

Excerpt from al-Māturīdī's work in the *alā al-nasārā min Kitāb al-tawhīd*, shows some of his apologetical disposition. Needless to say, those periods were rife

with polemical works in defence of, or attack of rival positions and religions. Some of his position on the Christian doctrines and religion read as follows:

> The Christians are divided over Christ, for there are those among them who attribute two spirits to him, one of them temporal, the spirit of humanity which is like the spirits of people, and an eternal divine spirit, a part of God and this came into the body.' They say: 'There are no more than Father Son and Holy Spirit.'
>
> Others make the spirit, which was in Christ God and not a part, although a small group of them make in the body as it were a thing within a thing and a small group control, without the body encompassing it.
>
> Among them are those who say: 'A part of God almighty combined with it, and also another part.'
>
> Ibn Shabīb said: 'I heard one of the associates say that he was son by adoption and not by begetting, just as the wives of Muhammad, peace be upon him, are called mothers, and as a man says to another, 'My little son (Thomas D, p, 97, 2008).

In an elaborate response to the accusation of 'association' al-Māturīdī says:

> The Master, may God have mercy on him said, say to them: 'Since the spirit that was in him is eternal and is a portion, how did it become Son and the other portion did not? If it is said: Because it is lesser; he has to make all the portions of the universe sons to those that are bigger than them, and he has to make every portion from what remains the same, so that he will be entirely sons. Further, it is well-known that a son is younger than a father, so how can they both be eternal? And if the whole is regarded as being in the body, say to him: Which thing in it is the Son? And if he says: The whole; he has made the whole Son and Father, in this making the Father a son to himself.[7]
>
> If it is said: It was a part of him without there being any diminution in the wholeness of the original, like the part taken from the light; respond along the lines that if the part that was taken originated as happens in

[7] According to David Thomas, the first objection centers on the identity of the divine participation in the Incarnation, which is familiar from the Muslim refutations of Christianity from the third-ninth century [of the Islamic calendar] and even earlier. These typically take the form of saying that if the Son acted alone, then each of the three Persons could do so, or else the Son must be distinguished from the others in the some way; and if the three Person acted in unison for the Son, they could equally do the same for another Person. But al-Māturīdī' argument is that if the Son, whom he refers to as the 'spirit', acted alone then he would establish a relationship that must be repeated throughout creation, while if the three Persons became incarnate, there would be no way of distinguishing between them. See D. Thomas *Christian Doctrines in Islamic Theology*, Leiden: Brill, 2008, p.97.

the case of what is taken from the light, then his teaching about eternity of the spirit, which is the Son is disproved. And if he claims that it was communicated from God like that which is taken, the foregoing applies to him. Furthermore, how does he know that what is taken from the light will not disappear? If it is said: Such is our observation of it; say: Maybe God brought it into being or it is like the fire in the stone, which comes out. Whichever of these, it is temporal, and the temporal is created, so how can it justifiably be Son? (Thomas D, p, 101, 2008).

He says: Because God manifested miracles from him, say: He manifested from Moses, so he was another son, though if you claim that this was through invocation and entreaty, the same applies to Jesus, in addition to which on the part of Jesus is that on the night of arrest he said: 'If your will is to take this bitter cup from any, then take it from me.'[8]

If it is said crying and entreaties on the part of Jesus were to instruct people; say: The same from Moses. Furthermore, both he and Moses used to pray and make entreaty towards Jerusalem; and once again, crying and entreaty are natural actions neither can be prevented, so what is the meaning of 'instructing'?[9]

Next, if he merited this because of action, this must apply to Moses and others. So if it is said: He and no others merited this by reviving the dead; say: Ezekiel revived a man. And he responds: Prolificness; say: The Jews say that Moses was more prolific than him. The Jurist, may God have mercy on him, said: He caused a lifeless to become a living serpent on numerous occasions, so he is greater. And if as argument he refers to feeding many people with little food, respond that our Prophet produced in vessel flour that had not been there. If it is said: He turned water into wine; say: Elisha filled a number of vessels for a woman and

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[8] For the hypothetical Christian al-Māturīdī says, will argue that Jesus was unique in performing miracles by his own power and authority, unlike Moses who entreated God to perform miracles through him [Moses]. Al-Māturīdī replies by providing evidence that Jesus also entreated God. See endnote no. 14 in the same work. See D. Thomas, *Christian Doctrines in Islamic Theology*, p. 101.

[9] Again al-Māturīdī will not concede any uniqueness to Jesus but sees him performing these actions [miracles] in the same way as Moses and any like human being. The argument echoes a point made over a century before al-Māturīdī by the Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I in his dialogue with the Caliph al-Mahdī in which the Patriarch explained that Jesus performed worship and prayer 'in order that his disciples might fulfill themselves what they had seen him practicing himself, and that they might teach others to do the same'. The anachronistic reference to Moses praying towards Jerusalem may reflect the assumption that this was the original *qibla* (cf. Q. 2: 143-144), though this may have been common among Muslims with regards to pre-Islamic prophets, since the pseudonymous writer of the letter of 'Umar, which probably dates from the late 9th century, mentions Jesus and other prophets praying towards Jerusalem. See D. Thomas, *Christian Doctrines in Islamic Theology*, Brill, Leiden, 2008, p. 103.

> turned it into oil. And if he refers to walking on the water as argument, they themselves acknowledge this of Joshua son of Nun, Of Elijah and of Elisha. And if they adduce as evidence the ascension into heaven, they themselves acknowledge this of Elijah and they say he ascended into heaven in the sight of many people. And if as argument they refer to healing the blind, the leper and the like, bringing what is lifeless to life is greater than these and they themselves acknowledge this of Elijah and Elisha. (Cf. Matthew 8: 1-4; Mark 1: 32-34; Q.5: 110; 1Kings 17: 21-24; 2Kings 4: 34-37).
>
> In addition to what is against them in their own acknowledgement that the Jews crucified him and mocked him, for if the above is evidence of exaltation, this evidence is diminution. And why did he not do what Elijah did, because when they came after him, he sent down on them fire which ate them up, God honouring him with this (Thomas D, p, 101, 2008).

It is evident from the foregoing that al- Māturīdī knew the Christian scriptures, because some of the miracles he cited are not in the Qur'an. One issue he did not mention is the resurrection of Christ, which for the Christians is the miracle that testifies to the Christian faith of Christ's death. But we can argue that it is probably because Muslims don't believe in the resurrection narrative of Jesus Christ.

**4.0. MODERN APOLOGETIC**

Modernity has improved the lot of mankind but it has also posed challenges not only for Christianity but also for Islam in the area of apologetics. While traditional apologetics employs reasoned argument in support of their positions, modern apologetic also employs reasoned defence of the faith and doctrine in post-Christian/Islam secular and pluralistic culture. Apologetics has shifted drastically from purely intellectual arguments to include personalistic approaches that addresses individual experiences, scepticism, and modern issues like technology, and critical theories. Key methods include: classical arguments, evidence-based and presuppositional approaches.

Key aspect of modern apologetics includes: context, which addresses a culture marked by scepticism, relativism, and the need for personalized experienced-based, or "story-oriented engagement." It uses methods like presuppositionalism, which employs contrasting worldviews to argue that only religious assumptions make rational sense of the world. It also uses classical/evidential philosophy, science, and historical evidence *and* the truth of religion as method to bolster it claims. Apparently, modern apologetics focuses on the "new evangelization", adapting traditional arguments to contemporary culture. In Christianity, key proponents include: Bishop Robert Barron, Peter Kreeft, William Lane-Craig, and Lee Strobel. While in Islam, Tariq Ramadan, Ahmed Deedat, and the Yaqeen Institute try to make systematic,

intellectual, and digital-driven defence of faith aimed at addressing contemporary philosophical, and social challenges.

## 5.0. CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM APOLOGETICS, ANCIENT, YET NEW

Christian and Muslim apologetics constitutes a field of ancient, yet evolving dialogue (the choice of the word dialogue does not in any way remove the sting associated with this exercise, which in most cases is polemical rather than dialogical), and debate. While the foundational arguments dates back centuries, beginning with early Christian responses to the rise of Islam in the 7th century, these debates often in letter form, are continually renewed by modern scholars incorporating experiential approaches that addresses contemporary issues.

The ancient foundation of Christian-Muslim apologetics especially under Muslim rule involved adapting previous arguments against paganism to a new monotheistic context. With key arguments such the "Islamic Dilemma" which challenges Islam based on the Qur'an endorsement of earlier but arguably contradictory scriptures, go back to as early as the 8th century with figures like George of Beltan. John of Damascus is mostly considered as the first Christian Father to propose a critic of Islam from a Christian theological perspective. New and contemporary approaches have seen some ex-Muslims Christian apologists such as Nabeel Qureshi and al Fadi who use their background to provide perspective in debates that would have eluded Christian thinkers.

It is heart-warming to note that in recent times, debates between Christians and Muslims mostly focuses on relationship. Rather than viewing Muslims as opponents, in an intellectual debate, contemporary approaches especially among Catholic thinkers encourages building personal relationship and addressing the whole person. Embedded in this new approach is the Ecclesial apologetic which moves away beyond rationalistic debate to emphasis on the "community's way of being in the world" and the lived experience of faith as 1 Pet. 3: 15-16 admonishes.

## 6.0. CONCLUSION

Regarding any form of conclusion between Christian and Muslim apologetics, it is important to state that both traditions will use reason to defend their faith, they are fundamentally at odd on the identity of Jesus and the nature of God. Christian apologetics focuses on defending the Trinity, the divinity of Jesus Christ, and the historical reliability of the bible, while highlighting the Resurrection of Jesus as the central evidence. On the other hand, Muslim apologetics centers on the absolute unity of Allah (*Tawhid*), the prophethood of Muhammad and the supreme authority and uncorrupted nature of the qur'an.

Ultimately, apologetics serves to either strengthen the faith of adherents or provide a framework for navigating deep and conflicting theological truths. While both sides strive to provide compelling arguments for their respective

audiences, the polemics rarely produces a winner, as both sides as experience has shown are usually dug-in to even submit to any truth or sound argument from the other side. Like the saying goes, "People are not interested in the truth, they are only interested in anything that reinforces their deeply held believes."

## 7.0. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHRISTIAN APOLOGISTS

1. Autobiographical and Testimonial Apologetics: This method shares the Gospel through the lens of lived experience, deeply addressing the cultural and personal cost of conversion. Example is the book Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus by Nabeel Qureshi, which recounts his journey from a devout Muslim to Christianity, detailing the historical eveidence he investigated along the way.
2. Internal Critique (The Islamic Dilemma): Thos method uses the Qur'an's own internal claims to critique Islamic theology or to show that the Qur'an implicitly validates the Christian New Testament.
3. historical and Textual Evidence: This involves investigating the historical reliability biblical and qur'anic manuscripts, archelogical findings and the authenticity of early historical accounts.
4. Relational and Dialogue Approaches: Emphasisng respectful listening, relationship building and answering objections without being aggressive.

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