

MAPPING THE SEMANTICS OF *DĪN* ('RELIGION') IN 9TH CENTURY ARABIC CHRISTIAN CONTROVERSY

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1 Introduction

The term *dīn* has always played a fundamental role in Christian–Muslim controversy, which, especially in its first phase (8–12th centuries), was revolving around the “true religion” and the belief in the Trinity. (al-Khoury 2004:5, Griffith 2002:I, 63–87) The etymology of the term and the contents of its notion in a pre-Islamic and Islamic sense have been elaborated on by such scholars as L. Gardet (1965), P. C. Brodeur (2004), Y. Y. Haddad (1974), T. Izutsu (2008), G. Monnot (1994) and others, however, the Arabic Christian counterpart is understudied.¹

Yet, investigations of the Christian *dīn* would complement the picture, due to various reasons. First, the meanings present in Qur'ānic usage might have entered the Arabic language through Syriac, which is implied by the fact that the very same meanings are attested in Early Syriac Christian writings (Brodeur 2004:396–397); and as 9th-century Arabic Christian writers were immediate heirs to the Greek–Syriac Christian tradition, the way they used *dīn* is expected to be informative as far as the richness of its connotations translated into Arabic is concerned. Second, according to the scholarly consensus, by the time Christians living under the dominion of Islam first composed theological works in Arabic, this language had been determined by the Islamic religion and its terminology; furthermore, due to encounters and disputes, Arabic Christian and Islamic theologies developed in a parallel manner, influencing each other with the questions posed,² which is

¹ Publications in the field include collections and classifications of *dīn*-related quotes. E.g. al-Khoury 1989, 1991, 2004. See also the notion of the “true religion” in Christian apologetics that has been examined by such scholars as e.g. S. H. Griffith (2002), and M. Swanson (2010).

² Islamic “theology”, *ʿilm al-kalām* appeared and developed in the first Abbasid century, when Muslim and Christian *kalām* advanced and formulated in an analogous, parallel form, due to the frequent public disputes of the period. At least in the beginning, Christians must have been influenced by the questions of Muslims posed in Islamic phraseology. These provoked answers from Christian scholars, who sought to phrase them in a way that should be intelligible to Muslims, so they explained their doctrines using the Arabic phraseology

reflected in their respective vocabularies: so the use of the term *dīn* in Arabic Christian writings is also expected to reflect this interaction.

In this paper, I first sum up briefly the results of previous research on pre-Islamic and Islamic *dīn* that provides the background for an analysis of occurrences of *dīn* and related terms in the earliest Arabic Christian sources at our disposal: the Melkite Theodore Abū Qurra's (d. probably after 816) *Maymar fī wuḡūd al-ḥāliq wa-d-dīn al-qawīm* (Treatise on the Existence of the Creator and on the True Religion); the Jacobite Ḥabīb ibn Ḥidma Abū Rā'īṭa's (d. ca. 830) *Risāla fī iṭbāt dīn an-naṣrāniyya wa-iṭbāt at-tālūt al-muqaddas* (Treatise on the Verification of the Christian Religion and the Holy Trinity), and the Nestorian 'Ammār al-Baṣrī's (d. ca. 840 AD) *Kitāb al-Masā'il wa-l-aḡwiba* (The Book of the Questions and Answers). I seek to examine in what contexts and with what meaning the term is used, identify similarities and differences between Christian and Islamic usage; and reflect on the shaping of the notion of "religion" in the Islamo-Christian religious milieu.

2 Islamic and Pre-Islamic *dīn*

The major contributions in the field, i.e. the works of T. Izutsu,³ L. Gardet,⁴ P. Brodeur,⁵ J. D. McAuliffe and C. Wilde⁶ all agree in that it is "one of the most

and terminology of contemporary Muslim *mutakallimūn*. Polemics and *kalām* are also complementary and interdependent: they developed in an analogous way, and it is theologians who wrote the polemical works. (Cf. Charfi 1994:49; Cook 1980:32–43; Griffith 1993:2; *Idem.* 1980:170; and van Ess 1976.)

³ In his *God and Man in the Qur'an* (first published in 1964), Toshihiko Izutsu claims that the two generally acknowledged meanings of *dīn* in the *Qur'ān* are 'religion' (this sense of the word is thought to be originating in the Persian *den*, 'systematic religion') and 'judgment' (coming from the Hebrew *dīn*, 'judgment'; Izutsu also refers to the "Day of Judgment" (*yawm ad-dīn*) as typically Jewish, c.f. p. 240). He then identifies three meanings belonging to the Arabic roots *d-y-n* in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry: 'custom, habit'; 'requital'; and 'obedience/subduing', and suggests that this latter meaning might also be the origin of the meaning 'religion', which would make the derivation from the Persian word unnecessary. Turning to W. C. Smith's distinction between personal and reified/institutional religion (cf. Smith 1964), T. Izutsu demonstrates that at least the meanings 'system of ritual practices/reified religion' of *dīn* must have been deeply rooted in pre-Islamic usage, though he adds that the personal vs. institutional distinction is not likely to have been sharp in people's minds that time. Finally, turning back to Qur'anic occurrences and drawing parallels between *dīn* and its synonyms, i.e. *ibāda* (worship, serving), *islām* (surrendering one's self to God), and *milla* (religious community), Izutsu suggests that in the *Qur'ān*, both reified and non-reified connotations might be attested.

⁴ L. Gardet's *Dīn* (1965) elaborates on the meanings of the term as used in the *Qur'ān*: 'judgment/retribution' (coming from Hebrew-Aramaic roots with reference to *yawm ad-dīn*); 'custom/usage' (from the Arabic *d-y-n*); and 'religion' (allegedly coming from Pehlevi *dēn*, though the notion is different in Mazdaism and Islam). Gardet corroborates Izutsu's thesis when writing that the first two meanings can interact, and from the web of connotations that come into being, 'religion' is easily derived even without going back to Persian roots. As an alternative to 'religion', Gardet offers the translation of the term as 'an act of worship,' saying that 'cult' is seen to be an essential part of *dīn*, which is evidenced by the frequent association of *ibāda* and *dīn* in the text. *Dīn* is often specified with other terms (*ad-dīn al-qayyim*, as Gardet translates it: 'immutable religion', , but could be rather rendered as 'firm', 'true', or 'most valuable' religion; *dīn al-ḥaqq*, 'religion of Truth/true religion'; *ad-dīn al-ḥālīṣ* 'pure religion') to have a narrower sense; and is also associated with others, like *islām*, *hudā* ([God's] guidance), and *ḥukm* (judgment). As for the content of the notion, he says that the *Qur'ān* associates it with worship; and later on, *hadīṭ* literature lists its "components" in the following: faith (*īmān*), practice of *islām*, and interiorization of faith: i.e. good deeds, *iḥsān*. Early Muslim theologians (8th–9th centuries) often define *dīn* as faith, *islām*, law, doctrine (*maḍhab*), and religious community (*milla*).

⁵ P. C. Brodeur (2004) follows Y. Y. Haddad's division of meanings attached to the word *dīn* in the *Qur'ān* into three chronological stages, according to the Meccan periods and one later Medinan period (see also: Haddad 1974). These are 'judgment/retribution' (when used in the expression *yawm ad-dīn*); 'God's right path for human beings on earth' (implying obedience and commitment); and 'religious community' (synonymous to *milla*). *Dīn* then includes the meanings of 'a prescribed set of behaviours' as well as the 'community'. As for the term's etymology, Brodeur also speaks of polysemy, according to which *dīn* goes back to the Persian *dēn* as far as the meaning 'code of law' is concerned; while the meaning 'judgment' derives from Aramaic. Given that both meanings are attested in early Syriac Christian works, it is possible that the term and its meanings entered Arabic through this language.

⁶ In their investigation titled *Religious pluralism*, J. D. McAuliffe and C. Wilde place the term *dīn* into a wider context, introducing the investigation with the remark that "the *Qur'ān* uses a range of words, both Arabic and Arabized non-Arabic to signify what contemporary readers understand as religion" (McAuliffe and Wilde 2004:400). Among these there are general terms that can refer to both Islam and other sets of beliefs, and specific ones, referring only to Islam. *Dīn* as presented in the first category, is traced back to Persian *dēn* 'religion' and Akkadian *danu* 'judgment'. Where it appears in the sense of religion, it involves the meaning of an act of worship, which relates to the Arabic *dayn*, 'debt' (rendering to God what is due). Other general terms include *milla* and *ibāda*. *Milla* (of Syriac origin, meaning religion and sect in the Scripture) is held to be unattested in Arabic prior to the appearance of the *Qur'ān*; *ibāda* appears with the meaning of 'serving', service being directed towards God, or other Lords. In the *Qur'ān*, *islām*, *ḥanīf* (true monotheistic believer), and *ṣarī'a* are the religion-related terms applied exclusively with an Islamic reference. *Ṣarī'a*, "perhaps parallel to the Christian designation of their religion as the "way", with one occurrence at Q 45:18 has been understood with the sense of God's

difficult Qur'ānic key-terms to handle semantically”, and consider it “problematical as regards its original meaning” (Phrases taken from Izutsu, 2008:239–240). There might have been more words of different origins behind it that assumed the same form with different but related meanings. As Brodeur (2004:395) and Gardet (1965:293) claim, it is generally translated as “religion”, but while *religio* refers to what binds man to God, *dīn*, in its general meaning, evokes the obligations imposed by God on humankind, and its other connotations are not included in this translation. All the major studies on the concept and term identify the following two meanings of *dīn* in the *Qur'ān*: “(institutional) religion/code of law” (supposedly of Persian/Pehlevi origin) and “judgment” (of Hebrew/Aramaic/Akkadian origin). Other possible translations are seen to be “God’s right path” and “religious community” (like *milla*). Almost all mention the Arabic root (*d-y-n*), as well, claiming either that derived forms are attested even in pre-Islamic usage with the meanings “custom”, “requit” and “obedience”, or that the inherent notion in *dīn*, worship can be traced back to them. The meanings “reified and non-reified religion” in *dīn* are also established. Studies list Qur'ānic synonyms like *ibāda* (“worship”), *islām* (“surrendering one’s self to God”), *milla* (“religious community”), *hudā* (“[God’s] guidance”), and *ḥukm* (“judgment”), as well as forms specified with other terms: *ad-dīn al-qayyim* (“firm/true religion”), *dīn al-ḥaqq* (“the religion of Truth”), and *ad-dīn al-ḥālīṣ* (“pure religion”). The notion of *dīn* in the *Qur'ān* and subsequent Muslim theological or legal elaboration is seen to include worship; *īmān* (“faith”), practice of *islām*, *ihsān* (“good deeds”), *ṣarī'a* (“law”), *maḏhab* (“doctrine”), and religious community. The studies also investigate which terms have a general, or an exclusively Islamic reference. Now let us turn to Christian texts to see how they may add to our understanding of the term and respective concept.

3 Christian *dīn*

The term frequently appears in Christian works written by all denominations living under the dominion of Islam: Melkites, Maronites, Nestorians, Jacobites, and Copts (al-Khoury 2004:5–7), but we restrict our investigations to the first period of Christian–Muslim interaction in Arabic, and concentrate on writers from the main denominations of the age. Prior to any investigation, we need to indicate that the term is never defined (al-Khoury 2004:15–16), so we can only work with an inductive method based on the context of its occurrences.

having sent Muhammad on the “open way, clear way, right way” (McAuliffe and Wilde 2004:402).

3.1 Theodore Abū Qurra

The Melkite scholar and polemicist, Theodore Abū Qurra is the first known Christian author who wrote theological works in Arabic. Born in Edessa, he is likely to have been a monk in the monastery of Mar Sabas, before becoming a bishop of Ḥarrān. He was known by Christians of other denominations as well as by Muslims, and disputed even in the court of the caliph al-Ma'mūn (Griffith 1993: 6–8). Some of his *opuscula* survived in Greek (Abū Qurra, *Opuscula*); and his main Arabic works include the *Treatise on the Existence of the Creator and the True Religion* (Abū Qurra, *Maymar fī wuḡūd al-ḥāliq*), and the *Treatise on the Veneration of Icons* (Abū Qurra, *Maymar fī ikrām al-īqūnāt*).

The former one is his general apology, in which he seeks to determine which one among the contemporary religions is the “true” one. A part of its contents is shortly presented here, for the sake of the induction regarding Theodore’s understanding of *dīn*. The author introduces a narrator who grew up in the mountains alone. Upon descending, he finds that people adhere to different religions,⁷ and all invite him to join them. In order to find the right *dīn*, he starts his quest which is described through an analogy built upon the figures of a hidden king, his son, and a doctor, whose task is to protect him. The son falls ill, so the king, by way of a messenger, sends him medicine and a book with a description of himself, of the use of the medicine and with a prescription of what the son should do to recover, and what he should abstain from. It also tells what the result of committing “healthy” or “forbidden” actions would be. The enemies of the king also send messengers with poison and forged books with false descriptions. The doctor, knowing what makes man ill or healthy, says he can judge the things prescribed or forbidden in the different books; and, from the attributes of the son, he is sure to recognize those of the king. He sees that, with one exception, all the books exhort the son to do things that would harm him, and discourage him from doing things that would benefit him. He finds that this is the only book in which the description of the king shows similarity to the features of the son, and that the remedy belongs to it. The king stands for God, the son for humankind, the doctor for the intellect. The son’s ignoring the doctor and getting ill alludes to humankind’s neglect of the intellect

⁷ In my translation: “I grew up in the mountains, and there I had no knowledge about men. One day, due to an emerging necessity, I descended in the sphere and community of people, and I found them to belong to different religions.” Arabic text (Abū Qurra, *Maymar fī wuḡūd al-ḥāliq*, 200): *innī naša’tu fī ḡabal, lam a’rif mā an-nās fīhi. fa-nazaltu yawman li-ḥāḡatin ‘araḡat lī, ilā l-madāyin wa-ḡamā’at an-nās. Fa-ra’aytuhum fī adyānin muḡtalifa.*

and going astray. Enemies are daemons; their messengers are false prophets that initiate false religions. Abū Qurra says that

“The king’s sending him a messenger represents God’s sending, in truth, a messenger (*rasūl*) and a book (*kitāb*) to his creation. In this book, he gives them a true description of himself, according to which he is to be worshipped (*yuʿbad*). In it, he forbids them from every form of evil and insolence (*nahy*) and commands them to do good in this world (*amr*). In it, he proclaims for those who do good their blessedness in the next world, as well as unending comfort, while for evildoers he promises hell, the fire of which is not extinguished. This is the one true religion (*ad-dīn al-ḥaqq*).”⁸

We can see in this analogy and its interpretation that *dīn* is a relationship between man and God. Given that every religion was examined according to the following elements, i.e. criteria, we may say that what constitute a religion are:

1. a messenger;
2. a book – and this comprises the rest of the components: the teaching on
 - a. the attributes of God;
 - b. moral prescriptions;
 - c. reward and punishment in the hereafter.

The analogy that presents a book of teachings as a component of ‘religion’ lets us interpret *dīn* as set of teachings (doctrine), as well as a set of moral prescriptions (ethics), and a forming factor of a community, given that people create groups according to the religion they follow. At the same time, as shown in the quest, *dīn* also has an individual aspect. The term is not exclusively used to refer to any religion; in this, we can compare it to the Islamic interpretation.⁹ The component

⁸ Lamoreaux’s translation (Abū Qurra, *Theologus autodidactus* 9). Arabic text (Abū Qurra, *Maymar fī wuḡūd al-ḥāliq* 217–218): *wa-baʿtuhu ilayhi rasūlan bi-ḥaqq ilā ḥalqihī bi-kitābihī yuʿallimuhum fīhi ṣifatahu al-ḥaqqīyya llatī yaḡibū an yuʿbada ʿalayhā, wa-nahyuhu iyyāhum ʿan kulli sūʿin wa-qabīḥin wa-amruhu iyyāhum bi-ʿamali l-ḥayri fī d-dunyā wa-saʿadat al-ṣāliḥīn fī l-āḥira naʿmuhu llaḏī lā yazūl wa-waʿd at-ṭāliḥīn ḡahannam allatī lā taṭfaʿ nāruhā wa-ḏālika d-dīn al-wāḥid al-ḥaqq.*

⁹ Cf. McAuliffe and Wilde 2004. For another example for the general use of the term see also Lamoreaux’s translation (Abū Qurra, *Theologus autodidactus* 9): “In the real world, there are yet other religions and still more disagreement (*iḥtilāf kaṭīr fī l-adyān*). We, however, have restricted ourselves to the aforementioned eight or nine and explained what each proclaims (*daʿā*) with regard to the attributes of God, the permitted and forbidden (*ḥalāl – ḥarām*), and reward and punishment. (*tawāb – ʿiqāb*).” Arabic text (Abū Qurra, *Maymar fī wuḡūd al-ḥāliq* 217): *wa-hunāk iḥtilāf kaṭīr fī l-adyān illā annanā iḥtaṣarnā ʿalā ḥāʾulāʾi t-ṭamāniya l-adyān aw at-tisʿa llaḏīna ḏakarnā wa-aḥbarnā ilā māḏā daʿā kull wāḥid minhum min ṣifāt Allāh wa-l-ḥalāl wa-l-ḥarām wa-t-tawāb wa-l-ʿiqāb.*

“reward/punishment” implies ‘judgment’ that is an essential element of the meaning of *dīn* in both Qur’ānic and Syriac Christian usage.

Dīn appears in a variety of contexts throughout the treatise. We may draw attention to the last words of the quote, i.e. the idiom *ad-dīn al-ḥaqq* (“the True Religion”), a variant of *dīn al-ḥaqq* (“the religion of the Truth”) which is of paramount importance in the *Qur’ān*, where it refers to the exclusive claim to truth on the side of Islam. It is deliberately relativized by Abū Qurra, when he puts it in the mouth of different religious groups, sometimes even used in indefinite form (*dīn ḥaqq*).¹⁰ At least on a phraseological–terminological level, he is seen to be influenced by an Islamic frame of reference. Abū Qurra claims that the only true religion, “*ad-dīn al-ḥaqq*” must correspond to what human reason can establish concerning the matter:

“We must now ... compare the religions (*adyān*) we encountered and examine what each says about God, the permitted and the forbidden (*ḥalāl – ḥarām*), and reward and punishment (*tawāb – ‘iqāb*). If we find one that agrees with what our own nature has taught us, we shall know for certain that it is true (*al-ḥaqq*), that it is from God, and that through it alone God is to be worshipped (*yu’bad*). We shall wholeheartedly accept it, take our stand on it, and worship (*na’bud*) God through it, casting aside, rejecting, and despising the rest.”¹¹

¹⁰ E.g. Lamoreaux’s translation (Abū Qurra, *Theologus autodidactus* 3), where Christians say: “You should adhere to the religion of Christ (*dīn al-Masīh*) and to his teaching, that is, that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, three persons, and in this essence a single God. This is the true religion (*ad-dīn al-ḥaqq*). It was given to us by Christ, the Son of God, in the gospel. He also declared for us the permitted and the forbidden (*ḥallala l-ḥalāl – ḥarrama l-ḥarām*), and promised to raise the dead, rewarding those who did good with the kingdom of heaven and punishing those who did evil with hell. The only true religion (*dīn ḥaqq*) is ours.” Arabic text (Abū Qurra, *Maymar fī wuḡūd al-ḥāliq* 205): *wa-lākin ‘alayka bi-dīn al-Masīh wa-ta’līmihi. wa-dālika anna Allāh Ab wa-Ibn wa-Rūḥ Quds, ilāh wāḥid ṭalāṭat wuḡūh. wa-fī ḥādā l-ḡawhar wāḥid. wa-ḥādā d-dīn al-ḥaqq, alladī a’ānā l-Masīh ibn Allāh fī l-Inḡīl. wa-qad ḥallala la-nā al-ḥalāl, wa-ḥarrama l-ḥarām, wa-wa’ada annahu yub’ītu al-mawtā, wa-yukāfi’ al-muḥsinīn bi-mulk as-samā’, wa-yuḡzī al-musīn ḡahannam. fa-lā dīn ḥaqq illā dīnunā.*

¹¹ Lamoreaux’s translation (Abū Qurra, *Theologus autodidactus* 18). Arabic text (Abū Qurra, *Maymar fī wuḡūd al-ḥāliq* 240): *yanbaḡī lanā an naṣna’ miṭlamā ṣana’ dālika ṭ-tabīb al-ḥakīm: an nuqaddim ḡamī’ al-adyān allatī laqīnā fa-nanzur fī qawl kull wāḥid minhum, fīmā yaṣīfu Allāh wa-fīmā yaṣīfu ayḡan min ra’yihī min al-ḥalāl wa-l-ḥarām wa-t-tawāb wa-l-‘iqāb. fa-lladī naḡiduhu muwāfiqan li-mā ‘allamatnā ṭabī’atunā min dālika, ‘allamatnā bi-yaqīn annahu l-ḥaqq alladī ḡā’a min ‘inda Allāh wa-lladī yaḡib an yu’bad bihi waḡdahu wa-lā bi-ḡayrihi, fa-naqbaluhu wa-nattaḡiduhu, wa-nuqīmu ‘alayhi wa-na’budu Allāh bihi wa-narmah ḡayrahu wa-nub’iduhu wa-nabḡaḡduhu.*

He arrives at the conclusion that it can only be Christianity:

“The gospel is thus the true religion of God (*iḍan al-Inḡīl dīn Allāh al-ḥaqq*), through which alone he is to be worshipped (*yuʿbad*). This we learn from the three things our nature taught... Because of this, we believe this religion (*nuʿmin*), accept it, and cling to it. For its sake, we endure tribulations in this world, through the promised hope.”¹²

Remarkably, instead of ‘Christianity’, the Gospel is named as God’s true religion, which suggests that religion (*dīn*) and scripture (*kitāb*) are co-extensive.¹³

In Abū Qurra’s usage, related terms include worship (*ibāda*) and faith (*īmān*): “Notwithstanding this faith (*īmān*) and these circumstances that we mentioned, we see that all the Gentiles accepted them. The disciples turned them from the worship (*ibāda*) of their filthy and unclean demons ... and filled the four corners of the world with this religion.”¹⁴

The term worship, *ibāda* was seen in other examples cited above, as well, and was seen to be an essential constituent of religion (*dīn*); the object of such worship being God.¹⁵ However, as this example indicates, worship can be directed towards daemons, as well – so it is not a term used in an exclusive sense, directed towards only a given religion. Both features – its being a general term and its being a part of *dīn* – show similarities with Islamic usage (Gardet 1965; and McAuliffe – Wilde 2004. Cf. notes 4 and 6 above). The other term, faith: *īmān* is narrower in sense than *dīn*, restricting its meaning only to belief, as a component of *dīn*, which incorporates it. However, its being a part of “religion” shows similarities with Islamic usage.

¹² Lamoreaux’s translation (Abū Qurra, *Theologus autodidactus* 23). Arabic text (Abū Qurra, *Maymar fī wuḡūd al-ḥāliq*, 252–253): *iḍan al-Inḡīl dīn Allāh al-ḥaqq, alladī yaḡibu an yuʿbad bihi, ʿalā ṣifat tilka t-ṭalāṭa al-anwāʿ allatī kunnā ḡakarnā anna ṭabʿatanā ʿallamatnā iyyāhā ... wa-li-ḡālika nuʿminu bi-ḥāḡā d-dīn, wa-nattaḡiḡuhu wa-natamassaku bihi, wa-nuṣbiru ʿalā l-balāyā fī d-dunyā min aḡlihi, li-r-raḡāʿ alladī waʿada.*

¹³ On the close connection between ‘religion’ and ‘Scripture’ in Arabic Christian apologetics, see also al-Khoury 2004:12.

¹⁴ Lamoreaux’s translation (Abū Qurra, *Theologus autodidactus* 44). Arabic text (Abū Qurra, *Maymar fī wuḡūd al-ḥāliq* 264): *fa-naḡnu narā l-umam aḡmaʿīn qad qabilūhum [i.e. qabilū talāmīḡ al-Masīḡ] ʿalā ḥāḡā l-īmān wa-ʿalā l-ḡālāt allatī ḡakarnā wa-ḡawwalathum at-talāmīḡ min ʿibādat ṣayāʿīnihim aṭ-ṭafīsa an-nasiḡa llatī kānū naṣaʿū ʿalayhā, wa-hum wa-ābāʿuhum wa-aḡḡāduhum wa-aḡḡād aḡḡāḡihim, wa-malaʿū d-dunyā min ḥāḡā d-dīn fī arbaʿ zawāyāhā ilā yawminā ḥāḡā.*

¹⁵ Cf. Abū Qurra, *Maymar fī wuḡūd al-ḥāliq*, 217–218: God must be worshipped; 210: in the *dīn* of Islam, God is the only one to be worshipped; 240 and 252–253: after recognizing and accepting the true religion, one must worship God through it.

Abū Qurra's *dīn* is then a general term referring to a relationship between God and man, including a messenger, a book/scripture (which is sometimes used co-extensively with *dīn* itself) and teachings on God, a set of prescriptions and teachings on the hereafter. It can denote communal as well as personal adherence. The most frequently used related terms, as its components, are faith and worship. Let us now turn to the next author, and examine the similarities and differences between their usages.

3.2 Ḥabīb ibn Ḥidma Abū Rā'īṭa t-Takrītī

Abū Rā'īṭa was a famous lay theologian, whose native language was probably Syriac. He belonged to the earliest generation of Arabophone Christians living under Abbasid rule in Iraq, where the increasing influence of the Muslim community enticed him to begin writing apologetic works in Arabic. His extant texts (Abū Rā'īṭa, *Die Schriften*) include pieces written against Muslims and Melkites (Griffith 1980:164–165). His general apology, the *Risāla li-Abī Rā'īṭa at-Takrītī fī iḥbāt dīn an-naṣrāniyya wa-iḥbāt at-tālūt al-muqaddas* (A Treatise of Abū Rā'īṭa at-Takrītī on the proof of the Christian religion and the proof of the Holy Trinity), is the longest and the most comprehensive among his writings. It provides the reader with responses to be used in debates with Muslims over the truth of Christianity, i.e. arguments from logic and reason, as well as scriptural proofs (Keating 2006:73–81, Swanson 2003:174–181).

The most general interpretation of *dīn* in this work is an occurrence that can be compared to the ideas of Abū Qurra:

“The proof of this is the statement of God, ... to His intimate friend, Moses, when he begged Him to save the Sons of Israel from the hand of Pharaoh..., and to reveal to them His religion (*iḥhārahu dīnahu lahum*) and send down to them His book (*inzāl kitābihi 'alayhim*) with His practices (*sunan*) and His law (*ṣarā'i*) by His [own] hand in mercy to them”.¹⁶

This example includes a messenger, through whom God could reveal his religion and a Scripture. The phrases ‘revealing the religion’ and ‘sending down the book’ are arranged in a parallel structure, and given that parallelism had become the leading style in Arabic prose writing by the ninth century (Beeston 1974:134–146, *Idem* 1983:180–185, Sperl 1989:5), taking into consideration the arrangement of the ideas, we have every reason to believe that these two phrases

¹⁶ Keating's translation: Abū Rā'īṭa, *Christian Apologies* 97, 99. Arabic text (Abū Rā'īṭa, *Die Schriften* 138): *al-burhān 'alā dālika qawl Allāh ... li-nağṭhi Mūsā 'inda iltimāsihi ḥalāṣ banī Isrā'īl min yad fir'awn... wa iḥhārahu lahum dīnahu wa-inzāl kitābihi 'alayhim bi-sunanihi wa-ṣarā'i'ihī 'alā yadayhi rāḥiman lahum hunāka.*

(*iẓhāruhu dīnahu lahum – inzāl kitābihi ‘alayhim*) are structured this way intentionally with a synonymous meaning in mind. The book in turn comprises what makes up a religion: practices (*sunan*) and law (*šarā’i’*). *Sunan* may be paralleled to the attributes of God as referred to by Abū Qurra, given that the term, at least in Qur’ānic usage, usually denotes God’s “custom”, something specific of Him.¹⁷ *Šarā’i’*, law (used in the *Qur’ān* with a meaning exclusively referring to Islamic law) is not specified here any further, but it may include positive and negative commands. On a general level, Abū Rā’iṭa’s idea of religion and its components resembles that of Abū Qurra; but the use of the terms of *sunna* and *šarī’a* can also be considered as references to the Islamic vocabulary.

For the sake of brevity, the remaining occurrences are treated in a summarized form. *Dīn* is frequently used together with other terms, and sometimes other terms are used instead of it. Relying on linguistic evidence in interpreting the different terms, we can say that *dīn* is used synonymously with the following terms and notions: *īmān* (“faith”), *maḏhab* (“ideology/doctrine”), *i’tiqād* (“belief or conviction”), *šarī’a* (“law”), *ibāda* (“worship”), and *ṭā’a* (“obedience”).

The synonymy with *īmān* is indicated by e.g. the combined genitive construction “pillars of faith and religion”:

“We are speaking in this [book] in accordance with our beliefs (*i’tiqādāt*) and [drawing] from the teaching (*qawl*) of the best [of our] chosen leaders and pillars of faith (*īmān*) and religion”,¹⁸

The extract also includes the term *i’tiqād*, translated as belief or conviction, which, based on the context can be interpreted as a personal commitment to and acceptance of the teachings of a religion. This is also visible in the next example, which, at the same time illustrates the synonymy with *maḏhab* with the following parallel structure: “every ideology that has spread throughout the earth” – “every religion which has appeared in the world”:

“Know, my brother, that in every ideology (*maḏhab*) that has spread throughout the earth, and every religion (*dīn*) which has appeared in the

¹⁷ Cf. Monnot 1994: 98: “... le mot de *sunna* ... est 18 fois dans le Coran, soit au singulier, soit (...) au pluriel *sunan*. Il y désigne la voie au sens de « coutume », mais toujours ou presque toujours la coutume de Dieu, sa manière d’agir, et non pas la coutume d’un homme ou d’un groupe religieux.”

¹⁸ Keating’s translation (Abū Rā’iṭa, *Christian Apologies* 83), vs. Arabic text (Abū Rā’iṭa, *Die Schriften* 131): *wa-naqūl fī ḏālika bi-ḥasb i’tiqādinā min qawl as-salaf al-afāḏil min al-a’imma al-muntaḥabīn wa-da’im al-īmān wa-d-dīn*.

world, it does not fail that the conviction (*i'tiqād*) [of those who believe in the religion] necessarily has its source in one of seven types [of reasons].”¹⁹

Šarī'a is the law of the Gospel in the next extract, but is interpreted as the religion established by the Gospel; while the synonymy with *'ibāda* is implied by the parallelism between “the aim of worship” and “what is wanted in religion” (*al-maqṣūd bi-l-'ibāda – al-maṭlūb bi-d-diyāna*):

“As for the fifth type [of reason for acceptance of a religion], which is the approval to adorn and ornament oneself with finery, this is also not permitted in the law (*šarī'a*) of the Gospel. Because the aim of worship (*al-maqṣūd bi-l-'ibāda*), what is wanted in religion (*al-maṭlūb bi-d-diyāna*), is the storing up of treasure for the end [of time], the reward hoped for.”²⁰

The term *tā'a* is also used in synonymous parallelism with *dīn*: “diverge from the religion of God” – “lie outside of obedience to Him” (*ḥā'ida 'an dīn Allāh – ḥāriḡa 'an tā'atihi*), as it is shown in the following example:

“[But] these six types [of reasons] diverge from the religion (*dīn*) of God, and lie outside of obedience (*tā'a*) to Him, and so are separated from His religion because of the depravity which possesses them, and the contradictions inherent in them.”²¹

This usage of *dīn*, i.e. that the Scripture is co-extensive with it, that it contains practices (*sunan*) and law (*šarā'i'*), that it is synonymous to faith (*īmān*), ideology/doctrine (*maḏhab*) and obedience (*tā'a*) is similar to the features mentioned by T. Izutsu in pre-Islamic and Qur'ānic use, and resembles Abū Qurra's notion.

Looking at the elaboration of the reasons for converting to a religion other than the true one, we can sum up that according to Abū Rā'īta, these false motives are:

¹⁹ Keating's translation (Abū Rā'īta, *Christian Apologies* 83), vs. Arabic text (Abū Rā'īta, *Die Schriften* 131): *i'lam yā aḥī anna kulla maḏhab tafarra'a fī d-dunyā wa-kull dīn zahara fī l-ālam lā yaḥlū i'tiqād fā'ilihi min aḥad saba't aqsām idṭirāran.*

²⁰ Keating's translation (Abū Rā'īta, *Christian Apologies* 89, 91); vs. Arabic text (Abū Rā'īta, *Die Schriften* 134–135): *ammā l-qism al-ḥāmis allaḏī huwa l-istiḥsān li-tanmīqihi wa-zahrafatihi fa-dālika ayḏan ḡayr ḡā'iz fī šarī'at al-Inḡīl li-anna l-maqṣūd bi-l-'ibāda al-maṭlūb bi-d-diyāna al-muddaḥar li-l-'iqāba al-marḡūww al-mukāfa'a al-mu'tamad 'alayhi fī d-dunyā wa-l-āḥira.*

²¹ Keating's translation (Abū Rā'īta, *Christian Apologies*, 85); vs. Arabic text (Abū Rā'īta, *Die Schriften* 132): *wa-hāḏihi s-sitta l-aqsām ḥā'ida 'an dīn Allāh, wa-ḥāriḡa 'an tā'atihi wa-mufāriqa dīnahu li-mā ya'tarīhā min al-fasād wa-yaltaḥiq 'alayhā min at-tanāquḏ.*

set up against
deviate from
are forbidden to
are not permitted in

:

the Gospel of God (1st reason) (*Inġīl* – i.e. the divine message, manifesting itself in a Book/Scripture)
the law of the Messiah (2nd reason) (*šarī'a*)
the Christian religion (3rd reason) (*dīn*)
the Christian proclamation (4th reason) (*da'wa*)
the law of the Gospel (5th reason), etc.

It implies then that the meanings of the terms (Gospel – law – religion – proclamation) are connected, even synonymous. In this, Abū Rā'īṭa follows the Islamic usage, in which “the words *da'wa*, *sunna*, *šarī'a*, *dīn*, are often used interchangeably” (Canard 1965:168). The phrase “law of the Gospel” (*šarī'at al-Inġīl*), i.e. the use of the name of the Gospel instead of the (Christian) religion recalls Abū Qurra's view, where we could see that the Scripture is close to ‘religion’ in meaning, given that it comprises everything that makes up a religion.

Personal adherence and ‘beliefs’ are expressed by *i'tiqād(āt)*, as it is implied by the participial form *mu'taqidī dīn an-našrāniyya* (‘believers of the Christian religion’), as it can be seen in the passage where Abū Rā'īṭa elaborates on the only right reason that justifies the adherence to a religion, i.e. the one that has proof (*burhān*),²² and endorses faith (*īmān*):

“[However,] the seventh type is one for which there is proof, and upon it faith (*īmān*) is sanctioned by the support of the Lord of Majesty. For understanding is too weak to grasp it, and creation is prevented from effecting [this true religion], apart from the rightly-guided People of Truth. We find that the believers of the Christian religion (*mu'taqidī dīn an-našrāniyya*) reject the six types [of reasons to convert to another religion] foreign to the will of God, His remembrance is exalted! [and] contrary to the religion of truth (*dīn al-ḥaqq*).”²³

I'tiqād implies belonging to a religious group or a set of beliefs. At the end of the sentence God's religion is referred to by the Qur'ānic phrase: *dīn al-ḥaqq*, which, as seen in Abū Qurra's case, is probably deliberately used here.

²² The use of the term *burhān* is a deliberate choice, responding to *Qur'ān sūras* like 2:111: “Produce your *proof*, if you should be truthful” (*Sahih International Translation*).

²³ Keating's translation (Abū Rā'īṭa, *Christian Apologies* 85), vs. Arabic text (Abū Rā'īṭa, *Die Schriften* 132): *fa-ammā l-qism as-sābi' allaḏī bihi yaqūm al-burhān wa-'alayhi mu'tamad al-īmān min ta'yīd Rabb al-'izza bi-mā ya'ġiz al-'aql 'an taḥšīlihi wa-yamtani' al-ḥalq 'an fi'lihi illā li-ahli l-ḥaqq al-muršadīn waġadnā mu'taqidī dīn an-našrāniyya munābidīn al-aqsām as-sitta al-ḥāriġa 'an irādat Allāh ... al-muḏādida li-dīn al-ḥaqq.*

Other synonymies include: “the Gospel of God”, “God’s Covenant”, and the “proclamation” (*daʿwa*), as illustrated by the following:

“The first [motivation] is the longing of this world, the desire of worldly people which [their] souls greedily accept, that is set up against the Gospel of God (*Inġīl Allāh*) and promise of His Covenant (*ʿahd mīṭāqīhi*) by which, for which and to which the peoples were guided to the proclamation (*daʿwa*) of the Messiah.”²⁴

The “Gospel of God”, i.e. the Scripture is used in the meaning of the Christian religion, similarly to Abū Qurra’s usage. The Scripture is paralleled to the “Covenant”, implying that religion is a relationship between God and man. Though its literal meaning is call, invitation, or a proclamation to accept a religion, *daʿwa* has an implication close to that of religion, as implied by the arrangement of the phrases.

Worship at the same time is seen to be a neutral term, like in Abū Qurra’s case, since it can refer to the worship of idols (translated by S. Keating as service of their idols),²⁵ and the notion expressed by it is not connected to any religion exclusively.

The meaning of *dīn* includes proclamation, which, as can be seen in the following example is synonymous to it, and *iḥsān*, i.e. “charity/good deeds”:

“As for the third kind [of reason to convert], the over-powering fear that compels [one] to accept the Christian religion (*dīn*), this is forbidden and foreign to the Christian religion (*dīn*). Its missionaries (*ad-dāʾīn*) were humble men. [...] They taught among the peoples to whom they were sent, prohibiting and forbidding²⁶ them to carry the sword, and the one who accepts their proclamation (*daʿwa*) is restricted from battle and fighting, and the forgiveness of enemies and charity (*iḥsān*) to the one in distress is incumbent upon them.”²⁷

²⁴ Keating’s translation (Abū Rāʾīṭa, *Christian Apologies* 85), vs. Arabic text (Abū Rāʾīṭa, *Die Schriften* 132): *fa-awwaluhā ar-raġba al-ʿāġila al-multamisa min ahl ad-dunyā allatī tašrah al-anfus li-qabūlihā fa-innahā munāšiba li-Inġīl Allāh wa-ʿahd mīṭāqīhi llaḏī bihi wa-lahu wa-ilayhi inqādat al-umam ilā d-daʿwa al-masīḥiyya.*

²⁵ Keating’s translation (Abū Rāʾīṭa, *Christian Apologies* 95, vs. Arabic text (Abū Rāʾīṭa, *Die Schriften* 137): *ʿibādat awṭānihim.*

²⁶ I translate this part differently: “They taught among the peoples that who was sent to them (*al-mursal lahum*) prohibited and forbade.....”

²⁷ Keating’s translation (Abū Rāʾīṭa, *Christian Apologies* 87, 89), vs. Arabic text (Abū Rāʾīṭa, *Die Schriften* 133–134): *wa-ammā l-qism aṭ-ṭālīṭ alladī huwa ar-raġba al-qāhira allatī taḏṭarr ilā qabūl dīn an-našrāniyya fa-ḏālika mumtaniʿ ḥāriġ ʿan dīn an-našrāniyya ... inna ad-dāʾīn ilayhā ḥāmilūn ḏuʿafāʾ masākīn fuqarāʾ mutawāḏiʿūna mabdūdūna ṣay-yādūna ... yuʿallimūna bayna l-umam anna l-mursal lahum nahāhum wa-ḥarrama ʿalayhim*

Though in the quote charity and forgiveness are equally positioned as parts of the (Christian) religion, the present paper only highlights *ihsān*, “charity”, given that it is the feature that can also be found in Islamic theory – as seen above. *Dīn* also includes *divine precepts (farāʾid)*, which are then classified.

“We find that the people of the Christian religion (*dīn*) are obligated by the divine precepts of the Gospel (*farāʾid al-Inḡīl*) to renounce the attainment of the longing[s] of this world and to do away with them. What obligates [these people] is humility, submissiveness, obscurity, and poverty, and they are charged with patience and modesty.”²⁸

As it can be seen in the text, followers of (the Christian) religion are *obliged* by them, which implies that an important component of religion – similarly to Theodore Abū Qurra’s interpretation – is prescriptions: some precepts are positive, while others speak of bans, which parallels the *amr – nahy* distinction seen in Abū Qurra’s description.

The notion of charity and righteous deeds (also expressed by appellatives as *ḥayr* and *barr*) is connected to the “difficulties or burdens” Christians must endure; and these attitudes are both associated with obedience (*tāʾa*), making a part of it, i.e. these are commands.

“That which they are assured of is that when, during their lives, they do acts of goodness and righteousness (*afʿāl al-ḥayr wa-l-barr*) [and] all of what is enjoined upon them, [such as] the acceptance of hardship and exertion (*at-taʿb wa-n-naṣab*) in obedience (*tāʾa*) to God and for His pleasure, and if they count all of this to themselves, they say that they are useless servants (*ʿabīd*), doing what they were commanded (*umirū*) by Him [that] service [for] their Master made incumbent upon them, without [the expectation of] praise or thanks. What [worldly] longing could lead someone in this position to accept a religion (*dīn*) whose commandments (*farāʾiduhu*) are like these?”²⁹

ḥaml as-sayf, wa-ḥaṣara ʿalā qābilī daʿwatihim al-mukāfaha al-munāḍala wa-iftaraḍa ʿalayhim al-ṣafḥ ʿan al-aʿḍāʾ wa-l-ihsān ilā mā asāʾ.

²⁸ Keating’s translation (Keating 2006:85), vs. Arabic text (Abū Rāʾiṭa, *Die Schriften* 132): *wa-waḡadnā ahl dīn an-naṣrāniyya qad alzamū min farāʾid al-Inḡīl tark idrāk ar-raḡba al-ʿāḡila wa-izālatahā mā alzamahum min at-tawāḍuʿ wa-d-dilla wa-l-ḥumūl wa-l-qilla yukallifuhum al-ṣabr wa-l-qanūʾ.*

²⁹ Keating’s translation (Abū Rāʾiṭa, *Christian Apologies* 85–87), vs. Arabic text (Abū Rāʾiṭa, *Die Schriften* 132–133): *mimmā akkada ʾindahum annahum idā faʿalū afʿāl al-ḥayr wa-l-barr kullahā allatī aḡraḍahum ʿalayhim min qabūl at-taʿb wa-n-naṣab fī tāʾat Allāh wa-murḍātihi madā ḥayātihim an yaʿdū ḍālika kullahu ʾinda anḡusihim fa-yaqūlū annahum ʿabīd bāṭilūn faʿalū mā umirū bihi mimmā yalzamuhum min ḥidmat sayyidihim bi-ḡayr*

Those who adhere to the “obedience to God” are considered “servants” (*‘abīd*), which corroborates the synonymy of religion and obedience. However, given that the Arabic term *‘abd* (“servant”), i.e. one who follows a religion goes back to the same roots as those of worship, or service, it indicates a relatedness between religion and worship as well. The commands that made part of religion in Abū Qurra’s usage, are also seen here to constitute parts of a religion. On the other hand, command (*amr*) and religious duty, commandment (*farīda*) are seen to be semantically connected. In the passage, the double-faceted meaning of *dīn* (including both reified and non-reified religion), demonstrated by T. Izutsu can be discerned: in line with the Semitic thinking, this distinction might go back to early Christian (even Jewish) understanding, while *‘abīd* (servants) is in line with Qur’ānic usage as well. Both features resemble Islamic usage, as well as Abū Qurra’s interpretation.

The concluding remarks on the false reasons put law, religion, proclamation, and obedience in a context that confirms the inherent synonymy of the terms and the connection of their notions; e.g. synonymy is enhanced by the fact that ‘Christian law’ prevails over other ‘religions’; while proclaimers and obedience are seen to be essential parts of religion – similarly as seen in Abū Qurra’s case:

“Since it has been shown that the Christian law (*šarī’a*) differs from [these] six kinds [of false reasons to follow a religion], it remains that the characteristic of it, the inherent property belonging to it, is that it is evident and demonstrated to be above every religion (*dīn*) by the confirmation of the Lord of the Worlds, Who confirmed with it those who proclaimed [the Christian law] (*ad-dā’īn*) through signs and miracles and clear proofs which led all of the peoples to accept it willingly (*ṭaw’an*).”³⁰

The passage introduces another idea of major importance to Abū Rā’īṭa, namely that the true religion is accompanied by miracles. Abū Rā’īṭa’s frequent references to the latter phenomenon constitute an implicit allusion to Islam’s not being a true message, given that no miracles prove its truth. What S. T. Keating translates with the word “willingly” may eventually refer to obedience, too, since the Arabic word

ḥamd wa-lā šukr. fa-ayyat raġba qādat man kānat ḥālatuhu hādīhi ilā qabūl dīn farā’īduhu hākaqā?

³⁰ Keating’s translation (Abū Rā’īṭa, *Christian Apologies* 91–93), vs. Arabic text (Abū Rā’īṭa, *Die Schriften* 135): *wa-lammā tabayyana anna š-šarī’a l-masīḥiyya muḥāriqa li-l-aqsām as-sitta fa-qad baqiya an yakūn al-ḥāṣṣ bi-hā al-lāzim lahā annahā zaharat wa-istaḥarat ‘alā ġamīr al-adyān bi-ta’īd Rabb al-‘ālamīn allaḏī ayyada bihi ad-dā’īn ilayhā min al-āyāt al-mu’ġizāt wa-l-barāhīn al-wāḏiḥāt allatī qādat ġamīr al-umam ilā qabūlihā ṭaw’an.*

goes back to the same roots. Willingness is a key factor in Abū Rā'īṭa's apology for Christianity juxtaposed to the coercion that he implies to be present in Islam.

We could see that many of Abū Rā'īṭa's terms and notions overlapped those presented by Abū Qurra, but the Jacobite author used a greater variety of terms. The notion of "religion" that implies or includes teachings on God and moral prescriptions was a shared idea, and both authors used *dīn* as a term not exclusively denoting Christianity. In both cases, we could see that most terms and notions referring to religion or a component of it could be used interchangeably. Now let us turn our attention to our last author and examine his understanding of religion.

3.3 'Ammār al-Baṣrī

'Ammār al-Baṣrī (d. ca. 840 AD), a Nestorian theologian of vast religious and philosophical education, is a poorly studied yet interesting author. (The fragments of information we possess about him have been collected by M. Hayek 1976 and 1986.) His name implies that he was a native of Basra, an important Nestorian centre of the age. Two of his works survived: *The Book of the Proof* (*Kitāb al-Burhān*), a reference work for Christians who might be interrogated by Muslim opponents on controversial issues (Beaumont 2011:68; Griffith 1983 and 2009); and *The Book of the Questions and Answers* (*Kitāb al-Masā'il wa-l-aḡwiba*), a general apology. These are among the most sophisticated texts in early Arabic Christian theology. The present paper will concentrate on the second part of the latter piece, where 'Ammār seeks to demonstrate the reasonableness of the Christian faith and the authenticity of the Gospels, using mostly rational arguments.

First, let us examine an example that may parallel the "general definition" of the previous authors. 'Ammār says that

"different groups take up different religions (*yatadayyanūn bi-adyān*), they have different books (*kutub*) at hand, which include orders and prohibition (*amr wa-nahy*), laws and religious duties (*ṣarā'i' wa-farā'id*), mention resurrection and resurgence, reward and punishment (*tawāb wa-iqāb*); while all parties claim that their book is the Covenant of God with humankind, which was given to them by His messengers (*rusul*), through whom God showed His signs (*āyāt*) and proof (*burhān*)."³¹

³¹ 'A. al-Baṣrī, *Kitāb al-Masā'il wa-l-aḡwiba*, 135–136: *wa-qad narā aqwāman mutaṣat-tita yatadayyanūn bi-adyān mutafāwita, wa-fī aydihim kutub muḥtalifa min amr wa-nahy wa-ṣarā'i' wa-farā'id wa-ḡikri ba'tin wa-nuṣūrin wa-tawābin wa-iqābin yaddat kull ḥizb minhum anna kitābahum huwa 'ahd Allāh ilā ḥalqihī atāhum bihī rusuluhu wa-aḡhara 'alā*

The same “components” are listed that were the parts of religion in Abū Qurra’s interpretation, and even the major part of the terms are mutually shared ones, though ‘Ammār mentions some new aspects, or slightly modifies the notions included. The things ordered and prohibited are expressed the same way, though there is no mention of licit and illicit (as referred to by previous authors using Islamic terminology). Besides order and prohibition, law, and religious duties, as well as reward and punishment are also mentioned as constituents of religions, which is also a shared notion of all authors examined. At the end of this quote, we can see that he emphasizes the importance of signs as much as his Jacobite contemporary. We can see that the terms used are not restricted to an exclusively Christian sense, since the author discusses religions in general.

For the sake of brevity, the remaining occurrences will be presented in a summarized form. ‘Ammār frequently uses the words *sabīl*, *ṭarīq* (“road”/“path”) instead of religion, especially in phrases like “God’s paths”, “the paths of the Truth”, etc. In the second question, al-Baṣrī makes the opponent ask why God quit showing signs through his messengers (he uses the term *rasūl*, messenger, also used in Islamic phraseology.)³² His answer is that it would be contrary to the reward God prepared for the considerate, who walk on the ways of truth.³³ The way or path of truth, *sabīl al-ḥaqq* appears in the context with a meaning close to religion, but with ethical connotations, given that it is rewarded in the hereafter. We may here recall the importance of the concept of “way, road” in Semitic languages in general and in the religions that were first expressed in these languages (which then appeared in other ecclesiastical languages, too – cf. the Greek ἡ ὁδός). As G. Monnot (1994:97) claims, words referring to way, road, path are frequently used in the *Qurʾān*, but mostly with the meaning of conduct, and not as technical terms referring to religion. We may also see in the passage that an important part of religion is freedom: constantly produced miracles and signs would be a forcing factor, they would necessitate obedience (*tāʿa*), taking human freedom away. Signs were shown only to those who lived in the age of the covenant that God made with humankind, since they had no basis for inferring the truth of the message. However, the situation has changed, and signs are not sent so

aydīhim bi-dālika āyātīhi wa-burhānahu. The translations from ‘A. al-Baṣrī’s work are mine.

³² “What restrained Him from sending his messengers (*rusul*) to them again and again, and stick to the performance of His signs (*āyāt*) through the hands of His messengers?” ‘A. al-Baṣrī, *Kitāb al-Masāʿil wa-l-aḡwiba*, 128: *fa-mā manaʿahu an yuwātir rusulahu bi-dālika wa-yudmin iẓhār āyātīhi ʿalā yaday [sic!] rusulīhi?*

³³ “He was prevented by His own preparation of a great reward for the considerate who walk on the paths of truth.” ‘A. al-Baṣrī, *Kitāb al-Masāʿil wa-l-aḡwiba*, 128: *manaʿahu min dālika ... taʿammuduhu ḡazīl ṭawāb ahl al-ʿināya wa-l-baḥṭ as-sālikīna subul al-ḥaqq*.

that the ones who work for the recognition of truth, walk obediently (*tā'a*) and according to their custom (*sunnat anfusihim*) on God's ways (*subul*) should deserve reward (*tawāb*).³⁴ The term and related notion of covenant (*'ahd*) is of great importance for the Nestorian author, as we will see in the next example; here it can stand for Scripture or a pact, or relationship between God and man. The way 'Ammār emphasizes the importance of signs resembles the Jacobite author's idea concerning their significance. Obedience (*tā'a*) is a central part of religion in 'Ammār's understanding, but the Nestorian author emphasizes the necessity of its voluntary nature.

Dīn is also equated with a covenant, i.e. a connection between God and human-kind in the following passage, where the opponent asks:

“What is his covenant (*'ahd*) that He confirmed as his religion (*dīn*) and through which he taught to them His ways (*subul*) and how to obey Him (*tā'a*)?”³⁵

This can be taken for another definition for *dīn*, which is then an alliance between God and man; of which human obedience (*tā'a*) constitutes a major part; and through which God's teaching concerning the right path is revealed. Obedience on the other hand is structured to be parallel to [the following of] God's ways, which implies the synonymy of the two words. These ingredients are in line with previously seen Christian attitudes. 'Ammār al-Baṣrī answers the question the following way:

“the covenant [that can be taken for God's *dīn*] is the one which conforms to his justice and which is accommodated to his excellence. By this, I mean his Gospel [...] and Scripture that has spread among the peoples and nations.”³⁶

³⁴ “He performed them for those who lived at the time when He sent down His Covenant for them, given that at that time they had had no previous proof which they could have used as a basis for inferring the justification for what He sent down to them – [it was possible] only by the signs. Later, He quit producing them or their offspring, for He wanted them to reward those among them who acquired knowledge of Him by searching, and those who walk His paths in obedience and according to their custom.” ‘A. al-Baṣrī, *Kitāb al-Masā'il wa-l-aḡwiba*, 129: *aḡharahā li-ahli l-'aṣr allaḡdīna anzala 'ahdahu 'alayhim, li-mā lam takun 'alayhim id ḡāka huḡḡa mutaḡaddima yastadillūna bihā dūna l-āyāt 'alā taḡḡiq mā anzala ilayhim. tumma mana'a ḡālika min a'ḡābihim min ba'd, li-mā arāda min inḡāb at-tawāb li-muktasibī ma'rifat 'ahdihi baḡḡahum, wa-sālikī subulihī bi-tā'atihim wa-sunnati anfusihim.*

³⁵ ‘A. al-Baṣrī, *Kitāb al-Masā'il wa-l-aḡwiba*, 129: *fa-ayyamā 'ahduhu llaḡdī raḡiya bihi l-ḡaḡqu li-dīnihi, wa-'arraḡahum fīhi tā'atahu wa-subulahu?*

³⁶ ‘A. al-Baṣrī, *Kitāb al-Masā'il wa-l-aḡwiba*, 129: *'ahduhu ḡālika llaḡdī yuṣākilu 'adlahu wa-yulā'imu faḡlahu. A'nī Inḡīlahu al-maḡsūr wa-kitābahu al-manṣūr fī aydī l-umam wa-ṣ-ṣu'ūb.*

This interpretation is similar to Abū Qurra’s rational approach to the cognition of the true religion: the lore of religions has to be compared to what can rationally be known of God (in this case it is justice and excellence), and the one conforming this is the right one. The covenant, i.e. God’s *dīn* is interchangeable with the Gospel, which is a feature also seen at the Melkite author.

To make a shift from the Gospel to a more general approach, we may add that *dīn* is sometimes used co-extensively with Scripture (*kitāb*): e.g. in the fifth question when the opponent refers to “those who have accepted this religion and this scripture” (*dīn wa-kitāb*);³⁷ or when ‘Ammār refers to “Scripture that explains a religion”³⁸ (every religion has such a book); but the synonymy of *dīn* and *kitāb* is also attested in the example where a proclaimer invites to the Torah – i.e. instead of the invitation to Judaism, the name of its Scripture is given; which is followed by “the taking up of the Torah”, i.e. instead of the name of religion, i.e. Judaism, the name of the Scripture, the Torah is given.³⁹ (The non-exclusive nature of these terms is indicated by the fact that apart from the Torah and Judaism, the same idea is expressed with Mani’s message and religion, the Qur’ān and Islam, etc.) In the very same extract faith (*īmān*) is mentioned along with practice (*a’māl*), and the two are contrasted to proclamation (*da’wa*) and laws (*šarā’i’*) – implying religion. It is suggested then that religion is made up from deeds (*a’māl*) and faith (*īmān*).

Sometimes *dīn* is replaced with proclamation (*da’wa*), e.g. when ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī uses *dīn* and *da’wa* alternately in similes and comparisons to the Kingdom of Heaven, the mustard seed, a net for catching fish, the fermenting dough, and a feast,⁴⁰ which proves evidently the synonymy of the two terms.

³⁷ ‘A. al-Baṣrī, *Kitāb al-Masā’il wa-l-aḡwiba*, 130: *allaḡīna qabilū hāḡā d-dīn wa-hāḡā l-kitāb*.

³⁸ ‘A. al-Baṣrī, *Kitāb al-Masā’il wa-l-aḡwiba*, 145: *kitāb mubayyin dīn*.

³⁹ “We do not doubt that the proclaimer to the Torah – given that we find that his whole community stands firm in the devoutness/religiosity of the Torah – from the time he started his proclamation for his religion has never displayed anything that would contradict to his proclamation: i.e. the *tawḡīd* and the laws established in his Torah. Should his proclamation and action have had contradicted his proclamation and the laws of his Scripture, then his community would not have had accepted his religion and would not have inclined to his Scripture.” ‘A. al-Baṣrī, *Kitāb al-Masā’il wa-l-aḡwiba*, 145: *ka-mā lā našukk fī d-dā’ī ilā at-Tawrāt, id ulfiyat ummatuhu muḡīmatan bi-aḡma ‘ihā alā at-tadayyun bi-Tawrātihi, annahu munḡu inba ‘aḡa li-da ‘wa ummatihi ilā dīnihi lam yuḡhir min nafsihi ḡilāfa mā da ‘ahā ilayhi min at-tawḡīd wa-š-šarā’i’ al-muḡbata fī Tawrātihi. wa-law ḡālafat a ‘māluhu wa-īmānuhu da ‘watahu wa-šarā’i’ kitābihi, idan la-mā qabilat ummatuhu ‘alā ḡālika dīnahu wa-lā dānat bi-kitābihi*.

⁴⁰ “The Kingdom of Heaven – I mean its religion – resembles the mustard seed... This proclamation resembles a net ... this religion resembles the fermenting dough ... this proclamation resembles a feast ... ‘A. al-Baṣrī, *Kitāb al-Masā’il wa-l-aḡwiba*, 131: *tašbahu*

In a similar manner to other Christian authors' usage, 'Ammār al-Baṣrī does not use these terms referring to Christianity exclusively. E.g: he refers to the worship of idols (*ibādat awṭān*) and the obedience to Satan/Evil (*tā'at aš-šayṭān*),⁴¹ which indicates that both worship and obedience are general practices and are not exclusively dedicated to God; but the parallel structure they are put in also indicates their synonymy.

'Religion' (*dīn*) can also refer to other religions, not just to the true one: e.g. when 'Ammār al-Baṣrī writes that "the Wise has sent his messengers and performed signs and wonders through them in order to establish his religion (*dīn*) and proclamation (*da'wa*) among the people, and in order to overthrow the religions of forgers (*adyān al-mubṭilīn*)."⁴²

Related terms include 'confession' and 'faith', which are parts of a religion, e.g. when 'Ammār writes that "God sent messengers (*rusul*), whom he ordered to invite (*da'wa*) people to the faith (*īmān*) and confession (*iqrār*) of a Father, a Son and a Holy Spirit, as one God, one Creator, and one Lord."⁴³ Proclamation, or invitation (*da'wa*) implies that there is a religion, here, however, instead of using a single term: *dīn* a circumscription is given by the list of its components.

Another synonym of religion is *milla* – in the sense of the religious community, which in turn reflects Qur'ānic usage:

"You have [certainly] not heard of or seen a man of the world who had left his community (*milla*) in which he had grown up for another community (*milla*) except for one of the reasons we have mentioned."⁴⁴

malakūt as-samawāt, wa-ya'nī bi-dālika dīnahu, ḥabbat al-ḥardal ... tašbahu ḥāḍihi d-da'wa šabakatan... yašbahu ḥāḍā d-dīn ḥamīratan laṭīfatan ... tašbahu ḥāḍihi d-da'wa walīmatan.

⁴¹ "His Scripture relates His commanding His messengers to proclaim with a clear proclamation [that] the peoples [should turn away] from the worship of idols, [the peoples] who had previously been dedicated to the obedience to daemons." 'A. al-Baṣrī, *Kitāb al-Masā'il wa-l-aḡwiba*, 132: *fa-huwa llaḍī yuḥbiru kitābuhu min amrihi li-rusulihī bi-da'wat aš-šu'ūb min 'ibādat al-awṭān al-munhamikīn kānū fī tā'at aš-šayṭān da'watan ḥāliṣatan.*

⁴² 'A. al-Baṣrī, *Kitāb al-Masā'il wa-l-aḡwiba*, 132: *kāna l-ḥakīm ... arsala rusulahu wa-azhara 'alā aydihim āyātihi wa-a'lāmahu li-yuqīm bi-hā fī n-nās dīnahu wa-da'watahu wali-yubṭil bi-hā adyān al-mubṭilīn.*

⁴³ 'A. al-Baṣrī, *Kitāb al-Masā'il wa-l-aḡwiba*, 139: *arsala rusulan amarahum bi-da'wat an-nās ilā l-īmān wa-l-iqrār bi-l-Ab wa-l-Ibn wa-r-Rūḥ al-Quds, ilāh wāḥid, ḥāliq wāḥid rabb wāḥid.*

⁴⁴ 'A. al-Baṣrī, *Kitāb al-Masā'il wa-l-aḡwiba*, 142: *wa-anta lam tasma' wa-lam tara bi-raḡulin wāḥid min ahl ad-dunyā intaqala 'an milla naša'a 'alayhā ilā milla uḥrā siwāhā dūna iḥdā l-ḥiṣāl allatī ḍakarnāhā.*

Leaving a community for another one – taking the wider context into consideration which elaborates on the reasons that make someone adhere to a religion – means conversion from one religion to another.

‘Ammār’s usage has several shared features with that of the previous two authors, but he introduces new terms, as well, as it could be seen e.g. in the field of “path, way”. While the previous two authors mostly wrote about carrying out good deeds/charity, ‘Ammār’s approach brings “practice” into the fore, as a constituent of any religion – together with faith (or cf. Abū Qurra’s pair of faith and worship). Though “community” played an important role in the previous two authors’ discourse, too, ‘Ammār’s *milla* is of a higher level, being a synonym for religion.

4 Concluding remarks

In the course of investigation, I demonstrated that the ways the first Arabic Christian authors used *dīn* reflect a richness of connotations. These imply such a variety of meanings and tones that it is improbable to be the invention of the first generation of Arabophone Christians. There must have been a preexistent set of concepts which they could rely upon and which then came to be articulated in Arabic by them. Furthermore, there are a lot of similarities between the usage of terms and the interpretations, which further reflects a preexistent Greek/Syriac tradition known by all denominations. On the other hand, some Semitic-Islamic features in the use of synonymous terms were identified, which attests to the role of the Muslim–Christian interaction in the development of Arabic theological terminology.

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