

CORRESPONDING ACROSS RELIGIOUS BORDERS
THE LETTER OF IBN TAYMIYYA TO A CRUSADER IN CYPRUS

“If they kill me it will be martyrdom for me. If they expel me, it will be migration for me; if they expel me to Cyprus, I will call its people to Allāh so that they answer me. If they imprison me, it will be a place of worship for me”.

(Ibn Taymiyya, when told that his enemies were plotting against him)¹.

SUMMARY: Presentation of Taqī al-dīn Aḥmad ibn Taymiyya’s *Al-risāla al-qubruṣiyya*, a letter written to a crusader baron in Cyprus, probably John II of Giblet, sometime between early 1303 and mid-1304. In his letter – to which Ibn Taymiyya appends a long exposition on religious history with a view to convincing his interlocutor of the supremacy of Islam over other religions of the book –, the famous Ḥanbalite jurist requests humanitarian treatment for the Muslim captives in John’s power while they await ransom.

1. *Ibn Taymiyya: a militant life*

“Celui qui fut, dans l’Islam, l’adversaire le plus logiquement implacable de toute adoration vouée à d’autre que Dieu” (He who in Islam was the most logical and implacable foe of all worship directed at anyone other than God). With these words Henri Laoust summarizes the personality of the Ḥanbalite jurist and theologian Aḥmad ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328), one of the most important Sunni thinkers of all time². Embarked on a socio-moral project to reform contemporary Islamic society by means of a return to the Qur’ān and the authentic prophetic tradition, Ibn Taymiyya became known as a combative polemicist against everything that, in his eyes, affected the purity of Islam³. From his first public intervention in 1294, in the affair of a Christian who converted to Islam to avoid punishment for having insulted the Prophet, until he was deprived of paper and ink a few months before he died a prisoner in the citadel of Damascus, Ibn Taymiyya never ceased to direct his attacks at extremist Shī’i sects, Islamic rationalist theologians and Peripatetic philosophers, Ṣūfis of monistic tendency, the morally corrupting influence of Christians and Jews, and what he saw as exaggerated expressions of popular religiosity among his own coreligionists.

As Caterina Bori points out in her remarkable biographical study, the political and social activism of Ibn Taymiyya reflects the activist current of the Ḥanbalite school of Damascus in the 13th and 14th centuries. What sets him apart from his predecessors, however, is the intensity of his participation in public life and the close relationships he maintained with the political authorities of his time⁴. His vision of

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¹ Related by his disciple Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 1350); quoted in Ibn Taymiyya, *The Decisive Criterion Between the Friends of Allāh and the Friends of Shaytān*, trans. Abū Rumaysah, 2nd rev. ed., Daar us-Sunnah Publishers, Birmingham 2005, pp. 20–21.

² H. Laoust, “La biographie d’Ibn Taimīya d’après Ibn Katīr”, *Bulletin d’Études Orientales* 9 (1942–1943) 115–162, here 162. Laoust’s study should be supplemented with the additions and corrections offered by Y. Michot in *Muslims under Non-Muslim Rule: Ibn Taymiyya on Fleeing from Sin, Kinds of Emigration, the Status of Mardin, the Conditions for Challenging Power*, Interface Publications, Oxford 2006, pp. 149–169. For a standard account of Ibn Taymiyya’s life and times see V.E. Makari, *Ibn Taymiyyah’s Ethics: The Social Factor*, Scholars Press, Chico, CA 1983, pp. 7–29. See also Sh. Ahmed and Y. Rapoport (eds.), *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, Proceedings of a conference held at Princeton University, 8–10 April 2005, Oxford University Press, Karachi 2010.

³ On Ibn Taymiyya’s role as a reformer and his influence, see Thomas F. Michel, “Ibn Taymiyya: Islamic Reformer”, *Studia Missionalia* 34 (1985) 213–232; Fazlur Rahman, *Revival and Reform in Islam: A Study of Islamic Fundamentalism* (E. Moosa ed.), Oneworld, Oxford 2000, pp. 132–165; and H. Laoust, “L’influence d’Ibn Taimīya”, in: A.T. Welch and P. Cachia (eds.), *Islam: Past Influence and Present Challenge*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 1979, pp. 15–33.

⁴ C. Bori, *Ibn Taimīya: una vita esemplare. Analisi delle fonti classiche della sua biografia*, Supp. n. 1 alla Rivista degli studi orientali volume LXXVI, Istituti editoriali e poligrafici internazionali, Pisa 2003, pp. 111–140.

Islamic society includes, in Bori's words, "la piena convinzione che all'uomo di scienza spettò il dovere e la responsabilità di prendere parte alla gestione della 'cosa pubblica'" (the full conviction of the scholar's duty and responsibility to participate in the management of public affairs)⁵. Equally convinced that political authorities should accept the advice of scholars in order to uphold the religious ideal, Ibn Taymiyya did not hesitate to offer his counsel to Muslim sultans and governors, and occasionally, as we shall see in what follows, to non-Muslim princes as well⁶.

I present here a letter that Ibn Taymiyya wrote sometime between early 1303 and mid-1304 to a crusader baron in Cyprus, probably John II of Giblet (d. 1315), requesting that the Muslim captives in his power be well-treated while awaiting ransom. These captives had most likely been captured in one of the crusader raids on the Levantine coast during the Mongol campaigns into Syria in 1299, 1300 and 1303. In this letter, known as *Al-risāla al-qubruṣiyya* or *The Cypriot Letter*, Ibn Taymiyya appends to his humanitarian appeal a long exposition on religious history, with a view to convincing his interlocutor of Islam's supremacy over the other Religions of the Book. Thus, in addition to its value as an historical testimony to the author's role during the Mongol campaigns, this letter is important in that it anticipates, in brief form, the main ideas that Ibn Taymiyya will develop some years later in his famous work, *Al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ li-man baddala dīn al-masīḥ* (The Right Answer to Those who Changed the Religion of Christ), one of the landmarks in the history of Muslim-Christian polemics⁷.

The Cypriot Letter should not be confused with another work of similar title known as *The Letter from Cyprus*, a reworking by an anonymous author in Cyprus of the letter that Paul of Antioch, the Melkite Bishop of Sidon, had written approximately one century earlier to one of his Muslim friends from this city. The Cypriot reworking of Paul of Antioch's letter was sent to Ibn Taymiyya in Damascus in the year 715 A.H. (corresponding to the period between March 26, 1316 and March 15, 1317). *The Right Answer* was written in reply⁸.

While *The Cypriot Letter* is not among Ibn Taymiyya's most quoted works, its different translations attest nonetheless to its interest⁹. Yet, as far as my knowledge extends, this work has received relatively little attention in the English-speaking world, with the exception of Thomas F. Michel's summary in the introduction to his translation of *The Right Answer*¹⁰. I shall begin by devoting some attention to the historical context and the different hypotheses that have been put forward thus far concerning *The Cypriot Letter*'s mysterious addressee. Then I will give a detailed account of the structure of the letter and the main points developed therein. In so doing, I shall try to point out the many corresponding points that exist

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

⁶ On the political thought of Ibn Taymiyya, see H. Laoust, *Essai sur les doctrines sociales et politiques de Taḳī-d-Dīn Aḥmad b. Taymīya*, Recherches d'archéologie, de philologie et d'histoire, 10, IFAO, Cairo 1939, pp. 278–317; Ann K.S. Lambton, *State and Government in Medieval Islam: An Introduction to the Study of Islamic Political Theory: The Jurists*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1981, pp. 138–151; Makari, *Ibn Taymiyyah's Ethics*, pp. 133–157; and C. Bori, "Théologie politique et Islam. À propos d'Ibn Taymiyya (m. 728/1328) et du sultanat mamelouk", *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 224 (2007) 5–46.

⁷ See an extensive (though not full) translation in Th.F. Michel, *A Muslim Theologian's Response to Christianity: Ibn Taymiyya's Al-Jawab al-Saḥīḥ*, Caravan Books, Delmar, NY 1984. See also I. Di Matteo, *Ibn Taymiyyah o Riassunto della sua opera al-Jawāb al-Ṣaḥīḥ li-man baddala dīn al-Masīḥ*, Tipografia Domenico Vena, Palermo 1912.

⁸ On the relation between Paul of Antioch's original work and the Cypriot reworking, see D. Thomas, "Paul of Antioch's *Letter to a Muslim Friend* and *The Letter from Cyprus*", in D. Thomas (ed.), *Syrian Christians under Islam: The First Thousand Years*, Brill, Leiden 2001, pp. 203–221, and Idem, "Idealism and Intransigence: A Christian-Muslim Encounter in Early Mamluk Times", *Mamlūk Studies Review* 13/2 (2009) 85–103. For the dating of these works see S. Khalil Samir, "Notes sur la 'Lettre à un musulman de Sidon' de Paul d'Antioche", *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica* 24 (1993) 179–195. *The Letter from Cyprus* was also sent, in 1321, to another Muslim personality of Damascus, Shams al-dīn Muḥammad ibn Abī Ṭālib al-Anṣārī al-Dimashqī (d. 1327), who responded with yet another refutation. See R.Y. Ebied and D. Thomas (eds.), *Muslim-Christian Polemic during the Crusades: The Letter from the People of Cyprus and Ibn Abī Ṭālib al-Dimashqī's Response*, History of Christian-Muslim Relations, 2, Brill, Leiden 2005. If Samir Khalil is right, the date of composition of *The Right Answer* cannot be earlier than March 1316, given that Ibn Taymiyya composed it in reply to *The Letter from Cyprus*. Michot, however, places it as early as 1312. See Michot, *Muslims*, 163.

⁹ Th. Raff, *Das Sendschreiben nach Zypern (ar-Risāla al-Qubruṣiyya) von Taqī ad-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn Taimīya (661–782 A.H.=1263–1328 A.D.)*, Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, Bonn 1971; J.R. Michot, *Lettre à un roi croisé (al-Risāla al-Qubruṣiyya)*, Bruylant Academia, Louvain-La-Neuve – Tawhid, Lyon 1995; M. Di Branco, *Lettera a un sovrano crociato: Sui fondamenti della "vera religione"*, Biblioteca di via Senato Edizioni, Milano 2004. See also another German translation by S.M. Bleher, *Das ist die aufrechte Religion: Brief des Ibn Taymiya an den König von Zypern*, available online at: <http://islamische-datenbank.de/Das-ist-die-aufrechte-Religion/>.

¹⁰ Michel, *Response*, pp. 71–78.

between this letter and *The Right Answer*, thereby confirming Michel's remark that "Ibn Taymiyya's attitude towards Christianity developed very little during his lifetime"¹¹.

2. *Mongols and Mamluks: an Islamic world in convulsion*

The second half of the 13th and early 14th centuries was a period of great agitation in the central areas of the Islamic world. The empire of Gengis Khān, inherited by his children, continued to expand after his death in 1227. In 1253, one of his grandchildren, Möngke, who had become the Great Khān, sent his brother Hülegü on the double mission of crushing Ismā'īli power and subjugating the 'Abbasid caliphate. This campaign was to transform the Middle Eastern landscape definitively. In February 1258, Hülegü's troops took Baghdad and the Caliph was executed. With the fall of the 'Abbasids, it did not take long before Georgians and Armenians sided with the Mongols. Aleppo fell in February 1260 and Damascus surrendered shortly afterwards. The apparently unstoppable Mongols suffered their first setback at the hands of the Egyptian Mamluks at the famous battle of 'Ayn Jālūt, in Palestine, on September 3, 1260.

As would become increasingly clear during the following decades, this defeat did not put an end to Mongol expansionist ambitions. Nevertheless, it did establish two areas of politico-military influence: the Mamluks on one side, and the Ilkhānid Mongols – descendants of Hülegü (d. 1265) – on the other. A period of hostility began between these two powers that would last over sixty years. On the Mamluk side, the victory of 'Ayn Jālūt marked the beginning of their hegemony in Egypt and Syria. Under the leadership of Baybars (1260–1277) and his successors, the Mamluks conquered, one after another, all the crusader enclaves that were left on the Syrian coast: Caesarea, Haifa, Arsuf, Safed, Jaffa, Antioch, and Tripoli. The fall of Acre in 1291 signaled the end of the crusader presence in the Holy Land. Ibn Taymiyya was 27 years old at the time¹².

3. *The Mongol invasions of Ghāzān*

On their side, the Ilkhānid Mongols, based in Persia, controlled, directly or indirectly, the territory that corresponds today to Iran, Iraq, most of Turkey, the Caucasus region, Turkmenistan and the north of Afghanistan. Soon after his enthronement, Ghāzān, a great-grandson of Hülegü, converted to Sunni Islam in 1295. His newly acquired religious allegiance did not, however, prevent him from attempting to invade Syria in three occasions: in 1299, 1300 and 1301, during which Ibn Taymiyya became "le porte-parole du parti de la résistance... le champion de la légalité mamlūke contre l'Islām suspect des envahisseurs mongols" (the spokesperson for the resistance party... the champion of Mamluk legality against the suspect Islam of the Mongol invaders)¹³.

1303!

On September 7, 1299, Ghāzān crossed the Euphrates at the head of a large contingent which included Georgians and Armenians, as well as Mamluk defectors. After defeating the Egyptian army at the battle of Wādī l-Khaznadār, near Homs, on December 22 of that year, the Mongol army marched toward Damascus.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 74. Morabia also notices the continuity in content between the *The Cypriot Letter* and *The Right Answer*. However, he seems to assume that *The Cypriot Letter* is a later work when he writes, "Dans sa *Risāla qubruṣiyya* (Épître chypriote), Ibn Taymiyya reprend, d'une manière ramassée, l'argumentation développée dans le *Gawāb*." A. Morabia, "Ibn Taymiyya, les Juifs et la Tora", *Studia Islamica* 49 (1979) 91–122, here 94, note 1.

¹² The bibliography on this period is abundant. See, among others, R. Amitai-Preiss, *Mongols and Mamluks: the Mamluk-Ilkhānid War, 1260–1281*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1995; R. Irwin, *The Middle East in the Middle Ages: The Early Mamluk Sultanate 1250–1382*, Croom Helm, London 1986; D.O. Morgan, "The Mongols in Syria, 1260–1300", in P.W. Edbury (ed.), *Crusade and Settlement*, University College Cardiff Press, Cardiff 1985, pp. 231–235; S. Schein, "Gesta Dei per Mongolos 1300: The Genesis of a Non-Event", *The English Historical Review* 94 (1979) 805–819; and A.D. Stewart, *The Armenian Kingdom and the Mamluks: War and Diplomacy During the Reigns of Het'um II (1289–1307)*, The Medieval Mediterranean, 34, Brill, Leiden 2001.

¹³ Laoust, "La biographie d'Ibn Taimīya", p. 122. See also Y. Michot, "Un important témoin de l'histoire et de la société mamlūkes à l'époque des Ilkhāns et de la fin des Croisades: Ibn Taymiyya (ob. 728/1328)", in U. Vermeulen and D. De Smet (eds.), *Egypt and Syria in the Fatimid, Ayyubid and Mamluk Eras*. Proceedings of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd International Colloquium organized at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven in May 1992, 1993 and 1994, *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta*, 73, Peeters, Leuven 1995, pp. 335–353. On Ghāzān's conversion, see R. Amitai-Preiss, "Ghazan, Islam and Mongol Tradition: a view from the Mamlūk sultanate", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 59 (1996) 1–10. According to this author, having converted, Ghāzān "maintained a belief in various aspects of Mongol custom and tradition, much of which explicitly contradicted the precepts of his new religion" (9). This syncretism did not pass unnoticed by Ibn Taymiyya, as shown in the fatwas that he published against the Mongols questioning the sincerity and the quality of their alleged Islamic faith. See D. Aigle, "The Mongol invasions of Bilād al-Shām by Ghāzān Khān and Ibn Taymīyah's three 'anti-Mongol' fatwas", *Mamlūk Studies Review* 11/2 (2007) 89–120.

The city, except for the citadel, which refused to surrender, was occupied without resistance. The Mongols remained in control until the end of March 1300, when they withdrew from Syria.

The following winter (December 1300–February 1301) saw another attempted invasion of Syria by Ghāzān, who had planned to join forces with Armenians and Cypriots. However, after spreading panic in the region of Aleppo, the Mongols withdrew from Syria for reasons which are not totally clear. Armenians and Cypriots returned to their countries with many Muslim captives purchased from the Mongols.

A third attempt at invading Syria took place in the spring of 1303. This time, however, Ghāzān did not participate personally in the expedition. The Mamluk army came from Egypt to confront the invader. The two armies met on the plain known as Marj al-Şuffar on April 20. Ibn Taymiyya, who had issued a fatwa dispensing the Mamluk troops from the fast of Ramadan, took part physically in the battle. After two days of intense fighting, the Mongols were defeated, suffering many casualties during their withdrawal. Ghāzān died approximately one year later and was succeeded by his brother Öljeitü, who would direct the fourth and last Mongol attempt at invading Syria at the end of 1312, before his son Abū Saʿīd signed the peace with the Mamluks in 1323.

Throughout the Syrian campaigns of Ghāzān, Ibn Taymiyya played an extraordinarily active role in the Damascene resistance against the Mongol invader. This included taking part in negotiations with Ghāzān and his generals aimed at halting Mongol exactions and securing the release of Muslim and Christian prisoners; participating in a punitive expedition against the people of Kasrawān (Druzes and ʿAlawī Shīʿa) who had pillaged the disbanded Egyptian army after the defeat at Wādī l-Khaznadār; encouraging the Mamluk troops and assuring them of the legitimacy of fighting against the *Muslim* Mongols; or pleading with the Sultan in Cairo to send troops to Syria during Ghāzān’s second invasion¹⁴. “All this wartime activity”, Michel notes, “set the stage for Ibn Taymiyya’s first important work that can be properly called a polemic against the Christians”¹⁵.

4. Recipient and date of composition

The incipit of *The Cypriot Letter* reads as follows¹⁶:

In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy. From Aḥmad ibn Taymiyya to *Srjwān*, a notable of the people of his religious confession, to the heads of religion and notables of this world under his care – priests, monks, emirs, and secretaries –, and to those who follow them. Peace be upon whoever follows the right guidance. (601)

Who is this *srjwān*? For a while he was thought to be Henry II of Lusignan, who reigned in Cyprus between 1285 and 1324, with a period of exile in Armenia between 1306 and 1310¹⁷. It was logical to think so, given that Ibn Taymiyya repeatedly addresses his interlocutor as *malik*, literally ‘king.’ However, this hypothesis left unexplained the appellation *srjwān* (or *srjwās* in other manuscripts¹⁸) in the incipit of the letter. On the other hand, in medieval Arabic, the title *malik* did not necessarily carry the modern meaning of monarch, implying only the exercise of authority and command¹⁹. Thomas Raff, author of the first scientific edition of *The Cypriot Letter*, interpreted *srjwān* as the transliteration of the old French ‘sire Johan’, and proposed to identify the recipient of the letter as John II of Giblet, of the Embriaci family,

¹⁴ Michot provides an almost day by day account of Ibn Taymiyya’s vicissitudes during these momentous events in his *Lettre*, pp. 35–62. See also Laoust, “La biographie d’Ibn Taimiyya”, pp. 121–132; R. Amitai, “The Mongol Occupation of Damascus in 1300: A Study of Mamluk Loyalties”, in: M. Winter and A. Levanoni (eds.), *The Mamluks in Egyptian and Syrian Politics and Society*, The Medieval Mediterranean, 51, Brill, Leiden 2004, pp. 21–41; A. Hoteit, “Les expéditions Mamloukes de Kasrawān: Critique de la Lettre d’Ibn Taimiyya au Sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad Bin Qalāwūn”, *ARAM* 9–10 (1997–98) 77–84.

¹⁵ Michel, *Response*, p. 73. Michel is right in considering *Al-risāla al-qubruṣiyya* and not the earlier *Al-ṣārim al-maslūl* (The Unsheathed Sword) as Ibn Taymiyya’s first anti-Christian polemical work properly speaking. Written in 1294 in response to the affair of a Christian who had converted to Islam to avoid the punishment for blasphemy, *The Unsheathed Sword* is essentially the work of a *jurist*, not a polemicist. In it, Ibn Taymiyya reacts precisely “against the popular and emotional associations that surround religious issues”, and, in that sense, this work is “his most consciously anti-polemical of those listed among his controversialist writings on Christianity” (Michel, *Response*, p. 71).

¹⁶ Hereafter all references to *The Cypriot Letter* will be from the edition of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Muḥammad ibn Qāsim, *Majmūʿ fatāwā shaykh al-islām Aḥmad ibn Taymiyya*, Maṭbaʿat al-Ḥukūma, Riyad 1961–1967, vol. 28, pp. 601–630.

¹⁷ In what follows, I draw heavily from M. Di Branco, “Sul destinatario della *Lettera a un sovrano crociato* (*Risālat al-qubruṣiyyah*) di Taqī ad-Dīn Aḥmad b. Taymiyyah”, *Atti dell’Accademia nazionale dei Lincei. Rendiconti. Classe di scienze morali, storiche e filologiche*, serie 9, vol. 16, no. 3 (2005) 389–394.

¹⁸ See C. Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur*, Brill, Leiden 1937–1942, Suppl. 2, 123: *ar-R. al-Qubruṣiyya, ḥiṭāb li Saḡwās malik Qubruṣ*.

¹⁹ See E.W. Lane, *An Arabic–English Lexicon*, vol. 8, Librairie du Liban, Beirut 2003, p. 3023.

refugees in Cyprus after the fall of Tripoli to the Mamluks in 1289. We know, in fact, that the Lord of Giblet participated in the crusader raids on the Syrian coast during the campaigns of Ghāzān. It is plausible, therefore, that the Muslim captives mentioned in the letter were taken prisoner during one or another of those raids²⁰.

Raff's hypothesis, which was accepted enthusiastically by Michot²¹, has been questioned recently by Marco Di Branco. His arguments against it are essentially two. First, the fact that John II of Giblet is known elsewhere in Islamic sources as *al-malik Yuḥannā*²². Second, the fact that a crusader baron dispossessed of his lands and exiled in Cyprus seems an unlikely candidate for the person described in the above-mentioned incipit and whom Ibn Taymiyya praises elsewhere for "his religiosity, his refinement, and his love for science and study" (615). For Di Branco, this should not be interpreted as a *captatio benevolentiae* seeking to secure the goodwill of the recipient, because it would have sounded ridiculous if addressed to the exiled baron²³. Di Branco proposes a new hypothesis based on a corrected reading of *srjwān* that would yield *sanjawān*, that is, Saint John. This, in turn, should not be interpreted as a proper name, but as an *ex-feudo* or *ex-titulo* designation. Thus, the recipient of *The Cypriot Letter* would be none other than William of Villaret, Master of the Knights Hospitallers of St John of Jerusalem from 1294 to 1305. The Knights Hospitallers had also sought refuge in Cyprus after the fall of Acre and had participated in several campaigns on the Syrian coast during the period in question²⁴. For Di Branco, this hypothesis explains better Ibn Taymiyya's allusion to the religiosity of his interlocutor and the fact that the latter has priests and monks under his care. It also clarifies Ibn Taymiyya's decision to append a lesson in theology to his humanitarian appeal.

What can we make of this hypothesis? Imagining an exchange of correspondence between Ibn Taymiyya and William of Villaret is indeed an attractive proposition, and Di Branco's arguments are not insubstantial. However, the reasons adduced to discard Raff's theory are inconclusive. Di Branco bases himself on the supposed, though not proven, lack of refinement and aptitude for study of the Lord of Giblet. Furthermore, his corrected reading of *srjwān* has not been adopted by any of the editors of *The Cypriot Letter*, who have disagreed only in the reading of the last letter (*nūn* for some, *sīn* for others). For that reason, and until future studies indicate otherwise, I will maintain as a working hypothesis that John II of Giblet was the designated recipient of the letter²⁵.

As for the date of composition, Raff situates it shortly after the Mongol defeat at Marj al-Ṣuffar on April 20, 1303, which Ibn Taymiyya evokes in the letter as a recent event. As *terminus ad quem*, Raff suggests the third campaign against the people of Kasrawān in July 1305, in which Ibn Taymiyya participated and to which he makes no reference. To this should be added Michot's keen observation that Ibn Taymiyya refers to Ghāzān as if he is still alive at the time of writing. We can thus situate the date of composition sometime between April 20, 1303 and the Mongol leader's date of death, May 10, 1304²⁶.

5. Structure and main themes

²⁰ See Raff, *Sendschreiben*, p. 19. On the Embriaci family, originally from Genoa, who were lords of Giblet (today Jubail, Lebanon), see Marie Luise Favreau-Lilie, "Embriaci Family", in: A.V. Murray (ed.), *The Crusades: An Encyclopedia*, ABC-Clio, Santa Barbara, CA 2006, pp. 393–394. See also P.W. Edbury, *The Kingdom of Cyprus and the Crusades, 1191–1374*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1991, pp. 105–106, and P. Crawford, *The 'Templar of Tyre': Part III of the 'Deeds of the Cypriots'*, *Crusade Texts in Translation*, 6, Ashgate, Aldershot 2003, p. 157.

²¹ Michot, *Lettre*, pp. 88–91.

²² Di Branco, "Sul destinatario della *Lettera*", p. 392. The "Islamic" sources to which Di Branco refers are, however, the Franciscan Jibrā'il ibn al-Qilā'ī, Maronite Bishop of Nicosia from 1507 until his death in 1516, who wrote and translated several works of theology, history and Canon Law into Arabic. See J. Moukarzel, *Gabriel Ibn al-Qilā'ī (+ca 1516): approche biographique et étude du corpus*, Université Saint-Esprit, Kaslik 2007. For Michot, to the contrary, this reference proves that Ibn Taymiyya is not the only one to give the title of *malik* to John II of Giblet.

²³ Di Branco, "Sul destinatario della *Lettera*", p. 392.

²⁴ See A. Luttrell, "The Hospitallers in Cyprus after 1291", in idem, *The Hospitallers in Cyprus, Rhodes and the West 1291–1449: collected Studies*, Variorum Reprints, London 1978, II: pp. 161–171; Crawford, *Templar*, pp. 155–157; Schein, "*Gesta Dei per Mongolos 1300*", p. 811; Edbury, *Cyprus*, p. 105.

²⁵ Let us note in passing that Michel limits himself to stating that this letter "was written by the shaykh [Ibn Taymiyya] to Sirjwas the king of Cyprus requesting good treatment for the Muslim prisoners who were interned there" (Michel, *Response*, p. 73). For his part, writes that the letter was addressed to "Sirjuwān, the Cypriot Archbishop and Head of State" (Makari, *Ibn Taymiyyah's Ethic*, p. 130).

²⁶ Raff, *Sendschreiben*, pp. 15–16; Michot, *Lettre*, p. 91.

The Cypriot Letter occupies thirty pages in the edition of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Muḥammad ibn Qāsim. In addition to the preamble and conclusion, which follow the customary Islamic pattern of beginning and ending a written work with praise of God and a blessing on the Prophet and his family, the letter can be thematically divided into two parts²⁷. In the first part (602–615), Ibn Taymiyya expounds his view of ‘salvation history’, to borrow a term from the Christian theological tradition, and the place of Islam in it. He aims at convincing his interlocutor not only of the supremacy of Islam but also of the corruption of Christianity. It is here that most of the polemical material is found. In the second part (615–629), Ibn Taymiyya addresses the main point of his letter more directly: the request for good treatment of Muslim captives awaiting ransom in Cyprus²⁸.

Michel is correct in observing that *The Cypriot Letter* is consciously modeled on the letters that, according to tradition, Muḥammad sent to neighboring rulers with a summons to embrace Islam²⁹. Like the Prophet in those letters, Ibn Taymiyya begins his with the Qur’anic greeting: “Peace be upon whoever follows the right guidance” (20:47). The theme of “right guidance” (*hudā*) remains a leitmotif throughout the letter. Moreover, Ibn Taymiyya makes an explicit reference to the letter sent by the Prophet to ‘Caesar’ (i.e., the Byzantine emperor), as well as to the Prophet’s relationship with the Negus. In offering his advice to his Christian interlocutor, Ibn Taymiyya considers himself to be among the “representatives” (*nuwwāb*, sing. *nā’ib*) of Christ and the rest of the prophets:

Abū l-‘Abbās, the carrier of this letter, has made known among us the good qualities of the sovereign (*malik*) and his brothers, and has won our sympathy for them. For that reason, when I heard of his desire for the good and of his interest in science and religion, I have written to him. In advising the sovereign and seeking his good, I am among the representatives of the Messiah and the rest of the prophets. (628)

On the question of structure, it is worth noting that the letter begins and ends with important references to Jesus. This shows that, unlike other works in the history of Muslim–Christian polemics that were essentially written for internal consumption, even if formally addressed to the rival community, *The Cypriot Letter* is consciously tailored to a Christian audience, with whom it seeks to establish points of contact from which to lead its members to recognize the truth of Islam. Of course, the view of Jesus that Ibn Taymiyya puts forward is unmistakably Islamic. The *Letter*’s third paragraph mentions some of the loftiest attributes of the Qur’anic Jesus³⁰:

the servant of God; a spirit from Him; His word, directed to the virtuous, the pure, the virgin whom no man has touched, Mary, daughter of ‘Imran; that Messiah of the right guidance; Jesus, the son of Mary; who will be held in honor in this world and the next; who will be one of those brought near to God. (602)

Yet, for all this high exaltation, Ibn Taymiyya does not fail to note in the same paragraph that Jesus announced “the seal of the prophets” who would come after him. Jesus is also described as “the Messiah of the right guidance (*masīḥ al-hudā*)”, the same guidance that Ibn Taymiyya now offers to his Christian interlocutor. At the end of the letter, Jesus will be contrasted with the “Messiah of error” (*masīḥ al-ḍalāla*), the Impostor or Antichrist that the Messiah will kill when he descends as harbinger of the eschatological era: “He will break the cross, kill the pig, suppress the poll-tax [on non-Muslims] and will not accept from anybody except Islam” (629)³¹. In *The Right Answer*, Ibn Taymiyya affirms that the belief in the two

²⁷ Michot perfectly captures the content of each of them under the respective headings “De la Religion” and “Des prisonniers musulmans à Chypre” (*Lettre*, 347–349).

²⁸ Michel explicitly says that Ibn Taymiyya “does not ask for the release of the prisoners-of-war, but merely good treatment for them” (*Response*, p. 74). However, Ibn Taymiyya does ask his interlocutor “to help us (Muslims) to deliver them” (625). He even reminds him that prophets and virtuous people have spoken in favor of the ransom of prisoners and the recompense attached to their liberation (626).

²⁹ Michel, *Response*, p. 74. These letters, whose authenticity has been subject to controversy, were sent to, among others, the Byzantine emperor (Heraclius), the Persian king (Chosroes II), the Negus of Abyssinia, and the Ruler of Egypt (Muqawqis). See the analysis of R.B. Serjeant, in A.F.L. Beeston et al. (eds.), *Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period*, The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1983, pp. 141–142. See also S.A. Mourad, “Christians and Christianity in the *Sīra* of Muḥammad”, in: D. Thomas and B. Roggema (eds.), *Christian–Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History, Volume 1 (600–900)*, History of Christian–Muslim Relations, 11, Brill, Leiden 2009, pp. 57–71.

³⁰ See Qur’ān 2:87; 3:45–47; 4:171; 5:76; 66:12.

³¹ For a comprehensive treatment of Jesus’ return in the Islamic tradition, see N. Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity*, State University of New York Press, Albany, N.Y. 1991, pp. 78–105. See also Y. Michot, “Jésus est vivant”, *Textes spirituels d’Ibn Taymiyya. Nouvelle série I*, Hartford 2009, available online at <http://www.muslimphilosophy.com/it/works/ITA-TeXSpi-NS01.pdf>

Messiahs is common to all three monotheistic religions, even if they differ in their interpretations, an interesting passage that deserves to be quoted at length:

Muslims and People of the Book agree on confessing two Christs – the Messiah of True Guidance of the line of David, and the False Messiah whom the People of the Book say to be of the line of Joseph. Muslims and Christians say that the Messiah of True Guidance is Jesus, the son of Mary, whom God has already sent and will send again. Muslims say he will descend before the Resurrection Day and kill the False Messiah, break the cross, and kill the pig. Then there will not remain any religion but that of Islam, in which the People of the Book, Jews and Christians, will believe. The correct opinion on which the majority agree is [that this will occur] before the death of Christ. Christians, however, think that Christ is God and that he will come on the Resurrection Day to reckon up the good deeds and the bad. This is one of the cases in which they are in error. The Jews also confess the coming of the Messiah of True Guidance. He is coming, they say. But they claim that Jesus was not this Messiah because of their claim that he brought the corrupted religion of the Christians, and whoever brought that is false. Thus they await the two Messiahs³².

Another key theme in *The Cypriot Letter* is Ibn Taymiyya's formulation of the relationship between Moses, Jesus and Muḥammad with regard to God's three fundamental attributes in the Ṣūfī tradition: majesty (*jalāl*), beauty (*jamāl*), and perfection (*kamāl*). According to Ibn Taymiyya,

[Jesus, son of Mary] was sent with the attribute of beauty³³ and compassion when the Children of Israel deviated from that with which Moses had been sent, characterized by the attribute of majesty and severity. The seal [of the prophets], who combines [the good qualities of all the prophets], was sent with the attribute of perfection, which includes severity towards the unbelievers and compassion towards the believers. (602)

This sort of middle ground between Moses' severity and Jesus' compassion represented by Muḥammad is thus reflected, argues Ibn Taymiyya in *The Cypriot Letter*, in how each of the three religious laws deals with unbelief and hypocrisy. The same point is developed in *The Right Answer*, where he writes:

The law of the Torah is primarily severity, while that of the Gospel is leniency. The law of the Qur'ān is moderate, combining both of these qualities. (...) In the law of Muhammad there is leniency, pardon, forgiveness, and noble qualities of character greater than what is in the Gospel. There is in it, moreover, severity, *jihad*, and setting punishment for unbelievers and hypocrites greater than what is found in the Torah. All of this is to the limit of perfection. Some people say: 'Moses was sent with majesty. Jesus was sent with beauty. Muhammad was sent with perfection'³⁴.

Thus, Ibn Taymiyya does not hesitate to describe Muḥammad as both "the prophet of mercy and the prophet of slaughter" (602)³⁵. As we shall see below, the middle way of perfection represented by Muḥammad is also reflected, according to Ibn Taymiyya, in Islam's moderate position in relation to pure and impure, licit and illicit, and in the honor given all God's envoys, in which their status is neither exaggerated nor undervalued.

6. Salvation–history according to Ibn Taymiyya

A further indication of Ibn Taymiyya's desire to establish common ground with his Christian audience can be seen in his choice of two Qur'anic passages (42:13; 33:7–8) as the point of departure for his reflection. The two passages in question associate Muḥammad with four known biblical figures – Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus – as chosen servants with whom God made a solemn pact. These five figures serve Ibn Taymiyya as milestones to recount the history of God's dealings with humanity, culminating with the coming of Muḥammad, the seal of the prophets.

In Ibn Taymiyya's account, after Adam and before Noah, the people professed monotheism (*tawḥīd*) and purity of faith (*ikhhlās*), until the moment when, by their own will, they introduced associationism and idolatry. This aberration was possible because of the "false arguments that Satan embellished by means of corrupted syllogisms and a deviating philosophy" (604)³⁶. Most people followed their leaders blindly and

³² Michel, *Response*, p. 209.

³³ This must be understood in the sense of moral beauty or virtue.

³⁴ Michel, *Response*, pp. 357–358.

³⁵ For the title "prophet of slaughter" (*nabī al-malḥama*) see Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, 4:395, 404, 407; 5:405.

³⁶ On Ibn Taymiyya's strong opposition to Hellenist philosophy, see Th.F. Michel, "Ibn Taymiyya's Critique of Falsafa", *Hamdard Islamicus* 6/1 (1983) 3–14, and W.B. Hallaq, *Ibn Taymiyya against the Greek Logicians*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1993. In a later passage of *The Cypriot Letter*, Ibn Taymiyya says that most Christian scholars are free thinkers (*zanādiqa*) and self-styled philosophers (*mutafalsifa*) who secretly deny the resurrection of the body while they mock the beliefs of simple people, especially

deviated from the right guidance. For this reason, God sent Noah, who invited them to worship God alone and forbade setting up rivals to God. After Noah, messengers came one after another, “until the time when the religion of the Sabians and the associators prevailed over the earth, when the Nemrod and the Pharaohs were kings of the earth, East and West” (604). Then God sent Abraham, “the friend of the Lord of Mercy, who invited the people to pass from associationism to purity of faith, and forbade them to worship stars and idols” (604). God raised up prophets and messengers from among his descendants, placing some above others in rank, and granting them signs by which people might believe in them. The different signs God performed in favor of Moses are mentioned. After him, God sent prophets from among the children of Israel and, through them, performed new signs. “All the adepts of the different religious confessions agree on that”, says Ibn Taymiyya:

The Books that Jews and Christians possess, their prophecies and the stories of prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Habakkuk, David, Solomon and others (peace be upon them), the Book of Kings and other books, contain things which are worthy of consideration. (606).

Ibn Taymiyya describes the Jews as a hard and obstinate people. Sometimes they worshipped idols; at other times they worshipped God. Sometimes they killed the prophets without justification; at other times, by means of vain subterfuges, they declared licit what God had forbidden. Thus, they were initially cursed through the words of David and Jerusalem was destroyed. Then God sent His servant, the Messiah, and “gave him the clear signs that He used to grant [to His prophets]” (606)³⁷. Ibn Taymiyya lists here some of the Qur’anic miracles of Jesus, implying that Jesus belongs to a prophetic line that began before him and continued after him: “He called people to worship God, following the tradition of his brothers, the messengers, confirming what came before him and bringing the good news of what will come after him” (606). But once more the people did not heed the prophetic warning. The Jews were insolent and rebelled against Jesus, “even though the attitude of the Messiah was, for the most part, one of docility, mercy, indulgence, and forgiveness” (607).

As a result, the people divided themselves into three groups regarding the Messiah. Only one group, the Muslims, have followed the true religion, which consists in “professing God’s unicity and acknowledging His messengers” (608). They were neither ungrateful to the Messiah, nor did they make exaggerated claims about him, as the Jews and the Christians have done respectively:

Some accused him of lying and were ungrateful to him. They claimed that he was the son of a prostitute, accused his mother of having done something terrible, and attributed him to Joseph the Carpenter. (...) Others exaggerated about him, pretending that he was God or the son of God, and that the divinity had put on humanity, and that the Lord of the Worlds had descended upon the earth, or had made His son descend to be crucified and killed in expiation for the sin of Adam, peace be upon Him (607).

The Christians, for their part, divided themselves into different sects according to their views on the Trinity and the union of the two natures, human and divine, in Christ. In Ibn Taymiyya’s view, Christians hold things

that no intelligent person can confess and that are not contained in any transmitted text, except for some ambiguous passages (*mutashābihāt*) in the Gospel and in the Books that came before. These passages are explained, however, by unambiguous passages (*muhkamāt*) in the Gospel and in what came before, which all speak of the servanthood of the Messiah, his worship of the only God, his prayer and supplication (608).

Later, in *The Right Answer*, Ibn Taymiyya will complain that Christians, seeking to cause dissension among Muslims, are now applying to the Qur’ān the same methods that had led them to stray in their interpretation of the earlier books:

The procedure which they follow with the Qur’an is similar to what they follow in the earlier books and the teachings of the prophets in the Torah, the Gospel, and Psalms, and other books. In those books there are so many clear passages on the oneness (*tawhīd*) of God and the servanthood of Christ that they can only be counted with difficulty. In them there are a

women and monks (621). According to Michel, Ibn Taymiyya’s view of the philosophers “as essentially anti-prophetic and thus anti-religious” is a relatively new one in the history of Muslim-Christian polemic. See *Response*, pp. 257–258.

³⁷ Implicit here is a refutation of Christian attempts to prove the divinity of Jesus by his miracles. The Hebrew prophets performed similar, or even greater, miracles. Yet Christians do not claim that they were God or Sons of God. For an analysis of Ibn Taymiyya’s treatment of this question in *The Right Answer*, see Morabia, “Ibn Taymiyya, les Juifs et la Tora”, pp. 104–107.

few phrases which contain ambiguity; they seize upon the few, hidden, complex ambiguities (*mutashābih*) of the earlier books and omit the many clear, definite, unambiguous (*muhkam*) passages³⁸.

Similarly, the view that Christians affirm things which are nonsensical in relation to the Trinity and the union of Christ's two natures, and for which they lack any clear scriptural basis, is also developed at length by Ibn Taymiyya in *The Right Answer*, at times not without a good dose of irony:

It should be said to them that the explanation of Christians on this matter [the union] is muddled, differing, and contradictory. They have no view concerning it on which they agree. Their position is neither reasonable nor indicated by any sacred book. (...) It has been said that if you gather together ten Christians, they would split into eleven positions. Moreover, the belief that they hold on the trinity and the union in Christ as it is stated in their creed (...) is not found in the speech of Christ, nor in that of the apostles, not of any of the prophets³⁹.

7. The corruption of the Christian religion

According to Ibn Taymiyya's account, therefore, the very root of the Christian religion has been corrupted. The doctrines of the Trinity and of the union of natures in Jesus subvert the very essence of the true religion which consists, as was said earlier, in professing God's unicity and giving due recognition, neither more nor less, to His messengers. This corruption is evident to anyone who takes the trouble to consider it, whether from the perspective of the human natural disposition (*fiṭra*) for truth, or from the perspective of revealed Scripture. Most Christian religious leaders—priests, monks, patriarchs and metropolitans—are aware of it, yet they keep silent and act hypocritically in front of kings and the common people, satisfied with the privileges and the authority that they derive from their position. Ibn Taymiyya gives three examples of such hypocritical leaders, one of which is the Patriarch of Constantinople—"who is for them the Pope" (609). Ibn Taymiyya obviously did not hold him in great esteem, since he is mentioned in *The Right Answer* as an example of those who perform satanic preternatural deeds (*khawāriq shayṭāniyya*)!⁴⁰ Furthermore, he adds, most eminent people among Christians are only really interested in the mathematical and physical sciences, or in "the metaphysical discourse according to the way of the Sabians, the philosophers to whom Abraham was sent" (609). These Christians "have rejected the religion of the Messiah and of the messengers that came before or after him and have kept only the religious prescriptions because of the king and the common people" (609).

There follows a diatribe against the monks, who invent tricks and subterfuges to cheat the common people: crosses miraculously suspended in air; images that shed tears, or the famous 'Holy Fire' in the Church of the Resurrection in Jerusalem, which Ibn Taymiyya describes in some detail⁴¹. These ruses are manifest to any intelligent person, and eminent authors have composed books to expose them⁴². Ibn Taymiyya remarks that the adepts of the Truth in all the religious sects agree that it is unlawful to lead people astray by means of anything untrue, because otherwise "the hypocrites could think that the miracles attributed to the Messiah and to other prophets are of the same type as this fabricated fire" (610). In other words, as Michot explains, "not all strange stories, curious practices, or prodigious phenomena must be rejected as legends, useless fictions, or fabrications. The authentic reports concerning the prophets' miracles are true. The righteous friends of God are indeed capable of prodigies and wonders"⁴³. The same concern for distinguishing the authentic miracles of prophets and saints from the tricks of charlatans and impostors is present in *The Right Answer*. After listing a catalogue of tricks performed by monks, which includes "the fire which crowds believe to be descending from heaven during their feast at Calvary", Ibn

³⁸ Michel, *Response*, pp. 169–170.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 308–309.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 208. Michel, however, interprets *bābā al-rūmī* as referring to "the Pope of Rome".

⁴¹ On the holy fire, see M. Canard, "La destruction de l'Église de la Résurrection par le Calife Hakim et la descente du feu sacré", *Byzantion* 35 (1965) 16–43; and J.M.F. van Reeth, "Al Qumāma et le Qā'im de 400 H.: le trucage de la lampe sur le tombeau du Christ", *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 83, Uitgeverij Peeters, Leuven 1998, pp. 171–190.

⁴² It is difficult to guess whom Ibn Taymiyya has in mind here. A likely candidate would be 'Abd al-Raḥīm ibn 'Umar al-Jawbarī (d. 1264), author of *Al-mukhtār fī kashf al-asrār wa-hak al-astār* (Select Work in the Uncovering of Secrets and Tearing Away of Veils), a compendium of tricks and ruses practiced by people from all states of life, including Christian monks. French translation by R.R. Khawam, *Le voile arraché: L'autre visage de l'Islam*, vol. 1, Phébus, Paris 1979, pp. 103–114. See also R. Gottheil, "An Answer to the Dhimmis", *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 41 (1921) 383–457, here 453–455.

⁴³ Y. Michot, "Between Entertainment and Religion: Ibn Taymiyya's Viewpoint on Superstition", *The Muslim World* 99 (2009) 1–20, here 11.

Taymiyya states that “these things are either demonic wonders or clever absurdities in which there is nothing of the *karamat*—the miraculous favors granted to upright persons”⁴⁴.

In the next passage of *The Cypriot Letter*, Ibn Taymiyya focuses on another of his key ideas, also present in *The Right Answer*. According to him, the Messiah only abrogated a small part of the Mosaic legislation and asked his followers to observe the rest of it faithfully. The Christians, however, wanting to distance themselves as much as possible from the Jews, have rejected “all of that by which the Jews are distinguished from them, even the things legislated in the Torah which Christ did not abrogate but commanded them to perform”⁴⁵. The Jews, for their part, rejected the Messiah, claiming that “it is not fitting for God to change or abrogate what He has previously commanded, at another time or by the tongue of another prophet” (610), a claim to which Christians respond by asserting that “the religious authorities and priests can change whatever they wish: they forbid and allow whatever they consider appropriate; they impose acts of worship that they consider appropriate on whoever commits a fault and forgive them (610).

In connection with this allusion to the Christian practice of sacramental confession, Ibn Taymiyya remarks that there are even priests “who claim to insufflate the Holy Spirit in the woman and thus transform debauchery into an offering!” (610). As Raff notes, Ibn Taymiyya is probably referring here to the ritual of insufflation of the Holy Spirit that accompanies the absolution of sins in the Syriac Church⁴⁶. In brief, concludes Ibn Taymiyya, Jews and Christians are poles apart, opposing each other on several fronts:

The former say, ‘Many things have been forbidden to us.’ The latter say, ‘Everything between the bedbug and the elephant is permitted. Eat what you wish and leave what you wish.’ The former say, ‘Ritual impurity requires treating [the impure person] harshly, so that one should neither sit in a house with a menstruating woman nor eat with her’. The latter say, ‘Nothing is impure to you’, and they command neither circumcision, nor complete ablution in case of major impurity, nor the elimination of any impurity, even if the Messiah and the apostles followed the Law of the Torah (610–611).

Michel comments that the statement about the bedbug and the elephant seems to have been a catchword for describing the Christian rejection of forbidden foods, already used by authors such as ‘Abd al-Jabbār ibn Aḥmad al-Hamadhānī (d. 1025) and Shihāb al-dīn al-Qarāfī (d. 1285)⁴⁷. In fact, the history of this popular saying seems to be much older and an interesting example of borrowing across traditions. We already find it in the mouth of Paul of Tarsus in a work of the early Muslim chronicler, Sayf ibn ‘Umar al-Tamīmī (d. c. 796), to whom we owe, in large part in Muslim anti-Christian polemics, the negative image of Paul as the corruptor of the Christian religion⁴⁸.

As for the harsh treatment Jews inflict on menstruating women, the issue is dealt with at some length in another of Ibn Taymiyya’s later polemical works entitled *Iqtidā’ al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm mukhālafat aṣḥāb al-jaḥīm* (The Necessity of the Straight Path in Opposing the People of Hell). The author quotes a *ḥadīth* according to which Muḥammad was questioned by his companions on this precise subject. In reply, the Prophet ordered them to abstain only from sexual intercourse with a menstruating woman. This caused the Jews to react, saying, “This man will not let anything we do go unopposed.” From this episode, Ibn Taymiyya concludes that

God frequently stipulated for His Prophet to be different from the Jews (...) Thus, on the subject of dissociation from a menstruating woman, the differing was effected not over the fundamentals of the stipulation but rather over its particulars. The Koran laid down that contact with a menstruating woman is permissible except at the place of hurt (...). On the subject of ritual or cultic purity, the Jews had been heavily shackled, whilst the Christians, in the course of their innovation, abandoned all these restrictions without divine sanction to the extent that they considered nothing unclean.

⁴⁴ Michel, *Response*, p. 207. On this question, see A. Morabia, “Prodiges prophétiques et surnaturel démoniaque selon Ibn Taymiyya”, in *La signification du bas Moyen Age dans l’histoire et la culture du monde musulman. Actes du 8me Congrès de l’Union Européenne des Arabisants et Islamisants, Aix-en-Provence, sept. 1976*, Edisud, Aix-en-Provence 1978, pp. 161–172.

⁴⁵ Michel, *Response*, p. 144.

⁴⁶ Raff, *Sendschreiben*, p. 171.

⁴⁷ Michel, *Response*, p. 404, note 27.

⁴⁸ See Sayf ibn ‘Umar, *Kitāb al-ridda wa-l-futūḥ*, Qāsim al-Sāmarā’i (ed.), 2nd ed., Dār Umayya, Riyad 1997, p. 137. Ibn Taymiyya certainly knows the work of Sayf ibn ‘Umar, which he cites in his *Al-ṣārim al-maslūl*. On this author, see P.S. van Koningsveld, “The Islamic image of Paul and the origin of the Gospel of Barnabas”, *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 20 (1996) 200–228, and G.S. Reynolds, *A Muslim Theologian in the Sectarian Milieu: ‘Abd Al-Jabbār and the Critique of Christian Origins*, Brill, Leiden 2004, pp. 166–167. Reynolds remarks that the saying about the bedbug and the elephant also appears in the *Toledot Yeshu*, an early Jewish polemical work on the life of Jesus. See H.J. Schonfield, *According to the Hebrews*, Duckworth, London 1937, p. 57.

Consequently God guided the Muslim community to adopt a middle course; although the Jewish position was also lawful⁴⁹.

Ibn Taymiyya's next round of accusations against Christianity in *The Cypriot Letter* is related to questions of liturgical practice. Praying towards the East was commanded neither by the Messiah nor the apostles. It was an innovation on the part of someone else, possibly Constantine. The veneration of the cross was certainly of Constantine, following a dream that he had⁵⁰. Likewise, neither the Messiah nor the apostles ordered the introduction of melodies in prayer. This critique of Christian innovations becomes the occasion for Ibn Taymiyya to state one of his fundamental principles concerning the true religion: "The religion that brings worshippers close to God, must be commanded by God and prescribed by the tongue of His messengers and prophets" (611). Innovations are errors, says Ibn Taymiyya, adding in passing the somewhat intriguing remark that idols would not have been worshipped had it not been for the innovations that crept into Christianity. To fully understand this statement, we must turn to *The Right Answer*. Here Ibn Taymiyya explains how Christ sent his messengers – some during his lifetime, others after his ascension into heaven – to call the pagans to God's religion. Some responded positively and followed God's religion for a while, until Satan tempted them to change the religion of Christ. As a result,

They innovated a religion combining the religion of God and His Messengers – i.e., the religion of Christ – and the religion of pagans. The pagans used to worship bodily images which cast shadows (...). When the religion of Christ appeared 300 years after Aristotle in the land of the Romans and the Greeks, people followed *tawhid* up to the appearance of innovations among them. Then they fashioned images drawn on the wall and made these images a substitute for those other images. Others used to worship the sun, moon, and stars, and so these began to prostrate themselves before them towards the direction of the sunrise from which sun, moon, and stars appeared. They made their prostration towards it [the east] a substitute for their prostration before them [the heavenly bodies]⁵¹.

To put it briefly, in Ibn Taymiyya's view, Christian liturgy owes more to ancient paganism than to Christ or to his apostles: "In general, for the different acts of worship and feasts that they follow, God did not make descend a Book nor did He send a Prophet that prescribed them" (611), an accusation repeated and expanded in *The Right Answer*⁵².

Ibn Taymiyya ends this section on the corruption of Christianity on a somewhat more positive note by saying that, notwithstanding their innovated doctrines and practices, Christians "show kindness and mercy, which belong to God's religion", unlike Jews, "in whom there is harshness and hatred, which are among the things forbidden by God." Yet, despite their obstinacy and arrogance, Jews are endowed with discernment and intellect, whereas Christians "have strayed from the Truth and ignore the path to God" (611).

8. *Muḥammad, the prophet foretold*

The next important thematic section of *The Cypriot Letter* is centered on Muḥammad's prophecy. Ibn Taymiyya begins it by noting that both groups, Christians and Jews, have split into different parties over the foundations of their beliefs. He then mentions the three main Christian groups known in the classical Islamic world – Jacobites, Nestorians and Melkites –, and describes succinctly their differing theologies of the Incarnation, without discussing their views in detail, as he will do in *The Right Answer*⁵³.

Ibn Taymiyya reminds his interlocutor that among the Scripture people (*ahl al kitāb*), there have been, and there are still, groups of scholars "who have believed and have migrated toward God and His messenger" (612). Some have even composed collections of passages that point to the prophecy of

⁴⁹ M.U. Memon, *Ibn Taimīya's Struggle against Popular Religion: With an Annotated Translation of his Kitāb iqtidā' aṣ-ṣirāt al-mustaqīm mukhālafat aṣḥāb al-jaḥīm*, Mouton, The Hague 1976, pp. 133–134. According to Memon, Ibn Taymiyya composed this book in Damascus towards the end of his life, between 1321 and 1326, "when he was growing more and more impatient with Christianity and Judaism and other religious minorities, among them the Shī'ites" (7).

⁵⁰ In *The Right Answer*, Ibn Taymiyya claims that Constantine's dreams were demonic in origin: "The cross which Constantine saw among the stars and the cross which he saw another time are what the demons fashion and show to lead people astray" (Michel, *Response*, p. 202. See also 326).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 163–164.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 308–312. On these three ecclesial identities see S.H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2008, pp. 131–139.

Muḥammad in the Sacred Books, “passages from the Torah, the Psalms, and the Gospel, which they had not been able to understand until then” (612)⁵⁴.

Muḥammad is then presented as being sent specifically by God into the above-mentioned context of religious division with the mission of summoning all parties “to profess the religion of Abraham and of all [God’s] envoys before and after him, that is, to worship God alone – He has no associate – and to consecrate all religion to God” (612). In support of his argument, Ibn Taymiyya quotes several Qur’anic passages (2:213; 2:135–138; 3:64; 42:51; and 3:79–80) that are polemically addressed to the Scripture people. The overall aim is to claim “the religion of Abraham, the upright (*ḥanīf*), who did not worship any god besides God” (Q. 2:135) as the unadulterated form of the religion of God, which Muḥammad came to restore:

He purified the earth of [from] idolatry and freed the religion from associationism – the subtle and the gross⁵⁵ – after idols had been worshipped in the land of Syria and in other places during the dynasty of the Children of Israel and of those who say ‘We are Christians.’ He commanded belief in all the Books of God that had been sent down – the Torah, the Gospel, the Psalms and the Criterion⁵⁶ – and in all the Prophets of God, from Adam to Muḥammad. (612)

God commanded Muḥammad to invite all creatures “to proclaim His unity with justice (*bi-l-’adl*)” (613). Ibn Taymiyya illustrates this aspect of Muḥammad’s mission by referring to the well-known episode of the *mubāhala* (trial of mutual cursing) described in Qur’ān 3:58–64⁵⁷. What exactly does Ibn Taymiyya mean by proclaiming God’s unity with justice or in a just way? The concern here is not primarily an ethical one, but, as it becomes clear in *The Right Answer*, a doctrinal one. To act justly in regard to God means, first of all, to respect God’s right to be the only object of adoration of His servants. This, Ibn Taymiyya repeats tirelessly, has been the constant message of all the prophets. To those who accept the prophetic guidance, God forgives their ignorance and wrongdoing, thereby joining the people of knowledge and justice:

Guidance contains beneficial language, and the religion of truth includes right action and is based on justice. The basis of uprightness (*al-’adl*) in the truth about God is the worship of God alone, allowing no one else to share in that worship. As Luqman told his son, “*Shirk* is great wrongdoing” (...) Whenever the followers of the prophets – who are the people of knowledge and justice – have been in discussion with unbelievers and innovators, the statements of the people of Islam and the sunna have always proceeded from knowledge and justice, not from guesswork and what their own minds imagine⁵⁸.

In the following paragraphs, Ibn Taymiyya summarizes the main points that he has developed thus far. God has made the Muslim community “a middle nation, a moderate people who do not go to extremes” (613). They have not fallen into exaggeration with regard to the prophets, as Christians have done by putting them on the same level as God, nor have they treated them harshly, as Jews have done, by refusing to obey them. On the contrary, Muslims have supported the prophets, believing the message they brought and obeying them. Muslims have loved and honored the prophets, but did not and do not worship them. They “hear and obey” (Q. 2:285) and accept that God may forbid what he had previously allowed and vice versa. Those who are not God’s messengers and prophets should not introduce change in the religion of God, nor anything that God has not sanctioned. In short, concludes Ibn Taymiyya,

This people has followed the middle way in relation to ritual purity and impurity, in relation to what is licit and what is illicit, and in morals. They [the Muslims] did not insist only on severity, as [the Jews] did. Nor did they insist on kindness only, as [the Christians] did. Instead, they have treated God’s enemies with severity and His friends with kindness and mercy (614–615).

⁵⁴ Ibn Taymiyya is thus aware of the contribution of Muslim converts of Christian and Jewish origin to the genre of religious literature known as “the proofs of prophecy” (*dalā’il al-nubuwwa*). On this particular line of argument in defense of Muḥammad’s prophetic mission, see S. Stroumsa, *Freethinkers of Medieval Islam: Ibn al-Rawāndī, Abū Bakr al-Rāzī and their Impact on Islamic Thought*, Brill, Leiden 1999, pp. 21–36: The Signs of Prophecy: The Touchstone of Muslim Prophetology; and C. Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible: From Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazm*, Brill, Leiden 1996, pp. 139–191.

⁵⁵ That is, associationism in relation to God’s divinity (*ulūhiyya*) and to God’s lordship (*rubūhiyya*) respectively. On this distinction see Y. Michot, “Entre la divinité et la seigneurialité, le polymorphisme de l’associationnisme (*shirk*)”, Ibn Taymiyya, *Textes spirituels* IV. Available online at <http://www.muslimphilosophy.com/it/works/ITA%20Texspi%2004.pdf>

⁵⁶ That is, the Qur’ān. See Q. 3:3–4.

⁵⁷ See W. Schmucker, art. “Mubāhala”, in *EF*², vol. 7, pp. 276–277; see also G. Nickel, “‘We Will Make Peace With You’: The Christians of Najrān in Muqātil’s *Tafsīr*”, *Collectanea Christiana Orientalia* 3 (2006) 171–188.

⁵⁸ Michel, *Response*, p. 142.

With this last critique – present also in *The Right Answer* in the following lapidary formulation: “Jews get angry and take revenge for their own sake; Christians neither get angry nor take vengeance for the sake of their Lord”⁵⁹ – Ibn Taymiyya introduces a point that will figure prominently in the rest of *The Cypriot Letter*, where Christians will be accused of renouncing something that he takes for granted as having been part of Christ’s unadulterated message: to do *jihād* in the path of God.

Ibn Taymiyya ends this section on Muḥammad’s prophetic mission – and with it the first part of his letter – with a short but interesting paragraph that deserves to be reproduced:

The apostles revealed that the seal of [God’s] envoys will be sent from the land of Yemen, and that he will be sent with the rod of education, that is, the sword. The Messiah revealed that he [i.e., the seal] will bring clear signs and interpretation, whereas the Messiah came with parables. This is a long topic, whose explanation would be lengthy. (615)

Among the Biblical prophecies said to relate to Muḥammad and listed in *The Right Answer*, Ibn Taymiyya cites Habakkuk 3:3–13, which is probably the passage to which he is referring in *The Cypriot Letter*. For Ibn Taymiyya, Habakkuk’s words can only refer to Muḥammad: “It mentions the coming of the light of God from Teman, that is, from the region of Mecca and the Hijaz. Indeed, the prophets of Israel came from the region of Syria, whereas Muḥammad came from the region of Yemen. Mount Paran is among the mountains of Mecca⁶⁰. As for the reference to the “rod of education, that is, the sword”, Raff thinks that Ibn Taymiyya could be referring to Revelation 2:26–27 or 19:15. Another possibility is, in my opinion, Psalm 45:3–6, which figures among the biblical predictions concerning Muḥammad in the compilation of Ibn Qutayba (d. 889)⁶¹:

You are the most handsome of men; fair speech has graced your lips, for God has blessed you forever. / Gird your sword upon your hip, mighty warrior! In splendor and majesty ride on triumphant! / In the cause of truth and justice may your right hand show you wondrous deeds. (Ps 45:3–6, *New American Bible*)

Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350), a disciple of Ibn Taymiyya, identifies the “rod of education” with the “iron” mentioned in Qur’ān 57:25. According to him, the Messenger of God is described in the earlier books as carrying in his hand “the rod of education, that is, the sword”⁶².

9. Muslim captives in Cyprus

This puts an end to the first part of *The Cypriot Letter*. Ibn Taymiyya now turns to the events that motivated his letter, that is, the presence of Muslim captives in Cyprus. This second part contains precise references to historical events and figures that cannot be treated in detail here due to lack of space. Of more interest for our purposes, however, are those passages that help us understand Ibn Taymiyya’s ‘theology of religions’, to borrow once again a term from contemporary theological discourse.

Assuring his interlocutor that he is only seeking his well-being, both in this world and in the world to come, Ibn Taymiyya begins this second part of his letter on a spiritual and even ascetic tone. Like Pharaoh and Korah, the people of this world strive after power and wealth. The Messiah, however, like all the prophets before and after him, commanded us “to worship God, to devote oneself exclusively to the future life, and to renounce the splendor of this life” (616). The intelligent person, advises Ibn Taymiyya, should examine those things in which there is accord or disaccord among people concerning the message of the prophets, and seek to relate to God “according to correct doctrine and to virtuous conduct” (616). Islam is God’s religion and God has defended it by frustrating the Christian–Mongol plans to conquer Syria. Yet, in spite of this aggression, Muslims did not fail in their obligations toward their protected people (*ahl al-dhimma*). Ibn Taymiyya offers himself as an example, citing his success in securing the release of some Christians that the Mongols had captured in Jerusalem. Also, Christians who are prisoners-of-war in Muslim lands can witness to the benevolence, mercy and kindness with which they are treated, the same treatment that Ibn Taymiyya now demands for Muslim captives in Cyprus.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 242.

⁶⁰ This passage is not translated by Michel. See Ibn Taymiyya, *Al-jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ li-man baddala dīn al-Masīḥ*, Dār al-Ḥadīth, Cairo 2003, vol. 2, t. 3, pp. 267–269. See also Adang, *Muslim Writers*, pp. 268–269.

⁶¹ See Adang, *Muslim Writers*, p. 271.

⁶² See Ibn al-Qayyim, *Ahkām ahl al-dhimma*, Abū al-Barā’ Yūsuf ibn Aḥmad al-Bakrī and Abū Aḥmad Shākir ibn Tawfiq al-‘Ārūrī (ed.), Ramadī, Dammam 1997, vol. 3, pp. 1304–1305.

Just as the Prophet had in mind the best interests of Christians when he debated with the delegation from Najrān or when he wrote to the kings of neighboring nations, Ibn Taymiyya insists that his advice will be beneficial for his interlocutor and his companions. He then goes on to recount briefly three episodes, each of which concludes with an explicit acknowledgment of Muḥammad’s prophetic mission by a distinguished Christian. The Prophet invited the Christians from Najrān to a trial of mutual cursing in order to determine the truth concerning the Messiah⁶³. The Christians, however, declined the offer after one of their leaders told them: “You know that he is a Prophet and that nobody has ever defeated a prophet in a mutual cursing trial” (619). Likewise, Heraclius, the Byzantine Emperor, after reading Muḥammad’s letter and inquiring about his signs, “knew that he was the Prophet foretold by the Messiah, the one that God promised to Abraham in his son Ishmael” (620). For his part, the Negus of Abyssinia, on hearing what the sura *Maryam* (Qur’ān 19) said about the Messiah, wept and acknowledged that “this and the message Moses brought come certainly from the same niche [of prophecy]” (620).

The same arguments will be developed at length in *The Right Answer* in order to prove the universality of Muḥammad’s mission, which had been cleverly challenged by Paul of Antioch, the Bishop of Sidon. Paul did not reject Muḥammad’s prophetic mission, but he restricted it to “those Arabs who were in error, and about whom he [Muḥammad] says that no one had come to warn them before him”⁶⁴.

10. *Questions of jihād*

This defense of the universality of Muḥammad’s mission brings Ibn Taymiyya to the question of *jihād*. It is clear that the Prophet welcomed any Christian into his community who believed in God, His angels, His Books, and His Messengers. “As for those among the nations who did not believe in him [i.e., Muḥammad]”, says Ibn Taymiyya, “God commanded that they should be fought against” (619), and he quotes Qur’ān 9:29 in support. He then enumerates the reasons that, in his eyes, justify waging *jihād* against Christians “until they embrace the religion of God or accept to pay the poll-tax” (619): they insult God with their doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation; they refuse to believe in His messengers by rejecting Muḥammad’s message; they distort (*yuharrifūna*) the texts of the Torah and the Gospel; they don’t forbid what all prophets – “from Adam to Muḥammad” – have forbidden: blood, carrion and pig’s meat; and, finally, they reject things that God has revealed concerning the physical pleasures of paradise. It almost goes without saying that these are all issues that will reappear and will be dealt with in detail in *The Right Answer*, at times in a more nuanced way⁶⁵.

In Ibn Taymiyya’s opinion, therefore, all these reasons justify Muslim *jihād* against Christians. He reaches the same conclusion in *The Right Answer*, emphasizing that “the prophet himself went to fight them [in] the year of Tabuk, and called upon all believers to join in fighting them”⁶⁶. But neither the Messiah nor the apostles ever commanded their followers to fight against the upright nation (*umma ḥanīfiyya*). How can he then allow the killing and capturing of Muslims, Ibn Taymiyya asks his Cypriot interlocutor directly? And how can he allow Muslim captives to be treated in a way “that is contrary to humanity and to religion” (622), when he knows the kind of treatment that Christians receive in Muslim lands? Where is the piety and benevolence that the Messiah and the prophets enjoined on those who followed them? Moreover, he complains, many of these Muslims have been captured treacherously, something that all religions and political systems condemn. Ibn Taymiyya asks his interlocutor to reflect seriously on these matters and to fear the eventual revenge of the Muslims, whom God will help to vent their anger.

Once more, Ibn Taymiyya insists that his only concern is the well-being of his interlocutor, to whom he wishes two things that will be helpful to him in this life and in the next. Firstly, knowledge of the truth and of religion, a knowledge that will lead him “to worship God as He has commanded” (624); and secondly, that he should help the captives in his country, treat them with benevolence and ask his subjects to do the same, and facilitate their ransom. In thus acting, says Ibn Taymiyya, he will be following the example of the Messiah. In fact, it is altogether surprising that Christians should make prisoners of people who did not fight against them, when the Messiah says: “Whoever strikes you on the right cheek, offer him

⁶³ See *supra* note 56.

⁶⁴ J.-M. Gaudeul, *Encounters and Clashes: Islam and Christianity in History*, vol. 2, Studi arabo-islamici del PISAI, 15, Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi e d’Islamistica, Rome 2000, p. 272 (slightly modified). For Ibn Taymiyya’s reply to Paul of Antioch’s claim, see Michel, *Response*, pp. 103–112.

⁶⁵ For instance, as Michel points out, Ibn Taymiyya affirms the textual falsification of the Scriptures by Christians more strongly and with less precision in *The Cypriot Letter* than he does in *The Right Answer*. See Michel, *Response*, p.76.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

the other also; and whoever takes your coat, give him your shirt as well” (625). In any case, Ibn Taymiyya repeats his conviction that Christians can never be justified in fighting against Muslims, because neither God nor the Messiah, nor the apostles ever commanded them to attack the followers of the religion of Abraham. On the other hand, Muslims are justified in waging *jihād* against Christians for the reasons mentioned earlier: they have insulted God and corrupted His religion. In so doing, Muslims are only obeying God and not following their own passions and demons as do those Christians who attack Muslims and take them prisoner!

Ibn Taymiyya’s claim that neither the Messiah nor his apostles sanctioned war against an upright nation that follows the religion of Abraham deserves attention. It should not be taken to mean that they rejected war altogether. In contrast to his insistence elsewhere in the letter on Christ’s meekness, Ibn Taymiyya explicitly states that the Messiah and his apostles committed themselves to fight for the sake of God’s religion (626). Interestingly enough, the above-mentioned Sayf ibn ‘Umar, whose work Ibn Taymiyya knew, mentions the abolition of all forms of violence (*jihād*) and revenge as one of the three corruptions introduced by Paul of Tarsus in the Christian religion (the other two being the change of *qibla* or direction for prayer and the elimination of food interdictions)⁶⁷. Ibn Taymiyya takes up the same points of dispute in *The Right Answer*, explicitly accusing Christians of having failed to observe the duty of waging *jihād* and punishing God’s offenders:

God sent Christ with pardon and tenderness, with forgiveness to evildoers and bearing with their [i.e., the Jews’] wrongdoing in order to moderate their morals and put an end to the pride and harshness in them. However, these Christians have gone to excess in laxity so that they have failed to command the good and prohibit what is forbidden. They have failed to do *jihad* in the way of God, and to judge justly between people. Instead of establishing firm punishment [for crimes], their worshippers have become solitary monks⁶⁸.

11. *The best community singled out for people*

In an unambiguously threatening tone, Ibn Taymiyya reminds his interlocutor of the proven capacity of Muslims to repay good and evil in this world. Small groups of Muslims have never ceased to obtain victories against armies of Christians and others that outnumbered them several times over. Indeed, exclaims Ibn Taymiyya with euphoric fervor, “woe betide the one against whom Muslims fight!” (627). He goes on to quote the Qur’anic declaration to the effect that Muslims are “the best community singled out for people” (3:110). If his interlocutor in Cyprus has heard negative reports concerning Muslims, those reports are either false or the one who transmitted them did not understand the situation. The author grants that evil and injustice exist among Muslims, but to a far lesser degree than in non Muslim nations, whereas good is to be found to a far superior degree among Muslims than among non Muslims.

Ibn Taymiyya concludes the letter by recommending once again that his interlocutor help the Muslim prisoners, treat them with benevolence, and abstain from attempting to change the religion of any one of them. This is the right course of behavior and his interlocutor will see the benefits of it if he decides to follow it.

12. *Conclusion*

As Michel remarks, we are left to wonder if the treatment of Muslim prisoners improved as a result of Ibn Taymiyya’s intervention. We know, however, that this letter initiated a correspondence between him and the Christian community of Cyprus: “It would be from here that the ‘Letter from Cyprus’ would be sent to the shaykh upon his final return to Damascus. This in turn would prompt Ibn Taymiyya’s *Al-Jawab al-Sahih* [The Right Answer], completing the dialogue more than twenty years after it had begun⁶⁹.”

⁶⁷ In Sayf ibn ‘Umar’s account, however, it is Paul, not Christ, who says: “Whoever strikes you on the right cheek, offer him the other also”. See Koningsveld, “The Islamic image of Paul”, pp. 203, 208. See also C. Gilliot, “Christians and Christianity in Islamic exegesis”, in Thomas-Roggema (eds.), *Christian-Muslim Relations*, pp. 45–56.

⁶⁸ Michel, *Response*, pp. 357–358. In connection with the alleged Christian failure to do *jihād*, see the interesting remarks of Morabia: “On pourrait être surpris de lire pareille affirmation sous la plume d’un homme qui connut les contre-coups de la Croisade et en pâtit. Ibn Taymiyya se fit le porte-parole de la résistance au « complot », ourdi par les Francs et les Mongols contre l’Islâm. Il était convaincu que la faiblesse des autres religions scripturaires résidait dans leur inaptitude à se parachever et à mener le *ġihād*. (...) Il est fort probable qu’aux yeux du maître syrien, la Croisade n’était pas une guerre pour la défense du Christianisme” (A. Morabia, “Ibn Taymiyya, les Juifs et la Tora (suite et fin)”, *Studia Islamica* 50 (1979) 77–107, here 103, note 4).

⁶⁹ Michel, *Response*, p. 78.

To conclude, *The Cypriot Letter* is an extremely interesting document that deserves more attention than it has hitherto received. From an historical point of view, it bears witness to the important role that Ibn Taymiyya played during Ghāzān's repeated attempts to take Syria. More significantly for the history of Muslim–Christian relations, this letter is the first properly anti–Christian polemical work of the Ḥanbalite shaykh, in which, as I hope to have successfully shown, he anticipates many of the arguments developed some years later in his voluminous *The Right Answer*, possibly one of the most important works in the whole history of Muslim–Christian polemics.

Ibn Taymiyya's insistence on the “middle way” represented by Islam and its Prophet, vis-à-vis the deviations of Christians and Jews, is certainly not new in Muslim apologetics. With Ibn Taymiyya, however, it becomes, as perhaps never before, the structuring principle of a coherent and well-developed Islamic ‘theology of religions’, constructed upon two main theological premises: (1) true religion consists in professing God's unicity and acknowledging His messengers within the proper bounds of their function; and (2) the religious acts by means of which worshipers approach God must be imposed by God through His messengers—orthodoxy and orthopraxy, respectively.

It has been pointed out, and rightly so, that *The Right Answer* is “as much a work of Muslim apologetic as of anti–Christian polemic”, and that it “should be viewed against the background of a long tradition in which anti–Christian polemics had often been a means to promote Islamic orthodoxy”⁷⁰. In effect, in this work Ibn Taymiyya addresses his coreligionists, referring to the Christians in the third person, and, while he might have conceived it as a definitive ‘answer’ to anti–Muslim Christian polemics, “the principal motive for writing the work was... to let the Christian experience of *kufr* serve as a warning to tendencies within the Islamic *umma* that could lead Muslims to the same type of unbelief”⁷¹. In his own words,

[T]hat for which God censured Jews and Christians may be found among the hypocrites associated with Islam. They are those who outwardly profess faith in all that the Messenger brought, but secretly are opposed to that. [...] Through an understanding of the real nature of the religion of the Christians and its falsity one can also know the falsity of those views which resemble theirs—that is, the views of the perpetrators of apostasy and innovation⁷².

Yet, Ibn Taymiyya's theological evaluation of Christianity in *The Right Answer* is entirely consistent with the views expressed in *The Cypriot Letter*, which he did address to a Christian audience. This evaluation was that the historically corrupted Christianity fell short of the standards of orthodoxy and orthopraxy required by true religion, and Christians needed to hear that. God's truth was one and any use of ‘double language’ would not serve its cause:

Our intention is to present the truth with which God sent His messengers and revealed His Books and to refute Christians and others who oppose that. We do not deny that among those affiliated with Islam there are hypocrites, renegades, and crypto–Manichaeans. There are ignorant innovators. There are those who hold a view similar to that of Christians and those who hold something worse than theirs. Our intention is to refute all these people⁷³.

RÉSUMÉ

Présentation de la lettre, *Al-risāla al-qubruṣiyya*, de Taqī al-dīn Aḥmad ibn Taymiyya, écrite entre 1303 et 1304, à un croisé, baron en Chypre, probablement Jean II de Giblest. Dans sa lettre – à laquelle Ibn Taymiyya ajoute une longue exposition sur l'histoire religieuse avec l'intention de convaincre son interlocuteur de la suprématie de l'Islam sur les autres religions du Livre –, le fameux juriste Ḥanbalite demande que les musulmans, en captivité sous le pouvoir de Jean, soient traités humainement en attendant un rançon.

⁷⁰ D. Thomas, “Apologetic and Polemic in the *Letter from Cyprus* and Ibn Taymiyya's *Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ li-man baddala dīn al-Masīḥ*”, in *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, pp. 258–259.

⁷¹ Michel, *Response*, p. 100.

⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 139–140.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 101.