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).

SUMMARY: Presentation of Taqī al-dīn Ahmad ibn Taymiyya’s Al-risāla al-qubrūṣiyya, 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 Ahmad ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328), one of the most important Sunni thinkers of all time. 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 Islam. 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 the enemies of Islam, whether the morally corrupting influence of Christians and Jews, or 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 time. His vision of

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Islamic society includes, in Bori’s words, “la piena convinzione che all’uomo di scienza spetti 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). 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 well.

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–qubrūṣīyya 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 polemics.

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 reply.

While The Cypriot Letter is not among Ibn Taymiyya’s most quoted works, its different translations attest nonetheless to its interest. 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. 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...

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5 Ibid., p. 171.


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”.

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 Genghis Khan, inherited by his children, continued to expand after his death in 1227. In 1253, one of his grandchildren, Möngke, who had become the Great Khan, sent his brother Hülegü on the double mission of crushing Ismā’īlī 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 Hülegū (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 time.

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 Hülegū, 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’Islam suspect des envahisseurs mongols” (the spokesperson for the resistance party… the champion of Mamluk legality against the suspect Islam of the Mongol invaders).

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-Khuţaz, near Homs, on December 22 of that year, the Mongol army marched toward Damascus.


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–Suffar 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 Öljjeitī, who would direct the fourth and last Mongol attempt at invading Syria at the end of 1312, before his son Abū Sa‘īd 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 ’Alawī Shi’ā) who had pillaged the disbanded Egyptian army after the defeat at Wādī l–Khzaznadār; 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 invasion. “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”.

4. Recipient and date of composition

The incipit of The Cypriot Letter reads as follows:

In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy. From Ahmad 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 sirjwān? 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 1310. 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 manuscripts) 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 command. 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.

15 Michel, Response, p. 73. Michel is right in considering Al–rūṣāl al–qubrāṣiyya and not the earlier Al–rūṣām al–maṣlūl (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 controversial writings on Christianity” (Michel, Response, p. 71).
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 raids.20

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 Yuḥannā22. 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”23 (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 baron.24 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-título 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 question.25 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 (nān 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 letter.26

As for the date of composition, Raff situates it shortly after the Mongol defeat at Marj al–Suffar 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, 1304.27

5. Structure and main themes

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22 Di Branco, “Sul destinatario della Lettera”, p. 392. The “Islamic” sources to which Di Branco refers are, however, the Franciscan Jibra’il ibn al–Qil‘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-Qil‘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.


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 parts. 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 Cyprus.

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 Islam. 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‘īb) of Christ and the rest of the prophets:

Abū I‘-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 Jesus:

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 error” (masīḥ al–dalāla), 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). In The Right Answer, Ibn Taymiyya affirms that the belief in the two

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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).
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 Muhammad with regard to God’s three fundamental attributes in the Šūfi 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 Muhammad 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 Qurʾān 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 Muhammad 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 (ikhlas), 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

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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-maḥāma) see Ibn Hanbal, 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 (zaniḍāqa) and self-styled philosophers (muṭafalsifa) 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). 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 (mutashabhitāt) 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’ān 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 (tawḥīd) 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.

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.
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 prophets.

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 (*fitra*) 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*)

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 detail. These ruses are manifest to any intelligent person, and eminent authors have composed books to expose them. 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.” 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

39 Ibid., pp. 308–309.
40 Ibid., p. 208. Michel, however, interprets *hābīb al-rūmī* as referring to “the Pope of Rome”.
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 Church\(^{46}\).

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-Hamadānī (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 religion\(^{48}\).

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 *IṣṬiḍā’ al-ṣīrāṭ al-mustaqīm mukhālafat aṣḥāb al-jaḥīm* (The Necessity of the Straight Path in Opposing the People of Hell). The author quotes a *ḥadith* 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 differencing 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.


\(^{46}\) Raff, *Sendschreiben*, p. 171.


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 had\(^50\). 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. *Muhammad, the prophet foretold*

The next important thematic section of *The Cypriot Letter* is centered on Muhammad’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


\(^{50}\) 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).


Muhammad 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

Muhammad 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 (hanîf), who did not worship any god besides God” (Q. 2:135) as the unadulterated form of the religion of God, which Muhammad 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 Muhammad. (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 mubahala (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).


55 That is, associationism in relation to God’s divinity (al–hiyya) and to God’s lordship (rubûhiyya) 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%20Textespi%202004.pdf

56 That is, the Qur’ân. See Q. 3:3–4.


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”\textsuperscript{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:

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”\textsuperscript{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 kindliness with which they are treated, the same treatment that Ibn Taymiyya now demands for Muslim captives in Cyprus.

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., p. 242.
\textsuperscript{61} See Adang, \textit{Muslim Writers}, p. 271.
Just as the Prophet had in mind the best interests of Christians when he debated 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 Messiah. 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 (*yuharriḥūna*) 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 way.65

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 hanīfiyya*). 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

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63 See supra note 56.
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.
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


71 Michel, *Response*, p. 100.
72 Ibid., pp. 139–140.
73 Ibid., p. 101.