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Review of Lamoreaux

Theodore Abu Qurrah (Library of the Christian East 1)

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John C. Lamoreaux (translator), Theodore Abu Qurrah, Library of the Christian East 1, Brigham Young University Press, Provo, Utah, 2005, xxxvii+278, \$29.95 hardback, 0-934893-00-4.

Over the last few years Brigham Young University has begun an ambitious programme of publishing critical editions and English translations of a number of Middle Eastern texts, Jewish, Christian and Islamic. The Islamic series currently includes seven titles, one by Ibn Sina (Avicenna), two by al-Ghazali, two by Ibn Rushd (Averroes), one by Suhrawardi and one by Mulla Sadra, and the Jewish series, which so far concentrates exclusively on the medical works of Moses Maimonides, has two volumes, one consisting of some of his medical aphorisms and the other outlining his views on asthma (though it actually addresses a far wider set of medical issues than simply that disease).

The Christian series also currently includes two volumes, one being a critical edition and translation by S.H. Griffith of the tenth century Syrian Orthodox scholar Yahya bin 'Adi's ethical treatise *The Reformation of Morals* and the other being this translation of almost the complete works of the eighth-ninth century Chalcedonian (or Greek Orthodox) bishop of Haran, a town traditionally thought of as being in northern Syria, but currently, thanks to a 1939 border adjustment, in Turkey, Theodore Abu Qurrah, by John Lamoreaux of Southern Methodist University. The first is part of the 'Eastern Christian Texts' series, which includes the text in the original language as well as a translation, and the second is the first volume of the 'Library of the Christian East', which provides translations for a wider readership. Given the widespread ignorance in the West today, and perhaps particularly in the English-speaking world, of the fact that there is such a

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thing as living Middle Eastern Christianity, any attempt to make the works of significant Middle Eastern Christian thinkers more widely known is very welcome.

The Chair of the Advisory Board for the whole project is Sidney Griffith of the Catholic University of America, and the editor of the Library of the Christian East series is David Taylor of the University of Oxford. His editorial introduction makes clear that the intention of the series is quite explicitly to complement or supplement the other existing series of early and medieval Christian texts which usually concentrate exclusively on authors who wrote in either Latin or Greek, to indicate that in a Christian context 'oriental' does not necessarily mean 'marginal', 'peripheral' or 'unsophisticated' (p. viii), and thus to help 'all those who are curious to comprehend the true diversity of the early church' (p. vii), and the fact that the publication was funded through the support of the U.S. Congress and the Library of Congress makes very clear the pertinence of the project to the policy-making as well as the academic community.

Theodore Abu Qurrah (d.c. 829 CE) wrote in both Greek and Arabic (and indeed Syriac, though none of his works in this language are extant), and it is his role in this pivotal stage of the development of Middle Eastern Christianity, shifting from the language of the New Testament to the language of the Qur'an, which makes this collection of his works in both languages so valuable. *Almost* all of his works in both languages are included in this volume, with the translator indicating clearly (pp. xxvi-xxvii) his rationale for the exclusion of some works, which is normally on the basis either that the work is not actually by Theodore (e.g. the *Summa Theologiae Arabica*), or that a good English translation has recently appeared elsewhere (e.g. Sidney Griffith's translation of his work defending icons), or that the work is so technical in its language that it is likely to be of

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interest only to real specialists (e.g. the *Letter to David the Monophysite* (in Arabic)) and his discussion (in Greek) of philosophical names.

What remains, therefore, is nineteen works, five (in Part I) originally in Arabic, grouped under the title 'Discerning the True Religion', directed particularly against Judaism but also including reference to Magians (Zoroastrians), Samaritans, Manicheans, Marcionites, Muslims and others; six (in Part II), some originally in Arabic and some in Greek, on 'Discerning the True Church', mainly directed against the Armenians but also including discussion of the views of the Nestorians and the Jacobites, the main alternative Christian groupings in Haran; five (in Part III), all originally in Arabic and intended mainly for an internal (i.e. Christian) readership while also beginning to reflect the beginnings of inter-religious discussion of some of the themes, on 'Topics in Controversial Theology', that is epistemology, natural theology, the Trinity, and two texts on free will; and finally two, both in Greek, linked under the title of 'The Byzantine Legacy', which include guidance for Christians about how to relate to other religious communities, the 'Refutation of the Saracens' (as reported by John the Deacon) and the Greek Fragments (which, despite its title, is, the editor suggests, an integral composition probably compiled within a century of Theodore's death). The translator's introduction consists of a helpful six-page outline of what is known (which is not a lot) of Theodore's biography, an eight-page summary of the main arguments found in the works, and ten pages giving fuller details of the manuscripts, editions, and other translations of the works included in the volume. There is a full bibliography, index of scriptural (including twenty Qur'anic) citations, and index. The cover is beautifully illustrated with a picture of the four evangelists from a Syriac lectionary from Mosul produced in 1499 CE, a timely

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reminder of the contemporary relevance of the book in the light of the death, following kidnap, of Paulos Faraj Rahbo, the Chaldean (Catholic) Archbishop of that city, in March 2008.

Specialists in Christian-Muslim Relations will look particularly to Chapter 17, the short text where Theodore responds to questions from a Muslim enquirer about the Christian view of free will (pp. 207-8), a theme which is also discussed on pp. 196-198, Chapter 18, the Refutation of the Saracens, in which Theodore discusses both Christian beliefs (about God, Christ and Muhammad) and practices (such as the Eucharist and monogamy), and also pp. 238-241, where Theodore answers the questions in quick succession of the Arabs, of an unbeliever, and of an Agarene (i.e. Muslim). There is lots else of interest, however, not least as evidence of the thoroughly religiously plural context of Haran around the end of the 8th century, and it is also very interesting to see which of Theodore's works were written in each language, and therefore primarily for whom, Greek for a primarily Christian audience both inside and beyond the world of Islam, and then Arabic for a more mixed, even a multi-religious, audience within the world of Islam.

I have one technical quibble, namely that the arrangement of the footnotes is not quite as helpful as it might be, since although they are easily accessible at the foot of each page, they are run together, rather than each note starting on a new line of its own, and this means that an individual note is not quite as easy to locate as it might be. But this is a small quibble when put alongside the translator's achievement in making available for the first time in book form in English the collected works of an author who, in his words, was 'arguably one of the most creative and imaginative Christian theologians of the early Middle Ages' (p. xii). Put another way, John of Damascus, who is commonly described in a

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Western context as 'the last of the Church Fathers', did *not* represent the end of Chalcedonian Christianity, or indeed Christianity as a whole, in the Middle East. Rather it lived on, even if under radically different circumstances, especially after the transition from Umayyad rule (with Damascus as capital) to 'Abbasid rule (with Baghdad as capital) in 750 CE, and the works of Theodore Abu Qurrah are powerful evidence of this, both as one of the first Christians to write in Arabic and as one of the first to undertake a sustained theological defence of Christianity against the rival claims of Islam. It is therefore excellent to have an English-language collection of most of his works published in order to help make his name and works much more widely known.

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