

Knowledge Collaboration among Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, and Muslims in the Abbasid Near East: Introduction

Nathan P. Gibson*

This thematic section unearths several ways professionals from a variety of religious communities in the Near East collaborated with one another during the medieval period. Modern scholars of intellectual history have often attempted to trace connections in medieval texts across the religious spectrum, but it has been difficult to pin down the interpersonal circumstances behind these and other interactions. This is at least in part because scientific, philosophical, and theological treatises rarely refer to these personal relationships explicitly, leaving researchers to turn to other kinds of works for such details: biographies, chronicles, hagiographies, and documentary sources. But it then remains to come to terms with the historiographical perspectives of the authors of these works. For example, the authors of Arabic biographical dictionaries (*ṭabaqāt* literature) have provided some of the richest sources for person-to-person exchange in Near Eastern intellectual history, but they filter and taxonomize their subjects to focus on individuals, overwhelmingly men, who can be seen as formative for particular classes or categories (*ṭabaqāt*) of society. Disciplinary segmentation has made it especially difficult to answer questions such as how much »neutral« space there was in interreligious knowledge exchange in the Near East, or whether fields such as medicine became »Islamicized« through the exclusion of non-Muslims in the teaching, study, or practice of the field. The authors of the research articles here (contributors to a virtual forum hosted by the BMBF-funded »Communities of Knowledge« project) take various approaches to these problems of explicating silent sources, interpreting historiographical constructions, and bridging disciplinary segmentation. Some put particular texts under the microscope, pointing out new evidence of specific interactions on the basis of close readings or the examination of texts in a palimpsested manuscript. Some zoom out slightly on these interactions by making fresh comparisons between sources in differing genres or languages. All focus on the interreligious dimensions of exchange and, wherever possible, on the interpersonal engagements that brought these about. Reports from two research projects complement these by taking macro-level approaches that involve multiple languages, several genres, and broad regions. Overall, this thematic collection highlights the interpersonal and collaborative aspects of work by Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, and Muslims during the Abbasid caliphate (132-656 AH/750-1258 CE) with the aim of stimulating new research approaches that overcome previous genre limitations and disciplinary boundaries.

Keywords: Near East/Middle East, knowledge production, interreligious exchange, Abrahamic religions, medieval science, medieval medicine, biographical literature, Abbasid caliphate (132-656 AH/750-1258 CE), Arabic, Syriac

I urge you not to study the sciences from books, even if you are self-assured in your capacity to comprehend. Rather, avail yourself of teachers in each science you are studying to attain.¹

A person ought to read histories and become familiar with biographies and the experiences of peoples. By this he will, as it were, become someone who in his short life catches up to bygone peoples and is their contemporary and associate.²

‘Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baghdādī (557-629 AH/1162-1231 CE),
scholar of language, medicine, and theology

Introduction

Knowledge is personal. It is, further, *interpersonal* in its every movement. People mediate its production, acquisition, expression, communication, trade, negotiation, application, commercialization, and institutionalization. Even the transmission of knowledge through books does not escape this interpersonal dimension, for the activities of binding, copying, exchanging, teaching, and discussing books require interactions between people.

‘Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baghdādī, quoted above, is an example of this. Some of his best known personal contacts include winning the patronage of the ruler Saladin (Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, 532-589/1138-1193), meeting the physician-philosopher Maimonides (Mūsa b. Maymūn, 532-601/1138-1204), and corresponding with the biographer-physician Ibn Abī Uṣaybi‘a (d. after 590-668/1193-1269/70).³ He felt knowledge should be acquired through a person, and although Ibn Abī Uṣaybi‘a listed 169 writings of his,⁴ ‘Abd al-Laṭīf’s autobiography makes it apparent that he acquired and disseminated knowledge not just through reading and writing but also by seeking out other scholars as his teachers, students, and debate partners.

‘Abd al-Laṭīf lived just before the Mongol invasions, toward the end of the period of the Abbasids, defined broadly as 132-656/750-1258, if one includes the later centuries when the Abbasid rulers wielded little real power. It is a period well known for its remarkable production and circulation of knowledge. In terms of intellectual history, the period spans the activity of Jūrjis ibn Jibrīl (active late second/eighth century), founder of the Bukhtishū‘ dynasty of physicians, to that of luminaries like Maimonides and the Syriac polymath Barhebraeus (Gregorius bar ‘Ebroyo, 623-685/1225 or 1226-1286).

* **Correspondence details:** Nathan P. Gibson, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich, Institute of Near and Middle Eastern Studies, Geschwister-Scholl-Platz 1, D-80539 München, mw+contact@npgibson.com

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- 1 Translation adapted from Ibn Abī Uṣaybi‘a, *‘Uyūn al-anbā’*, ed. Savage-Smith *et al.*, §15.40.8 no. 2.
- 2 My translation. Compare Ibn Abī Uṣaybi‘a, *‘Uyūn al-anbā’*, ed. Savage-Smith *et al.*, §15.40.8 no. 3.
- 3 See Joosse, ‘Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baghdādī.
- 4 Ibn Abī Uṣaybi‘a, *‘Uyūn al-anbā’*, ed. Savage-Smith *et al.*, §15.40.9. To these should be added 15 additional works from the list of Ibn Shākir al-Kutubi; Joosse, ‘Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baghdādī.

In recent decades, studies have abounded that trace in the pages of scientific and philosophical treatises the ideas that scholars of this period shared with their contemporaries and predecessors across many religious communities.⁵ Yet the explicit connections between the persons who shared these ideas are seldom to be found in such treatises. What has survived to attest to personal links are the books bearing these texts – manuscripts showing the physical marks of those who wrote, studied, owned, traded, and preserved them. To suss out these connections, we have to read in-between the lines and layers of these books.

But how can we trace these personal links in the case of books that have not survived? Moreover, how can we trace links to teachers and practitioners – knowledge workers, to use modern parlance – who might have written prescriptions or signed business contracts, but never penned books? What about women practitioners whose ideas were not included in standard curricula (or, at least, not attributed to them there)? What about non-knowledge workers, family members and patrons, for example, who supported these knowledge networks?

For this, we must turn to sources other than the treatises themselves and pursue approaches at the intersection of intellectual history and social history. Still, it is tempting to remain focused on individual actors (such as the authors of scientific or philosophical treatises) by consulting references to them either in medieval biographical, bibliographical, and historiographical literature or, less commonly, in documentary sources. Not just modern researchers but also medieval Arabic biographers wished to discover what they could about the authors of the books available to them and conducted investigations compiling biobibliographical and historiographical literature and integrating it with interviews, oral reports, and documents in archives or personal collections.⁶

Where these medieval biographical endeavors (and sometimes their modern counterparts) fall short in helping us »catch up to bygone peoples« (in the words of ‘Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baghdādī) is that they often focus on the »great men« whose memory helped establish a community, be it a religious, ethnic, or professional community.⁷ In the texts most relevant to knowledge exchange, this »greatness« was often defined in terms of someone’s surviving literary reputation (with literary reputation being constrained almost exclusively to men), although the teachers of renowned authors and their family members as well as practitioners who were attached to colorful anecdotes also received some attention. Historians can flatten this hierarchy somewhat with approaches such as prosopography and network analysis, by tracing social links among *all* persons mentioned, whether named or anonymous, whether the subject of an entire chapter or referenced with a single word. Although these methods cannot replace unrecorded voices or regain lost biographical details, they can help juxtapose what authors emphasize with details they perhaps gloss over or admit against their own interest. Such approaches permit a kind of reading against the grain.

5 See, for example, many of the articles in the journal *Intellectual History of the Islamicate World* (2013-).

6 In general, see Bray, *Literary approaches*, 244–249. For specific examples, see Sánchez, *Art of compilation*; Heiss, *Biographical collections from South Arabia*, 128–130, 142; Mahoney, *Obituaries in Yemen*, 187.

7 See the articles in *Medieval Worlds* 15 special issue, especially Mahoney and Vocino, *Medieval biographical collections*; Heiss, *Biographical collections from South Arabia*, 125–127, 142; Mahoney, *Obituaries in Yemen*, 177. For a useful overview of scholars’ attention to the literary aims of Arabic biographers, see Bray, *Literary approaches*, 237–238. On the historiographical perspective of Ibn Abī Uṣaybi’a specifically, see Sánchez, *Art of compilation*, 77–79, 97–113. For the broader developments in research on Arabic biographical dictionaries (*tabaqāt* literature), see al-Qadi, *Alternative history*, including the references at 23–24 n. 1; al-Qadi, *Inner structure*.

Three »Inters«: Interlinear, Inter-genre, and Interreligious

In light of the above, studying *interpersonal* knowledge exchange involves at least three additional »inters«. The first is *interlinear*, if I may be permitted to use the term in a broad and even metaphorical sense, that is, reading between the lines and against the grain of an individual treatise or author. By this I mean extrapolating interpersonal links from a work's subtle, contextual clues, whether in its content, such as shared ideas or oblique personal references, or in its physical manifestation, such as traces left by those who used or reused a manuscript. The second is *inter-genre*, that is, turning to additional genres or working across genres (scientific and philosophical treatises, biographical and bibliographical dictionaries, chronicles, geographies, and documentary sources) to uncover collaborative networks.

The third is *interreligious*, that is, examining these collaborations across the boundaries of confessionalized corpora and disciplines. Historically, writings from the medieval Near East have been segmented in scholarship along religious lines into discrete bodies of literature to be studied in Islamic studies, »Oriental« Christian studies, and Judaic studies. This is despite the fact that many of these works share the same language and geographical origin: Muslim, Christian, and Jewish communities from Iraq to North Africa commonly composed literature in Arabic from at least the ninth century onward. Where differing languages are involved, such as Hebrew, Jewish Aramaic, Syriac, Greek, Coptic, and Persian, the gulf between disciplines is even larger.

The modern division along religious lines of scholarship *about* the medieval Near East does not in any case reflect the contours of knowledge exchange *in* the Near East, where the mutual involvement of Christians, Muslims, Jews, and others in medicine and other fields is well known alongside the names of scholars such as Ḥunayn b. Ishāq, Avicenna (Ibn Sina), and Maimonides (Mūsa b. Maymūn). Moreover, in the Abbasid Near East, the fact of collaboration by scholars of various religious affiliations (Jews, Christians, and Muslims of several denominations, as well as, in the early period, Zoroastrians and Sabians) was usually unremarkable for people at the time.⁸ To recognize knowledge exchange across religious communities does not suppose it was frictionless. There were dogmatically justified prejudices and barriers, as well as commonplace professional rivalries and political conflicts. But even in confessionally demarcated areas like polemic, religious jurisprudence, and scriptural interpretation, shared ideas and an awareness of other religions typifies Near Eastern writings.⁹

8 Savage-Smith, *Universality and neutrality of science*, 171. While I doubt the same could be said of Europe during the same period, this must be evaluated by scholars of medieval European history.

9 For examples of cross-communal scriptural consultations, see Dubovick, *Jewish-Christian interaction*; Sklare, *Samuel Ben Ḥofni Gaon and His Cultural World*, 115-116 and n. 52.

Nevertheless, the full implications of this have yet to be explored by specialists or appreciated by the general public. On a popular level, there is a temptation to ascribe credit for the era's achievements to one particular religious community or another. The common terms »Greco-Arabic translation movement« and »Islamic Golden Age« can be taken to mean that primarily Christian translators or, alternatively, primarily Muslim scientists provided the impetus for the developments of this period – even if those using the terms never intended this. The multi-directional and multi-dimensional extent of these collaborations across religious affiliations is difficult to express in a single metaphor. »Influence« and »borrowing« are certainly too one-directional; »exchange«, »entanglement«, »intertwining«, and »whirlpool« perhaps begin to capture the kinds of interaction evidenced in the sources.¹⁰

On the specialist level, the disciplinary segmentation along confessional lines mentioned above has left areas of scholarly exchange perceived as »non-religious« to the history of philosophy and history of science. Discussions in these latter fields sometimes take little account of what impact an author's religious affiliation (and related social standing) may have had in the marketplace of ideas or how scholars in »secular disciplines« engaged implicitly or explicitly with religious ideologies.

Two questions that remain difficult to answer because of these divides are, first, the extent to which scholars' religious affiliations or beliefs impacted their scientific work (for example, through their educational background, philosophical starting points in their disciplines, ethical considerations, and access to social and professional positions), and, second, the extent to which the study and practice of medicine became »Islamicized« at any given point through the exclusion of non-Muslims in the teaching, study, or practice of the field.

Regarding the first, it is clear that in the Abbasid Near East a large number of scholars and practitioners were not prevented by their religious affiliations from reaching the highest professional echelons nor from collaborating with one another, and it is also apparent that scholars from various religious backgrounds held many intellectual tenets in common, including ones from classical Greek thought, sometimes reworked in a monotheistic vein.¹¹ It might be tempting, therefore, to see scientific arenas as religion-free, secular spaces, but this would be to project modern European notions of a science-versus-religion clash onto the medieval Near East.¹² Better models for understanding the interplay between religion and science in this period will have to take into account that some of these scholars also held religious office as clerics or judges, wrote on spiritual matters, and advocated with political powers for their own communities. They will also need to take stock of the frequent theological vindications of science and apologetic justifications of religion (to use descriptions that future research might show to be too naïve and dismissive). Such models should, moreover, avoid generalizations about the religious conversions of scholars active in these fields and instead investigate their individual circumstances.

10 Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds*, 3-4; Stroumsa, Whirlpool effects; Gibson and Vollandt, Cross-communal scholarly interactions.

11 Savage-Smith calls these the »neutrality« and »universality« of science and provides numerous examples of collaboration and common ground; *Universality and neutrality of science*, 166-175. Goldstein refers to science as a »neutral zone« because it involved active cooperation among the various religious communities; *Science as a »neutral zone«*.

12 Compare Savage-Smith's argument against this historical European approach and her comments about its origins, as well as her summary of scholars' reevaluation of the »conflict model« in regard to the history of European science; *Universality and neutrality of science*, 177-179. See also Carlson, *Garden of the reasonable*, 100.

On the second question, the »Islamicization« of medical training and practitioners, some of the statistics from biographical dictionaries (including Ibn Abi Uṣaybi'a's) that were previously thought to indicate declining numbers of Christian and Jewish doctors by the beginning of the fifth/eleventh century should now be understood as historiographical artifacts.¹³ But how *should* we understand the later Mamluk and Ayyubid debates regarding the compatibility of medical practice with Islamic doctrines or regarding the acceptability of non-Muslims treating Muslim patients? Moreover, how should we understand the rise of medical institutions exclusively for Muslims?¹⁴

There is still much foundational work to be done on the concrete circumstances of inter-religious collaboration before these or other large questions can be answered comprehensively. In 2018, the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) funded the project »Communities of Knowledge: Interreligious Networks of Scholars in Ibn Abi Usaybi'a's *History of Physicians*« with myself as principal investigator and (shortly afterward) Nadine Löhr as research associate.¹⁵ The text at the center of the project, Ibn Abi Uṣaybi'a's *Uyūn al-anbā' fī ṭabaqāt al-aṭibbā'* (literally »Choice accounts of the classes of physicians«), is an Arabic work dealing explicitly with interpersonal and interreligious knowledge exchange.¹⁶ The author, a Muslim physician from Syria, profiles approximately 420 physicians from antiquity through to his times, the mid-seventh/mid-thirteenth century.

In the »Communities of Knowledge« project (usaybia.net), we have used network analysis to »read« the text in an interlinear way and make it a reference point for work across genres. We have attempted to mark each person and place that appears in chapters 8-15 (the Abbasid era, approximately). This includes not just the few hundred persons for whom Ibn Abi Uṣaybi'a provides a biography, but the few thousand persons and several hundred places he mentions in the course of his entries. Altogether we have tagged over 10,000 occurrences of people and places in these chapters. By loading these into a network and interrogating the relationships among them, any of these nodes can become the vantage point from which to view scholarly collaborations and thereby a means by which to critically inspect the façade of Ibn Abi Uṣaybi'a's historiographical presentation and even attempt to peer past it. Since we also provide a way to digitally refer to each of these subjects (with stable Uniform Resource Identifiers), it is possible to expand this view by linking them to literary or documentary texts studied by other researchers.

13 Carlson, Garden of the reasonable.

14 See Sánchez, Patronage, medicine, and piety. It would be useful but unfortunately beyond my capacity here to compare this to Lewicka, Medicine for Muslims.

15 Student researchers, who did a large portion of the work identifying and tagging people and places, were (in alphabetical order) Vanessa Birkhahn, Hanna Friedel, Lukas Froschmeier, Malinda Tolay, Robin Schmahl, and Flavio Zeska. Fabio Ioppolo did an internship with the project in 2020. Carolin Willimsky (student researcher) has done additional tagging after the project's conclusion. The individual contributions of each of the team members will be visible as data is iteratively published to the project website. The project's German title is »Wissensgemeinschaften: Interreligiöse Gelehrtennetzwerke in Ibn Abi Usaybi'a's *Geschichte der Ärzte*«.

16 There is now a new edition of the text based on the best known manuscripts accompanied by an English translation: Ibn Abi Uṣaybi'a, *Uyūn al-anbā'*, ed. Savage-Smith *et al.* The fact that it is available open-access in TEI-XML format at doi.org/10.1163/37704_0668IbnAbiUsaibia.Tabaqatalatibba.lhom-ed-ara1 has aided our work tremendously.

One of the things that can be seen so far from this dataset is that Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a is concerned about scholars' reputation *as scholars*, not always remarking on the affiliation of non-Muslims and sometimes even mentioning them with Islamic-style honorific titles. Even while writing many centuries after the establishment of Islamic political power, he reports circles of teaching, practice, and literary activity spanning religious communities as though they are absolutely normal. Certainly for the networks with which he is best acquainted, those of sixth-seventh/twelfth-thirteenth century Syria and Egypt, it is clear that Christians in Syria and Jews in Egypt were well integrated into medical education.

Current investigations on the *specific and interpersonal* ways that medieval Near Eastern communities exchanged knowledge are rare enough that we decided to solicit presentations showing the state of research on this topic. This thematic collection presents five research papers and two project reports, most of which were given in a preliminary form as part of the virtual forum »Jews, Christians, and Muslims as Colleagues and Collaborators in the Abbasid Near East«, held from 20 October to 11 December 2020.¹⁷ The research papers were pre-circulated, giving presenters the opportunity to benefit from respondents' and participants' reactions to the papers in both written and oral form. On behalf of the authors here, our gratitude goes to all the respondents and other participants who took the time to comment on these research efforts. I also want to thank the project team, especially Vanessa Birkhahn and Malinda Tolay, who put many hours into organizing the forum, and Tim Curnow, who helped copyedit these contributions.

Articles and Project Reports

The contribution of the plenary speaker, Ignacio Sánchez, is an exercise in both the interlinear and the inter-genre dimensions mentioned above. The account of al-Qalyūbī (active second half of the seventh/thirteenth century) comes from the time of Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a and from the streets of Cairo, the city where he trained. Just as in Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a's text, physicians in this text represent scholar-practitioners, those who were educated in elite sciences (medicine, pharmacology, and philosophy, sometimes also astral arts, mathematics, or grammar) but were also in practical demand.

Al-Qalyūbī provides a radically different picture in a wholly different genre from that of Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a – one that is, in Sánchez's words, something like an »antithesis« to such sources in its disparagement of the medical vocation. Just as the stories of treatment in biographical literature throw a different light on the theory to be read in medical treatises, and just as documents from the Cairo Genizah and elsewhere reveal the kinds of daily business arrangements mentioned only rarely in the biographies of leading physicians,¹⁸ so the *Nāṣīhat al-muḥibb fī dhamm al-takassub bi-l-ṭibb* (Advice to the passionate [student] admonishing against making a living with medicine) of al-Qalyūbī should cause us to revise what we think we know about the social and interreligious dimensions of medical practice in seventh-/thirteenth-century Cairo (and perhaps also other places and times). One could hardly call this a »view from the margins« as the Genizah material sometimes is. It is rather more like a view *to* the margins, written by a Muslim with the same kind of elite education as the

17 See usaybia.net/forum2020 for more details about the forum sessions. Financial support was provided by BMBF in the framework of the »Communities of Knowledge« project.

18 For a general overview of medical theory versus practice, see Pormann and Savage-Smith, *Medieval Islamic Medicine*; Bürgel, *Ärztliches Leben und Denken*. On Genizah perspectives of the medical profession, see Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, 2:240-261; and, more recently, Lev, *Jewish Medical Practitioners*.

physicians dominating biographical dictionaries who was, nevertheless, shocked by his encounter with life on the margins. It is Sánchez's effort to read between the lines that makes this study a counterweight to perspectives from other types of sources. He pulls the focus from the foreground – al-Qalyūbī's unique and hyperbolic argument – to the background – the social facts with which the author-physician had to come to terms.

Central among these facts that should prompt reconsideration are the prominent role of women (as explained by Sánchez) in determining a course of treatment (conceivably even writing prescriptions), the preponderance of Jewish physicians, and ethical points mitigating the likelihood that Muslim men would take up and continue in the medical profession, or continue in their Islamic beliefs if they did. All of this made it likely that Muslim patients would end up choosing Muslim women and Jewish men as practitioners over Muslim male doctors. This choice horrified al-Qalyūbī even as he penned warnings about the intellectual and spiritual dangers for Muslims entering the field. These facts should make us proceed cautiously regarding any supposed domination of the »physician« role by Muslim men during this period in Egypt or the Near East generally. They should also make it evident that many practical considerations contributed to the interreligious aspect of medicine.

Continuing in the interlinear vein, Kayla Dang examines two Arabic sources (fourth-fifth/ninth-tenth centuries) regarding Zoroastrian mowbeds (priests), who were seen as a hub of Persian cultural knowledge and engaged in interreligious debates hosted by caliphs and their courtiers. From these sources, she is able to read the way a Zoroastrian family claiming descent from the pre-Islamic mowbed Ādurbād ī Mahrspandān (Ādhurbādh b. Mārsfand) positioned itself as the leaders of the Zoroastrian community vis-à-vis Islamic authorities – and, in so doing, also laid claim to the pre-Islamic role of the mowbed as royal advisor and wise man. As she notes, this parallels what we already know regarding Christians, Jews, and Sabians who, during this same period, were securing protections for their communities on the basis of hadiths and documents attesting to historical pacts. The highest leadership positions in these communities (such as patriarch or exilarch) were subject to the Islamic ruler's approval, and, conversely, these same leaders were in a position to intercede with the ruler on behalf of their flocks.

The origins of Zoroastrian leadership in the Islamic period, however, have remained fuzzy until now, not least because most of the Zoroastrian Middle Persian texts that survive are recensions from this same period and may reflect these later Islamic-era dynamics. In any case, they do not seem to show the heterogeneity of the earlier Sasanian period. Dang therefore seeks evidence in outside sources, specifically, Arabic Islamic ones. Against the backdrop of Islamic traditions guaranteeing protection for Zoroastrians, she shows how Arabic historiographers depicted the mowbed as an advisor to Abbasid caliphs – and how this role sometimes led to disastrous results for the mowbed or his people. In the events that followed, under the Shi'i Buyids (c. 323-454/934-1062), the efforts of mowbeds to gain the ruler's endorsement as heads of their community are visible. But it is Dang's scrutiny of a hitherto overlooked edict from the ruler Ṣamṣām al-Dawla in 375/986 that clinches her argument. Here is the plain evidence that mowbeds claiming descent from Ādurbād ī Mahrspandān explicitly sought and received such an endorsement. A passage from al-Birūnī's history perhaps half a century later confirms that this particular group performed a gatekeeping role. Dang concludes by connecting her findings to other research on competition among Zoroastrian groups and follows this in the appendix with the first translation of the full edict of Ṣamṣām al-Dawla. Ultimately, the article helps clarify how members of this Zoroastrian family came into a position key to interreligious knowledge exchange.

The article on Timothy I, patriarch of the Church of the East (r. 163 or 164-207 or 208/780-823), shows that even when working from the best-known letters (40 and 59) of one of the most famous Syriac figures, one can establish new connections between Syriac authors and their associates. Both letters have a long history of research and recount engagements with Muslim interlocutors in the caliphal court, with an unnamed Aristotelian and with the caliph al-Mahdī (r. 158-169/775-785), respectively.

Joachim Jakob reads these letters in light of Islamic (specifically Muʿtazilite) theology to discover links between Christian and Muslim theologians that scholars have noticed in Arabic writings, but have sought less frequently in contemporary Syriac ones. Christian and Muʿtazilite theologians of the second-third/eighth-ninth centuries were preoccupied with the topic of God's attributes, an issue that stemmed from the quranic divine names but also resonated with Aristotelian ideas about relational attributes, as developed by the Syriac writer Athanasius of Balad (d. 687). These attributes, such as seeing, hearing, knowledge, and wisdom, posed a special problem to Islamic views of divine unity, for if the attributes were eternal, they might imply eternal and uncreated objects, that is, something seen, heard, and so on. Christian apologists latched onto this in their arguments for God's eternal relations within the Trinity.

Jakob builds on previous work that has illuminated the thinking of the influential Muʿtazilite Abū al-Hudhayl al-ʿAllāf (c. 135-c. 227/752-842) on this issue and has connected his ideas to those of Abū Rāʾīṭa (d. c. 220/835). It has also connected his circle quite directly to ʿAmmār al-Baṣrī (d. c. mid-third/mid-ninth century). To these ranks of Christian theologians conversant in the finer points of Muʿtazilite theology, Jakob adds Timothy, whose dispute with the Aristotelian in Letter 40 about knowing God on the basis of his attributes (among other topics, such as the Incarnation and the veneration of the cross) seems to show a precise awareness of Abū al-Hudhayl's theology.¹⁹ Timothy's position is echoed in somewhat less detail and with a slight variation in the dispute with al-Mahdī in Letter 59, which treats the topics of Christ's natures, the Trinity, Muhammad, and the relationship of Islam to Christianity in God's plan for history.²⁰ Working backward from shared ideas to specific interactions in space and time is a painstaking task, and fleshing out Timothy's personal network will require many further investigations (see, for example, the ongoing work of Michael Penn).²¹ Nevertheless, Jakob's argument here is highly suggestive that there were concrete, interpersonal links between Timothy and Abū al-Hudhayl.

Matteo Pimpinelli's article is quite literally an interlinear study. Palimpsests, like the fragment he investigates from the Qubbat al-Khazna (the octagonal dome in the courtyard of the Umayyad mosque in Damascus), demonstrate the intersecting work of two different copyists in the same space – two pens on the same vellum – even if they are separated in time by centuries. In this case, someone replaced a passage from Genesis written in Christian Palestinian Aramaic with one from an Arabic medical-botanical text, which Pimpinelli has identified as coming from the *Mukhtaṣar fī al-ṭibb* (Compendium of medicine) by ʿAbd al-Malik b. Ḥabīb (d. 238/853), otherwise known only in a hitherto unicum manuscript in Rabat. So far as I

19 For an overview of Letter 40's contents, see Roggema, To Sergius.

20 As overviewed by Heimgartner, Letter 59.

21 Until results are published from this ongoing research, see in the meantime Penn, *Envisioning Islam*, 79-83, 108-110, 132-133.

know, Pimpinelli is the first to identify, study, edit, and translate the excerpt, despite the fragment itself being available for more than a century though Friedrich Schulthess's 1905 volume containing colotype prints of it and an edition of the Christian Palestinian Aramaic undertext. Moreover, Pimpinelli dates the Arabic text on paleographic grounds to the late third-early fourth/late ninth-early tenth century, based on its similarity to Miriam Hjäl'm's category of »transitional scripts« for Christian Arabic manuscripts. This would probably make it the oldest witness to Ibn Ḥabīb's text and place it within a century of the author's death.

This small scrap of vellum undoubtedly tells a tale of interreligious collaboration, though not all its »whos« and »wheres« can be worked out with certainty. Palimpsests with this language combination, a Christian Palestinian Aramaic *scriptio inferior* and an Arabic *scriptio superior*, are common at St. Catherine's Monastery in Sinai. Pimpinelli suggests that also the content of the two texts, biblical and medical-botanical, could fit a monastic environment in the Sinai-Palestine region. In any case, the author of the Arabic text was a Muslim jurist, and the first portion of the text, known from the Rabat manuscript, is about »prophetic medicine«, that is, medicine derived from Muḥammad's teaching. Two scenarios are possible, both of which imply interreligious knowledge exchange. The first is that a Muslim Arabic copyist acquired a text of scripture from Christians in the fourth/tenth century (albeit in an antiquated script), not long after Muslim writers started to show detailed familiarity with biblical texts.²² The second scenario, the one for which Pimpinelli argues, is that it was Christian monks who became familiar with the Islamic text of Ibn Ḥabīb and erased a biblical manuscript that was no longer needed in order to make room for it.

We move to a new genre with Rémy Gareil's article, which boldly attempts to map cross-communal dimensions in the seventh section (*maqāla*) of an Arabic biobibliographic classic, the *Fihrist* (Catalogue) of Ibn al-Nadīm (d. c. 380/990). Gareil's examination of scholars mentioned in the *Fihrist* is an effort to understand the biography of these scholars collectively rather than individually. Taking his cue from Wadad al-Qadi's work on biographical dictionaries broadly, he wants to understand how the author's historiographical perspective shaped his references to religious affiliation and interreligious collaboration. He notes that there are no indices fitting for the purpose of identifying religious affiliations in the text but does find in Ayman Fu'ād Sayyid's edition a suitable textual basis for the endeavor.

On even a cursory reading of Ibn al-Nadīm's work, it is apparent that he includes scholars of all religious affiliations, seemingly without hesitation. In section 7, this includes Muslims, Christians, Jews, Sabians, and Manichaeans. But Gareil points out that Ibn al-Nadīm appears to use religious nisbas (descriptive titles attached to names) only incidentally, for example, where they are needed for identification. Moreover, writers of biographical dictionaries selected and organized their subjects according to many different criteria. There is no evidence that religious affiliation was one of these criteria for Ibn al-Nadīm, who seemed to emphasize other types of affiliation more than religion. Interreligious relationships in which a scholar taught, received patronage from, or translated a work with someone from a different religious community are described many times but not explicitly marked. Further, Gareil argues that Ibn al-Nadīm has scholarly collaborations in view when he discusses histories of translations and commentaries on specific works, which function as »virtual loci« of »asynchronous« collaboration. Here, too, Ibn al-Nadīm does not emphasize interreligious aspects when he

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records the interaction of scholars across religious affiliations. Why does the *Fihrist's* author spend so little ink on the religious identity of scholars? Until this question can be examined more comprehensively for the entire work, Gareil's findings remain preliminary. Nonetheless, his hypothesis is provocative: Ibn al-Nadīm's coverage of specifically *Arabic* works may have been more than just an issue of scope – it may have been a way to recast Islamic Arabic culture as heir to the ancient scholarly heritage, regardless of the individual religious affiliation of the scholars who conveyed it.

Finally, this thematic section includes two reports from projects that embrace inter-religious approaches and challenge the limitations of genre. Thomas Carlson and Jessica Mutter report on the National Endowment for the Humanities-funded project »HIMME: *Historical Index of the Medieval Middle East*« (medievalmideast.org), a resource to help scholars navigate the extraordinary linguistic diversity of the medieval Middle East (Central Asia to Egypt, including Anatolia), North Africa, and Andalusia and overcome disciplinary boundaries in the process. A researcher searching for the name of a person, place, or practice from a primary source in one language can find it in sources from up to seven languages (Arabic, Armenian, Greek, Hebrew, Latin, Persian, and Syriac). At its core, HIMME is a union index for over 20,000 persons, 18,000 places, and 1,600 practices with a deliberately broad scope of languages. It inventories four travel accounts (those of Nāṣir-i Khusraw, Benjamin of Tudela, four Frankish pilgrims, and Ibn Baṭṭūṭa) and five local sources (from Nu'aym b. Ḥammād, Michael the Syrian, Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, a collection of Armenian colophons, and Chalkokondyles) from the third-ninth/ninth-fifteenth centuries. Carlson and Mutter explain their selection of sources as prioritizing underutilized texts that are nevertheless available in English translation – in other words, those with a low barrier of entry but high reward for interdisciplinary prospectors. In large part because of its multilingual emphasis, HIMME also provides access to the richly multireligious life of the medieval Middle East. For example, someone looking in HIMME for accounts of physicians would find pagan, Christian, Muslim, and Jewish doctors in seven sources and five different languages.

The connection between multilingual practices and the religious communities to which they were linked is one Cecilia Palombo explores in her report on the European Research Council project »Embedding Conquest: Naturalizing Muslim Rule in the Early Islamic Empire«. The project as a whole focuses on letters attesting the personal relationships through which Islamic rule was »embedded« into society from Egypt to Iran. These are investigated in six regional case studies. Fundamentally, the project works on the assumption that non-Muslims were not passive subjects of the conquest but rather helped to build the ideals and structures of the government that ruled them. Palombo's own portion of the work focuses on Christian clergy and monastic scribes participating in the administration of Egyptian provinces. She discusses two particular contributions of non-Muslims to Islamic governance: language and expertise. The multilingualism, for example, of Coptic Christians who learned Arabic but also continued to write in Coptic and Greek into at least the early Abbasid years (second/eighth century or later) is noticeable not just in literary texts but also in administrative ones. Non-Muslim secretaries at the highest levels may have been famous for their scholastic output, but multilingualism was a valuable skill also for the large number of scribes that provincial officials employed in the middle administration. But participation in Islamic governance was not limited to writing multilingual documents, according to Palombo's description. The expertise that monastic and other scribes developed led to roles in which they themselves communicated with Muslim Arabic-speaking regional administrators; created official documents about taxes, travel, or legal cases; and discussed ideals of

governance, some of which were based on the Quran. Palombo concludes by stressing that the interreligious collaboration that helped to build Islamic administration involved not just the secretary-scholars who might have debated theology in the caliph's court but also the literate local personnel whose technical skills helped to run the empire.

It is my hope that the above articles do not just reflect the state of research but will also serve as waypoints toward research that better illuminates the concrete circumstances in which Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, and Muslims collaborated. From the individual encounters these researchers discuss – in their interpersonal, interlinear, inter-genre, and interreligious dimensions – it is still a long way to piecing together a comprehensive picture even of a particular region or half-century, let alone that of the Abbasid Near East across five centuries. Reflecting again on the words of 'Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baghdādī, this collection may nevertheless help us in our short lives to become closer contemporaries of bygone peoples.

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About the author

Nathan P. Gibson (PhD, The Catholic University of America) researches Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations in Arabic and Syriac texts from the medieval period, using both traditional and digital tools. From 2018-2022 he led the »Communities of Knowledge« project, which used network analysis to explore connections between religious communities in Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a's *'Uyūn al-anbā' fī ṭabaqāt al-aṭibbā'*. In 2022, he began »Arabic Literary Personages as Jewish Documentary Subjects«, a subproject in the BMBF-funded project »Beyond Conflict and Coexistence: Entangled Histories of Jewish-Arab Relations«.

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