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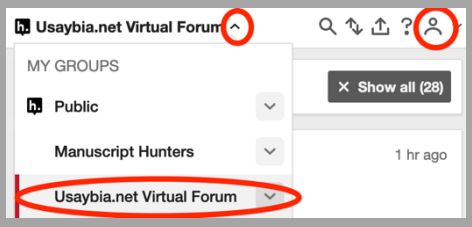

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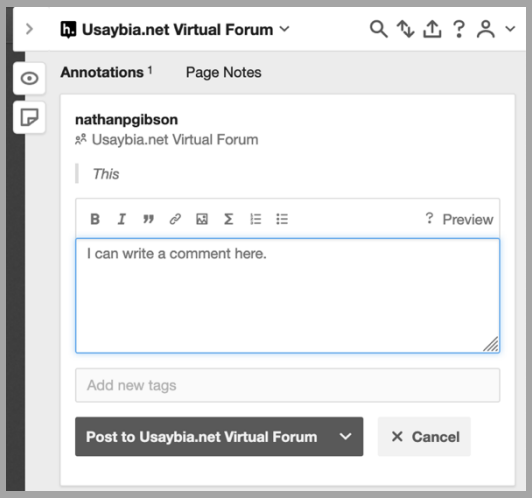

Labeling Religious Affiliation in Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa's History of Physicians: A Quest

Nathan P. Gibson
Institute of Near and Middle Eastern Studies, University of Munich (LMU)

[This is a draft paper intended for discussion. Here I have focused almost exclusively on the text of Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa and am reserving discussion of relevant secondary literature for a future version.]

The biographical dictionary of Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa (1203–1270 AD), titled *The Best Accounts of the Classes of Physicians* (Arabic, *ʿUyūn al-anbāʾ fī ṭabaqāt al-aṭibbāʾ*) or *History of Physicians* for short, is perhaps unequaled in the extent to which it details the social interactions of scholars from many different religious communities. *Ṭabaqāt* literature in general tends to provide a kind of who's-who resource collecting information about personages in particular categories, such as hadith transmitters or poets. Normally authors tended to make these categories applicable to a certain religious tradition, but Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa's project broke the mold by outlining a profession (medicine and related areas) in which collaboration and exchange among communities was typical. The *History of Physicians* is thus an ideal target for large-scale analysis of interreligious exchange, as the project "Communities of Knowledge" (https://usaybia.net) is in the process of doing.

The recently published critical edition and translation of the text makes such an analysis far easier, not least because the digital version is open-access under a CC-BY-NC license and can be downloaded and reused.[1] In this paper, links to sections of

[1] Emilie Savage-Smith, Simon Swain, and Geert Jan Van Gelder, eds., *A Literary History of Medicine: The ʿUyūn al-Anbāʾ Fī Ṭabaqāt al-Aṭibbāʾ of Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿah*, 5 vols., Handbook of Oriental Studies. Section 1 The Near and Middle East 134 (Leiden: Brill, 2019), https://dh.brill.com/scholarlyeditions/library/urn:cts:arabicLit:0668IbnAbiUsaibia/.

Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa's text are to this edition and translation (hereafter, LHOM), which is also the source of translated quotations, unless otherwise noted.

The overall aim of the Communities of Knowledge project is to examine the specific people, places, and types of interactions that function to bridge religious communities as represented in the *History of Physicians*. But one might ask (as my colleague Gregor Schwarb did once!), what the point of doing this is if we already know that collaboration across communities was not the exception, but rather the norm?

Indeed, the question is not *whether* such collaboration took place, since it is only from a retrospective, modern point of view that non-Muslim religious communities in the Middle East might appear too small or isolated to have such a role. I am also not asking *whose* the contributions of this period were, in the sense of ascribing specific knowledge or advancements more to one particular community than another. Modern studies of science or medicine during the medieval period sometimes refer to "Islamic science" or "Islamic medicine" as shorthand for those fields as practiced in Islamically governed regions, but this does not reflect the many different religious affiliations of their practitioners. It also does not mean, and should not be taken as meaning, that the fields themselves were "Islamic" in an ideological sense. On the other hand, the role of Christian translators during the early Abbasid period or the prominence of Jewish physicians in Fatimid Egypt, for example, should not be used to disregard the contributions of Muslims or others in at these times and places. To a large extent, the scholarly achievements of the Medieval Middle East came about through the collaboration of many scholars from many different communities and must be acknowledged as such.

The question of our project, then, is not "whether" or "whose" but *how*: in what circumstances did collaboration on an intercommunal level take place? Our tool for examining this is network analysis. Networks allow us to see the relationships between people (or places or texts) regardless of where they appear in the text or whether they are emphasized. Thus, after mapping the relationships, it may turn out that the actions of a caliph's wife or a physician's servant are a crucial link connecting scholars of different communities, even if the text only mentions them in passing. Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa's text is organized as biographical entries, but many of the

people who appear in each biography do not have an entry of their own. A good example is the author's grandfather, himself a physician and also known as Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa, who does not have his own entry but appears in other biographies (e.g., 15.40 and 15.51) as an important link in the author's own network.

But in order to be able to even identify interreligious interactions in the network, it is necessary to be able to label the communities to which individuals belong. Thus, the question for this paper is, how can this be done in a way that corresponds to the nuances of religious affiliation as perceived and recorded by Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa?[2]

Below I first mention some of the problems with trying to label religious affiliation, then I use some examples and data from the *History of Physicians* to explore how the text depicts affiliations, and finally I suggest the approach of "multiple signals" as a nuanced way to infer affiliations that can be represented in a network.

Conceptual and Practical Problems of Religious Affiliation

One issue that immediately arises is the conception of religion itself. From a modern perspective, religion is individually chosen and comprises highly personal and perhaps idiosyncratic beliefs and practices.[3] In contrast, I have chosen the term "religious affiliation" because I am not referring to beliefs, practices, or phenomena such as encountering "the numinous." Rather, by "affiliation" I mean the group to which someone is perceived to belong. In some cases, this may even contradict what a person is said to believe or practice. For example, the eminent physician Yūḥannā b. Masawayh (d. 857) is commonly spoken of as being part of the Christian community, and Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa quotes certain biographers that explicitly call him a "Christian" and a deacon. Yet his biography in the *History of Physicians* (8.26) hardly presents a pious believer. Once while he was suffering from a deathly illness, he reportedly fumed at the monks gathered around his bed to pray for him, "One drop of rose-perfume is better that the prayers of all the people of Christendom from the beginning to the day of Resurrection. Get out of my house!" (8.26.7). When

[2] The network constructed from the *History of Physicians* is meant as a tool for analyzing Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa's assertions. It is not in itself a historical-critical model.

[3] For the modern concept of "religion," see Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (Yale University Press, 2013).

reproved for taking concubines, he responded to the Catholicos with obscenities (8.26.8). On the other end of the Christian spectrum was Abū al-Faraj b. al-Ṭayyib, whose biography appears in 10.37. Besides being a respected physician, he was secretary to the Catholicos, a practicing priest, and a Bible commentator. Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa calls him *al-imām* (LHOM: "paragon"). Clearly, for Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa, terms like "Christian" indicated the community to which someone belonged, not their beliefs and practices.

A further question worth raising is whether it is possible in Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa's depiction for someone to simultaneously belong to multiple communities at once, such as to be both Jewish and Muslim. So far as I can tell, this is never indicated, at least when the groups in question are major religious blocs (what I would call "macro-affiliations").[4] However, he might consider the facts determining someone's affiliation to be unclear, as when he reports "it has been said" that Maimonides "converted to Islam while in the Maghrib" (14.39.2). In that case, he "reverted" to Judaism upon settling in Cairo. Going forward, I will consider macro-affiliations to be mutually exclusive but will still try to take into nuanced or contradictory evidence regarding the affiliation that should be inferred from the text of the *History of Physicians*.

Overall, I think it is useful to draw a parallel between the way religious affiliation was perceived and ethnicity. Except for an explicit conversion, children were considered to be of the same religion as their father.[5] Texts like Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa's suggest that it was not just jurists and theologians who saw things this way, but also social historians. Thus, religious affiliation was essentially inherited through the father, a point that may prove useful for the attempt to discover and label those affiliations.

If religious affiliations refer to someone's perceived membership in a group, if at least macro-affiliations are mutually exclusive, and if they are inherited, then should affiliations not be easy to find and label? No, for several reasons. First, Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa often omits explicitly mentioning the religious affiliation of both non-

[4] I doubt, but cannot yet disprove, that he considered it possible to belong to multiple subgroups such as Sunnī and Shiʿī, Jacobite and Nestorian, or Rabbanite and Karaite.

[5] See the paper from Jessica Mutter in this forum.

Muslims and Muslims. Perhaps he thinks it is known to his readers, or perhaps he thinks it is irrelevant to his purposes.[6] Second, when examined on a large scale and semi-automatically, the clues he provides may appear contradictory, due to his using conflicting sources or due to the person's having converted, among other reasons. But these seemingly contradictory indications should not be discarded. In fact, in some cases these may indicate that the person serves an important role in connecting communities within the network, as in the case of converts who bring their knowledge to a new community and presumably remain in contact with people from their old one. For these reasons, it needs to be possible to assign multiple affiliation labels to a person based on multiple, nuanced hints in the text.

Explorations of Affiliation in the *History of Physicians*

The following examples show some of the ways Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa speaks of religious affiliation, both directly and indirectly. In some cases, I will also compare this to the affiliation mentioned for the same person in the thorough LHOM index.

As explicit indications, he sometimes provides a *nisba* such as *al-Naṣrānī* or *al-Masīḥī*, ("the Christian), *al-Yahūdī* ("the Jew"), or *al-Isrāʾīlī* ("the Israelite"), but this is less common than one might expect. More often, a religious office or occupation may be mentioned, such as *al-Muṭrān* ("the bishop"), *al-Biṭrīq* ("the patriarch"), or *al-qāḍī* ("the judge," i.e., of an Islamic court). Some examples of his direct references to affiliation include the biography of Awḥad al-Zamān Abū al-Barakāt al-Baghdādī, who, he says, "was a Jew who subsequently became a Muslim" (كان يهودياً وأسلم بعد ذلك, 10.66). Throughout the biography, his former Jewish affiliation and his conversion feature large. In another entry, for Abū al-Barakāt ibn Shaʿyā, the author specifies that the latter was a "Karaite Jew" (وكان يهودياً قراء, 14.41).[7] He says the vizier al-Ṣāḥib Amīn al-Dawlah "was a Samaritan who converted to Islam under the name Kamāl al-Dīn" (كان سامرياً وأسلم ولقب بكمال الدين) (15.49). His uncle is given the *nisba al-Sāmirī* ("the Samaritan"). A final example is Amīn al-Dawlah b. al-Tilmīdh, who "died as a Christian" (ومات نصرانياً, 10.64.16).

[6] Compare the logic of Ibn al-Nadīm in the paper by Rémy Gareil in this forum.

[7] This biography only appears in versions 1 and 3 (see LHOM note).

In other cases, the indications are scattered and less direct, but may be enough to infer an affiliation when taken together. In 8.10–12, Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa gives a biography of ʿAbd Allāh al-Ṭayfūrī (active late 8th century), his son Zakariyyā, and his grandson Isrāʾīl. Al-Ṭayfūrī is indicated in the LHOM index as a "Christian" and is called a "Christian" (*al-Naṣrānī*) by al-Qifṭī. But this is not said explicitly in the *History of Physicians*, so far as I can find. None of the affiliations of the three generations are mentioned in their biographies. However, the entry for the Christian physician Yūḥannā b. Masawayh tells about the family's relationship to the latter (8.26 and see above). ʿAbd Allāh, it turns out, is Ibn Masawayh's father-in-law. This presumably shows a Christian affiliation for himself and his daughter, since it would be very unlikely for her to be given in marriage to a Christian man if she were a Muslim.[8] Moreover, ʿAbd Allāh lives next to Yūḥannā in the "Christian quarter" of Baghdad, and his son Dāniyal became a monk. In the biography of Ḥunayn b. Isḥāq, ʿAbd Allāh's grandson Isrāʾīl is reported to have been a Christian who created a conflict with Ḥunayn and then called for him to be tried by a Christian tribunal (8.29.12). Ultimately, the Catholicos got involved, suggesting that Isrāʾīl, like Ḥunayn, probably belonged to the Church of the East. On the basis of the affiliation of his descendants and (more weakly) his place of residence, it is reasonable to conclude that ʿAbd Allāh and his mentioned descendants were Christians, likely of the East Syriac variety.

Another example of indirectly implied affiliation is that of Muwaffaq al-Dīn ibn al-Muṭrān (d. 1191), physician to Saladin and a teacher of Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa's teacher al-Dakhwār. In his biography (15.23), his name "son of the metropolitan" strongly suggests a Christian affiliation prior to his conversion to Islam, which is mentioned. There seems little doubt that Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa's readers would have assumed Ibn al-Muṭrān to come from a Christian family.

What can we learn from these and other instances regarding the kinds of things in the *History of Physicians* that can be taken to signal religious affiliation? Put differently, can we learn to infer affiliation the same way that Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa's readers did?

[8] Muslim *men* marrying Christian *women* was a different matter juristically and socially and was far more likely.

Besides religious titles and professions or occupations, relationships can help when the affiliations of someone's father or siblings or a man's children are known. (Conversely, the affiliation of wives or mothers is more difficult to determine.) But what about names?

Certain given names are can be a weak signal of someone's affiliation at birth. Using the *Onomasticon Arabicum* (OA), a digital publication of the French Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS) based on a number of Arabic biographical dictionaries, it is possible to get a basic idea of which names were in use in which communities.[9] Each record is essentially an attestation of a person's name and other biographical information mentioned in a particular source. In the field "DIN," OA lists any religious labels mentioned by the source or "deduced" by the person recording the data. [The statistics I mention below derive from my analysis of OA in approximately 2017.] Since then, many new records have been added, and I plan to update this analysis accordingly.] Of about 13,500 attestation records, there were approximately 6,500 affiliation labels. By listing all of these and classifying them into "macro-affiliations" such as Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Zoroastrian, and so on, I was able to compile usage statistics for each name showing the number of times it occurred for each macro-affiliation. Some important caveats are in order: Persons labeled with non-Muslim affiliations make up only a tiny proportion of the dataset (e.g., Christian: 93 records / 0.7%; Jewish: 31 records, 0.2%). Also, the vast majority of records are for men and, by virtue of being derived from biographical dictionaries, mostly prominent men.

The following names are ones that are attested at least 100 times among Muslims:

Table 1: Names attested 100+ for Muslims in OA

Name	Occurrences among Muslims
Muḥammad	1255
Aḥmad	585
ʿAlī*	390

[9] In the future, perhaps the HIMME dataset could be used to augment this analysis.

Name	Occurrences among Muslims
ʿAbd Allāh*	240
Ibrāhīm*	189
ʿAbd al-Raḥmān	171
al-Ḥasan*	114
Ismāʿīl*	102

Names with an asterisk (*) represent names for which the combined total of occurrences among Jews, Christians, Sabians, Zoroastrians, and "Zanādiq" was more than 1% of the occurrence among Muslims.[10] These I did not consider exclusively "Muslim" names.

The remaining three names, Muḥammad, Aḥmad, and ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, are ones that could be seen to have a particularly Islamic valence in contrast to, for example, ʿAbd Allāh ("slave of God") or Ibrāhīm (Abraham), which might be seen as generally monotheistic. Thus, I take these three names to be suggestive of a person's Muslim affiliation at the time the name was given.

We can also see which names are *not* present in the nearly 6,000 attestations for Muslim men. I have classified these by Christian or Jewish usage, but it should be noted that, due to the small number of Christian and Jewish affiliations in OA, no conclusions can be drawn about which names were actually common in these communities. Moreover, of the names that occur only once in OA, I have excluded those I consider to be unusual and likely to be seen only in connection to one particular individual (e.g., Masawayh).

[10] Zanādiq (singular Zindīq) are difficult to assign to a macro-affiliation, since Muslim authors used the term variously to mean "heretics," "dualists," or other types of non-believers. I have therefore retained the term as is. The 1% cutoff is a preliminary guess that approximately represents the proportion of non-Muslim attestations in the dataset and also matches my own observations regarding which names I see used by non-Muslims in medieval sources.

Table 2: Names occurring among Christians but not Muslims according to OA attestations

Name	Occurrences among Christians
Yūḥannā/Yuḥannā	4
Bukhtīshūʿ	3
Isrāʾīl*	2
Jibraʾīl	2
Jūrjis/Jurjis/Jirjis	2
Mīkhāʾīl	2
Būluṣ	1
Isṭīfan	1
Mārī	1
Masīḥ	1
Mattā	1
Nasṭās	1
Sarjis	1
Tiyādūrus/Tayādūrus	1
Yūwānīs	1

The asterisk (*) indicates I have disregarded the name (Isrāʾīl) as a particularly "Christian" name, because I consider it likely to also occur in Jewish communities, even though it is not attested as Jewish in OA. Most of the other names could be seen as having a particularly Christian valence: names of New Testament characters or Christian saints or names that refer to "Christ" (Masīḥ) or to "Jesus" in Syriac (Īshūʿ).[11]

A good source to supplement Arabic names attested among medieval Christians would be the *Syriac Biographical Dictionary* (http://syriaca.org/persons), which has records for persons connected to the Syriac communities. The few records relating

[11] The Arabic name ʿĪsā, which refers to Jesus in the Quran, was not uncommon among Muslims. If Masīḥ and Bukhtīshūʿ can be regarded as indicators of a Christian affiliation, then similar names could probably be included in this category as well: Īshūʿ, Sabrīshūʿ, and ʿAbd al-Maṣīḥ.

to non-Christians would need to be manually excluded and the remaining names filtered according to whether they have Muslim attestations in OA.

Because of the small number of Jewish attestations (31), there are fewer "non-Muslim" names attested as Jewish in OA.

Table 3: Names occurring among Jews but not Muslims according to OA attestations

Name	Occurrences
Ḥasdāy	2
Ṣafiyyah	1
Minaḥim	1

For Jewish names, a good supplement could be the descriptions of Arabic items from the Cairo Genizah available from the Cambridge Digital Library. Names would need to be extracted from the descriptions and persons known to be non-Jewish excluded. Then the list could be compared with OA and the *Syriac Biographical Dictionary* to determine which names are attested only for Jewish affiliations, not Muslim or Christian.

Among the name data from OA and the text of the *History of Physicians*, there are also some surprises with regard to affiliation.[12] Names one might have thought to be Muslim in connotation were also sometimes used among non-Muslims, such as ʿAlī, al-Ḥasan, and ʿAbd Allāh. Moreover, names one might guess to indicate a Jewish affiliation such as Isrāʾīl and Hibat Allāh (equivalent of Nathaniel) were in use among Christians, perhaps because they were also biblical names. This points to the importance of using attestation statistics to test assumptions about the affiliations connected to names.

Another unexpected observation is that honorific titles are given to non-Muslims that one might expect to be reserved for Muslims.[13] The *kunyā*, that is, the title Abū

[12] Specific examples for the following paragraphs will be cited in a future version of this paper. Some of these can be found in the biographies mentioned above in the section "Explorations of Affiliation."
[13] This is a point that requires further investigation and might be reflected more strongly in Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa's text than in other biographical dictionaries written by Muslims.

[X] (“Father of [X]”) or Umm [X] (“Mother of [X]”) is a customary form of respect, but one prohibited by certain versions of the so-called “Pact of ʿUmar,” the document supposed to outline the agreements made between Muslims and conquered non-Muslim protected peoples (*ahl al-dhimma*). I would be far from the first to observe that provisions in the “Pact of ʿUmar” were very often disregarded, but the frequency of *kunyā* titles for non-Muslims is somewhat surprising. They may in fact be useless as any indicator of affiliation.

Even more surprisingly, honorific titles with al-Dawla (“of the state”) or al-Dīn (“of the religion”), such as Muwaffaq al-Dīn (“successful of the religion”), are also given to non-Muslims in the *History of the Physicians*. Although there are several cases, I have yet to see whether the statistical data suggests any significant correlation between these kinds of titles and affiliation.

To summarize, explicit labels, religious occupations or offices, family relationships, and certain names can all provide some indication of a person’s affiliation. What happens, then, when we put these to use on the *History of the Physicians*?

Our progress on this so far has been to apply this to the entries in the thorough LHOM index, most of which can now also be found in a draft form (some corrections are still needed) at https://usaybia.net.[14] These index entries normally provide the person’s full name and brief information about the person’s occupation, affiliation, or relationships, to the extent it may be useful for identification. For example, the entry for the above-mentioned al-Ṭayfūrī is, “ ʿAbd Allāh al-Ṭayfūrī, Christian physician to al-Hādī.”

Figure 1 shows the results of labeling these affiliations using the information provided by the index.[15]

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[14] Vanessa Birkhahn, Fabio Ioppolo, Nadine Löhr, Robin Schmahl, and Malinda Tolay (in alphabetical order) helped identify and proofread the information coming from the raw text of the index. Vanessa Birkhahn also helped to mark stated religious affiliations, and Fabio Ioppolo and Malinda Tolay processed the relationships mentioned in the index.

[15] Only Jewish, Christian, and Muslim affiliations are shown, since there is insufficient data for others.

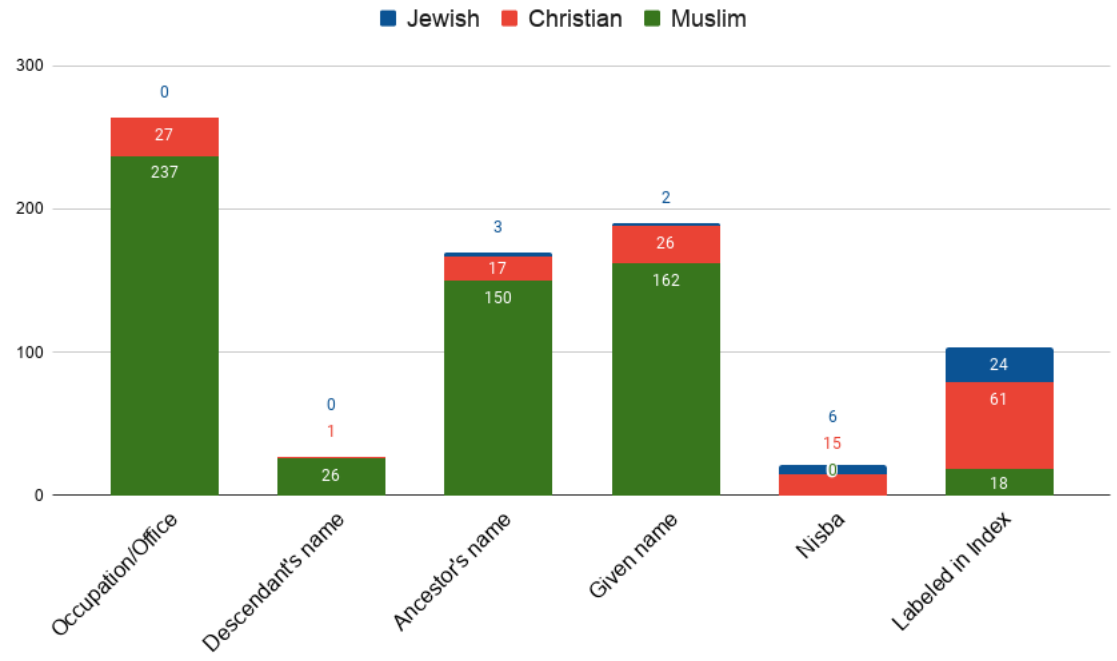

Figure 1: Number of persons in the LHOM Index for Jewish, Christian, and Muslim affiliations by indicators used

As this shows, the different types of indicators capture higher or lower percentages of people depending on the community.

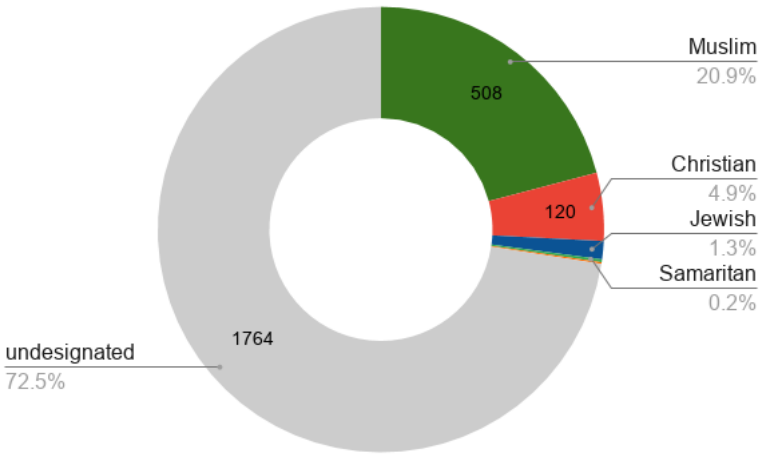

Figure 2: Total number of persons with affiliations in the LHOM index by any indicator

As seen in Figure 2, these help identify the affiliation of less than 30% of people in the index. Still, this is far more than can be done by relying on explicit identifications alone.

Multiple Signals as a Solution for Labeling Religious Affiliation?

The above methods need to be further tested, but I suspect that there will be discrepancies between the indicators based on names and occupations and what Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa states or implies about affiliations in his text. They might be thought of as "signals," arrows of a particular weight pointing in a particular direction. It would even be conceivable to develop an algorithm that assigns probability weights to certain indicators based on a "ground truth" of attested names among people with known affiliations. This would make it possible to analyze and visualize data (e.g., in a network) by degrees of uncertainty rather than merely by a categorical affiliation.

As mentioned above, being able to reflect the nuance and uncertainty of Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa's hints about affiliation also requires dealing with multiple—and sometimes conflicting—indications, or "mixed signals." In the LHOM index, there are fewer mixed signals than I expected, with only two persons having conflicting "macro-affiliations." These are Abū Ghālib Ibn Ṣafiyyah al-Ṭabīb al-Naṣrānī (active late 12th century), who is explicitly called a "Christian" but whose ancestor Ṣafiyyah bears a name attested in Jewish usage in OA; and Abū Jaʿfar Yūsuf ibn Aḥmad ibn Ḥasdāy (d. 1136), who seems to have hailed from the Jewish "Ḥasdāy" family in Andalusia, but who is said in other sources to have been a Muslim.[16]

Recording multiple, weighted signals in such cases is a way to help ensure that uncertainties are integrated into the analysis, and that a persons connections to multiple communities (as in the case of Abū Jaʿfar Yūsuf ibn Aḥmad ibn Ḥasdāy) are not overlooked.

[If there is time, or if some are interested, I can also address during the presentation how I plan to detect and record such signals from the text itself, not just the index.]

[16] See Ignacio Sanchez, "Ibn Ḥasdāy, Abū Jaʿfar," *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*, January 1, 2018, https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3/ibn-hasday-abu-jafar-COM_32138. Sarah Stroumsa, "Between Acculturation and Conversion in Islamic Spain The Case of the Banū Ḥasday," *Mediterranea. International Journal on the Transfer of Knowledge* 0, no. 1 (March 1, 2016): 9–36, https://doi.org/10.21071/mijtk.v0i1.5171.