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Talking with Enemies, Writing to Friends

Timothy I and the Construction of an Eastern Christian Response to Islam

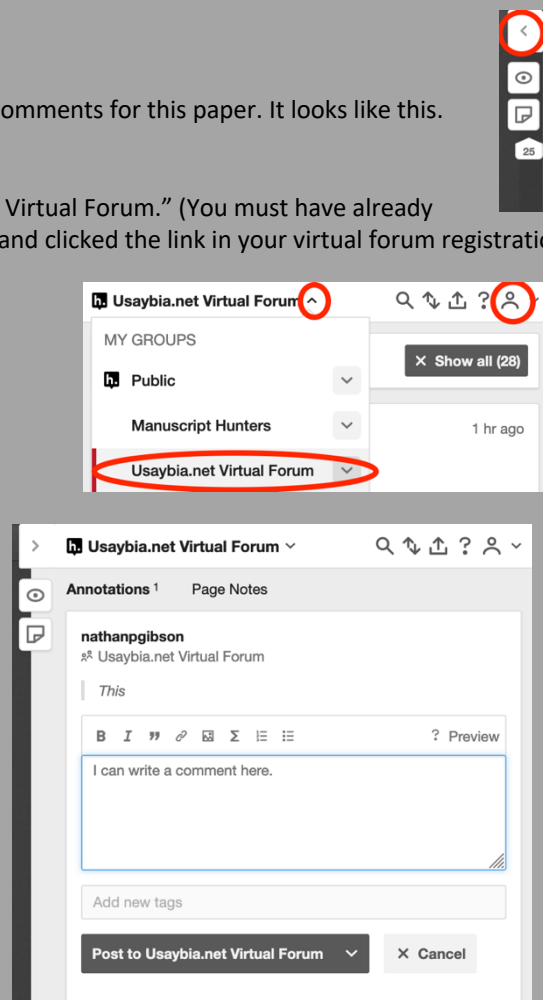
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Talking with Enemies, Writing to Friends

Timothy I and the Construction of an Eastern Christian Response to Islam

I. INTRODUCTION

Timothy I, born around 740 CE,¹ became patriarch (or *katholikos*, Syr. ܕܡܪܝܬܐ) of the Church of the East in 780. It was not an easy rise to power: Timothy had to face significant internal resistance to his nomination as head of his church.² In spite of this (or perhaps precisely because of it), he soon proved himself to be an apt political and spiritual leader for his community. Among his first orders of business there was the relocation of his residence as patriarch from Ctesiphon to Baghdad³ —a clearly strategic move, motivated by Timothy's wish to be closer to the heart of the political power represented by the caliph and his court. Judging by his own letters, the decision paid off soon enough. Timothy had no less than six official meetings with al-Mahdi in the early years of his mandate, in order to entreat the caliph to rebuild a church that had been destroyed after a recent defeat against the Byzantines. Again, in the mid-790s, he obtained a huge sum to be devolved to the monastery of Mār Pētiōn, which, he informs us, was the result of three visits over three consecutive days at the court.⁴ The relations with the caliph were not limited to economic matters: Timothy was also commissioned a translation of Aristotle's *Topics* —a feat which he accomplished with the help of a scholar who had served as secretary of the governor of Mosul.⁵ These instances already point to the good relationship that Timothy was able to establish with his Muslim sovereign.

But perhaps even more significant in this sense are two further episodes that Timothy relates at great length in two separate letters (which, consequently, have become among his most popular), namely letters 40 and 59.⁶ Although presently I shall argue against accepting these letters at face value and taking them as faithful *Gedächtnisprotokolle* of real-life events,⁷ they do confirm the impression that Timothy was a frequent and welcome presence at the caliphal *majli*.⁸ For in these letters Timothy presents himself deep in conversation with a noble member of the court (40) on one occasion, and with al-Mahdi himself on another (59). According to internal references, the two episodes can be placed in close proximity to one

¹ The traditional date of birth in 728 has been, rightly, called into question by BERTI 2009, who suggests postdating it by some 10/15 years.

² See BERTI 2009 for full discussion.

³ See HEIMGARTNER 2015: 'So we have to take into consideration a double localization of the East Syrian Church: Timothy resided, as far as we can tell, in Baghdad, whereas the highest official rites such as the election and the consecration of the Patriarch remained attached to the Patriarchal cities Seleucia-Ctesiphon and their Cathedral.' (p.175)

⁴ HEIMGARTNER 2011v: p.68, n.212.

⁵ See letter 43 (and 48). English translation and commentary in BROCK 1999. Now also HEIMGARTNER 2012: letter 43: p.L–LI (introduction), p.47–52 (translation), p.65–8 (text); letter 48: p.LX–LXI (introduction), p.73–7 (translation), p.88–92 (text). On Abū Nūḥ, see SWANSON 2009.

⁶ Numeration first found in BRAUN 1953 has since become standard. New editions of the letters, with rich commentary and German translation: HEIMGARTNER 2011 and 2019. All previous editions and translations are superseded by Heimgartner's and need no longer be mentioned. For a full list I refer to Heimgartner's introductions. See also HEIMGARTNER 2007, 2008, 2012a.

⁷ HEIMGARTNER 2009: 522 and HEIMGARTNER 2011v: XLII (and esp. n.192 for a bibliography of the use of the term 'Gedächtnisprotokoll', starting with VAN ESS 1992: 22 = VAN ESS 2017: 23 'a record produced from memory'). Cf. also ROGGEA 2016: 276: 'Elle [= Letter 59] fut écrit en syriaque sous la forme d'un *compte rendu* que Timothée envoya à un ami' (my italics).

⁸ On the *majli* see LAZARUS-YAFEH 1999 and esp. GRIFFITH 1999 therein.

another, and since the encounter with the caliph is datable to the second half of 782 or 783,⁹ Timothy must have discussed with the nobleman of letter 40 soon before that time.¹⁰

These letters (and the episodes they purport to record) have often been labelled as remarkable cases of Christian-Muslim peaceful interaction by their modern students, and have been read accordingly.¹¹ Letter 59, in particular has received much attention, not only because a caliph is involved but also because it was soon translated into Arabic and, judging by its manuscript tradition, experienced a good degree of popularity in Islamic environments too.¹² But this approach has by now begun to show its limitations. For while it is good to stress the amicable attitude that transpires from both episodes, there is a risk of diluting excessively the urgent conflict of ideas and beliefs that underlay this type of encounters. Two people can disagree and even fight over something without necessarily being intolerant or violent or ceasing to be on friendly terms afterwards.¹³ And the idea that this sort of debates was exceptional or rare is no longer tenable, not for real-life events nor for written texts. Christians still represented the majority of the population in early Abbasid times, and their elites contributed actively to the life, both political and cultural, of the empire. Moreover, Timothy's letters 40 and 59 do not stand out as literary exceptions, rather they fall within a genre of interreligious, Christian-Muslim debate that can be traced back at least to the beginning of the VIII century.¹⁴ It is high time we started considering Timothy's letters in a more nuanced and less irenic fashion.

The aim of this paper is, therefore, to gain new insight into Timothy's methods and goals by reading more closely and systematically his surviving corpus of letters. Two questions will guide the enquiry:

- 1) how did Timothy articulate his defence of Christianity in the face of Islam?
- 2) What were his (religious, cultural, political, personal) aims in so doing?

When answering these questions, it will be particularly fruitful to adopt a reader-oriented approach, which will take into consideration the intended audiences of Timothy's letters. This bears with it the double merit of focusing our attention on an aspect that, in the case of Timothy, has not attracted much scholarly interest until now and of allowing us to move past the strict limits of pure textuality so that we might think of the historical reality of Timothy's time. I shall argue that, by using carefully wrought literary techniques, Timothy aimed, in fact, to achieve very practical goals, such as internal reinforcement of his Church (both strengthening its members' faith and preserving their numbers) and external 'apology' of (dyophysite) Christian beliefs and cultural preparation and preparedness vis-à-vis the Muslim intelligentsia. I do not intend to provide exhaustive answers to the questions above, rather I wish to suggest a way into the problem that might lead the way for future studies. In the spirit of the

⁹ HEIMGARTNER 2011v: XXXI–XXXIII.

¹⁰ See letter 40.11,4 and HEIMGARTNER 2019v: XXVI: 'Da sich für die Disputation eine Datierung in die Jahre 782 oder 783 empfiehlt, dürfte auch die Niederschrift von Brief 40 in diese Jahre fallen.'

¹¹ E.g., HAGE 2001; GRIFFITH 1992, 1999, 2007a, 2007b, 2009, 2010; SAMIR & NASRY 2018; SUERMANN 2000.

¹² For the Arabic version of the dialogue, see SAMIR & NASRY 2018 (the introduction is, on the whole, not very useful, but pages XXXVIIIff. have up-to-date description of Arabic tradition).

¹³ ROGGEA 2016: 279: '... il ne faut toutefois pas en conclure, sur la base de ces divers point polémiques... que le patriarche recherchait l'attaque frontale avec l'Islam. Bien au contraire, le texte se distingue par son discours empreint de respect envers le calife.' While I agree that polemic does not necessarily call for violent opposition, I hope to show that the "respect" Timothy shows is only skin-deep.

¹⁴ A brief list of similar works would include: 'The Disputation between a Muslim and a Monk of Bēt Ḥālē', the treatise known as 'On the triune nature of God' (Fī tathlīth Allāh al-wāḥid), the tenth mimrā of Theodor Bar Koni, the 'Legend of Sergius Bahira', more than one work by Abū Qurrah – and so on.

forum for which this paper was written, I hope to show how Timothy's letters bear witness to an important intellectual (theological, philosophical) collaboration that took place between the highest ranks of eastern Christianity and of Islam —however, not a linear, straightforward collaboration but a collaboration *despite* the deep variance that ran between the two groups.

II. THE PEARL AS HIDDEN SYMBOL OF CHRISTIAN FAITH

A good starting point to reconstruct Timothy's intended audience and his methods to reach it successfully is the so-called 'Parable of the Pearl', which comes near the end of the dialogue with al-Mahdi and has experienced a popularity of its own, due to it being the first known version (or, rather, the closest antecedent) of the 'Parable of the Three Rings'.¹⁵ It is universally considered as a conciliatory attempt to state the unknowability of the ultimate religious truth and therefore the simultaneous validity of differing beliefs —the perfect peace-affirming closure of a peacebuilding dialogue. A closer look at the passage suggests otherwise.

And I replied to his Majesty: "O our victorious King, in this world we are all of us as in a dark house in the middle of the night. If at night and in a dark house a precious pearl (ܩܠܡܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ... ܕܥܝܢܐ) happens to fall in the midst of people, and all become aware of its existence, every one would strive to pick up the pearl, which will not fall to the lot of all but to the lot of one only, while one will get hold of the pearl itself, another one of a piece of glass, a third one of a stone or of a bit of earth, but every one will be happy and proud that he is the real possessor of the pearl. When, however, night and darkness disappear, and light and day arise, then every one of those men who had believed that they had the pearl, would extend and stretch his hand towards the light, which alone can show what every one has in hand. He who possesses the pearl will rejoice and be happy and pleased with it, while those who had in hand pieces of glass and bits of stone only will weep and be sad, and will sigh and shed tears. In this same way we children of men are in this perishable world as in darkness. The pearl of the true faith fell in the midst of all of us, and it is undoubtedly in the hand of one of us, while all of us believe that we possess the precious object. In the world to come, however, the darkness of mortality passes, and the fog of ignorance dissolves, since it is the true and the real light to which the fog of ignorance is | absolutely foreign. In it the possessors of the pearl will rejoice, be happy and pleased, and the possessors of mere pieces of stone will weep, sigh, and shed tears, as we said above."¹⁶

The gist of the parable is that there is only one real pearl, which stands for only one truth, i.e., only one valid religion, but it is impossible 'in this life' to tell which is which. In the context of a dialogue with the political head of a different religion than Timothy's own, this tale has been taken as implying that, given that no definite truth about religious issues can be unveiled once and for all this side of the end of times, it is best to be tolerant of one another, and accept differences in belief. If we place the accent on Timothy's position as a subordinate of al-Mahdi, this can even come across as an apology, a case made for Christianity's right to exist —all other arguments having already failed. But the reason for accepting

¹⁵ See ROGGEMA & POORTHIUS 2005 and SHAGRIR 2019. In the parable of the three rings, each ring represents one of the three Abrahamic religions, and the point of the story is that, just as the three rings are indistinguishable from one another, all three religions hold the same value. As such, it is considered one of the best examples of tolerance in the European tradition (but even in Boccaccio's version this comes with a good degree of irony and ambiguity: see the *Decameron*, day one, third story).

¹⁶MINGANA 1928: 88–9 = HEIMGARTNER 2011: 21,1–5 (p.106–7 German translation, p.158–9 Syriac text).

religious difference, as presented by Timothy, is rather weak, since it is based upon a temporary unknowability of the truth, not on the coexistence of different, equally valid truths. In other words, it works only as long as there is no way of finding out which is which.

Bearing this in mind, the choice of a pearl as a symbol for the one true faith is not without consequence. There existed in the Syriac tradition, dating back even further to Greek sources, the belief that pearls originated when oysters were struck by lightning out at sea.¹⁷ Building on this, Christian writers had associated the fire with the Holy Spirit and the (virginal) conception and birth-giving of the oyster with Mary.¹⁸ The resulting pearl, therefore, was the perfect symbol for Christ, a union of human and divine. In Syriac literature this was most notably used as a poetic trope by Ephrem in his *Hymns of the Pearl*.¹⁹ Although it is not clear at this stage if Timothy had read them, the image was sufficiently widespread to support the view that it held this meaning for him too. Now, by using the pearl for his tale, Timothy is providing a hidden message to his Christian audience. The caliph will not think much of the choice—to his eyes, it is but one of the many possible precious objects that can be taken to symbolize the truth. But a co-religionist of Timothy will have immediately perceived the connection between the pearl and Christ, and so will have read the parable as implying that the only true religion was, in fact, very much known, and that it was Christianity.

To corroborate this reading, we can turn to Timothy's letter 26.²⁰ This letter is less well known than others by Timothy, so it is worth quoting the relevant passage in full:

It is pure gold and a pearl of great value (ܡܕܢܐ ܕܝܗܘܐ ܕܡܕܢܐ) our Christian faith, o holy one of God, and Jesus Christ is its origin and accomplishment. Even if in one place and among [some] people, it sheds the radiance of its rays as on an immaculate candlestick and upon everyone it shines purely and lawfully; in another place, however, and among many other people, it is placed as under a bed or under a bushel, and no longer does it give to everyone, nor in its purity, the rays of its enlightenment and splendour. And just as, with regard to the sensible sun, its capacity to produce light is one and the same, but the capacity to receive it is neither one nor the same—for, among the material things over which it rises and spreads, there are some which receive the splendour of its rays in full, others do not receive it entirely but in a partial manner, and others still do not receive any radiance from its rays at all—just so [it is] also [for] the great light of our Christian faith. Its power is one and the same, but among those who have received and receive it, some welcome it and receive it in its splendour and illumination like gold and pearls; or gold, silver, and precious stones; others like bronze and iron; others still like simple stones and dry wood.²¹

¹⁷ I thank the members of the Hugoye mailing-list for providing me with precious information on this topic (esp. Adrian Pirtea, Yael Kramer, Flavia Ruani, Emanuele Zimbardi). I quote Prof. David Taylor directly: "This account of the origin of pearls is found, for example, in Aelianus (d. c. 235), *De natura animalium*, X.13. "And the pearl, so celebrated among fools and admired by women, is also a nursling of the Red Sea, and they tell a marvellous story of how it is produced when lightning flashes upon the open shells." It is also found in Isidor of Charax, and in citations in Ephrem Graecus and Clement of Alexandria. Pliny's *Natural History*, ch. 54, has a different account, according to which the oyster receives a kind of dew. This tradition is apparently of Indian origin. There is an excellent article on pearls in classical tradition in the large Pauly-Wissowa encyclopaedia, under 'Margaritai', which provides many further references."

¹⁸ On the Christian use of the pearl-symbol, see the excellent article by Pirtea: PIRTEA 2016.

¹⁹ These are hymns 81–5 "On Faith", see BECK 1955.

²⁰ Cf. (brief introduction and French translation). Partial German translation can be found also in HAINTHALER 2013: 198–9. Only edition of the text, with Latin translation, is BRAUN 1953. I plan on producing a new commented edition of this letter, with English translation, as part of my PhD dissertation. The translation given here is my own.

²¹ BRAUN 1953 142.8–143.1.

The addressee of this letter is no longer a Muslim, but a Christian, and not just any Christian, but a bishop of Timothy's same eastern confession. The dispute with al-Mahdi, too, as we have it, is in the form of a letter addressed to one of Timothy's closest friends, Sergius, the recipient of a large proportion of Timothy's surviving corpus.²² But there, the internal audience was a Muslim, not a Christian, and Timothy's strategy was developed accordingly. Here, on the other hand, there is no distinction between internal and external audience: Maranzeka, bishop of Nineveh, is the target of Timothy's letter *and* of its content. This serves to explain the slight shift in imagery: the pearl here is used explicitly as a symbol for the Christian faith, and not just any Christian faith, but the one true Christian faith, as opposed to other competing versions of it that Timothy will name later on (i.e., Severan and Melchite). Furthermore, in order to dispel any lingering doubts, Timothy manages to be even more explicit about his pearl-image a few lines down: 'One is the pearl (ܡܠܚܬܐ) of the unity of the divinity under three hypostases and that of three hypostases in one divinity, with us as with them.'²³ When thinking back to letter 59, it becomes apparent that the pearl, there too, far from being a generic symbol of an unknowable truth, was meant to symbolize Timothy's own Christian, and more precisely, eastern Christian, faith.

There is more. The image of the pearl in the passage above acquires a further meaning in comparison with its use in letter 59. In this case, it is not only a symbol of the true faith but also a symbol of its proper reception. Timothy devises here a much more sophisticated argument: it is not enough to say that everyone (i.e., all Christians, in this case —no matter their confession) has access to the light that emanates from the pearl, it must be specified the way they receive this light. Only the 'real' Christians will be able to give back to the pearl its proper status and treat it as a pearl —everyone else will inevitably diminish its status and see it as mere bronze or stones or wood, in varying degree. It is almost as if Timothy is suggesting that the pearl, the true faith, is only ever itself when recognised properly: truth is in the eye of the beholder. The underlying idea can be found elsewhere in his corpus,²⁴ and has to do with the purity of the Christian message in its eastern form, as opposed to the various versions of it (marred by additions or detractions) to be identified in neighbouring confessions. The appeal to greater antiquity and untouched originality in support of his faith's truthfulness can also be found in the dispute with al-Mahdi —in fact, it had been in use in inter-faith debates since the second century. What is remarkable in letter 26 is the reciprocity suggested by Timothy between the pearl itself and what people make of it.

Again, the pearl is used with this same symbolic meaning in another letter, this time addressed to the monks of Mār Mārōn (letter 41).²⁵ The precise statute of this community at this time is hard to define, but from the letter itself, it seems clear that Timothy considers them as a 'limb' of the same Christian 'body' to which he belongs —still, a different limb. In fact, the letter can be read as an attempt, on Timothy's part, to provide a list of fundamental theological beliefs that anyone should adhere to in order to become part of his Church of the East. The implied hope is for the recipients of the letter to find this list quite reasonable and to recognise Timothy's authority as their spiritual leader. It would seem that things did not go as Timothy had planned. Be that as it may, at 10,2 of this letter we come across the image of the pearl again:

²² On this point, see BERTI 2009, who argues convincingly that, in fact, the reason why so many letters are addressed to Sergius is because the surviving corpus probably comes from his personal collection.

²³ Braun p.144, line 25ff.

²⁴ For one, see the passage quoted below from letter 41.

²⁵ Edition and translation with introduction and commentary in HEIMGARTNER 2019. See also the important article by Theresia Hainthaler (= HAINTHALER 2013).

Denn auch bei uns ist die Orthodoxie richtig und ohne Änderung formuliert. Unserem Glauben ist nämlich nie etwas Entgegengesetztes [zuteil geworden], so dass wir etwa zur Perle der Wahrheit (ῥίζα μακρά) etwas hinzugefügt oder [von ihr] weggenommen hätten, welche die heiligen Apostel in dieser Region des Ostens überliefert haben.²⁶

As we have seen earlier, Timothy gives great weight to the idea of unmodified purity of the Apostolic message as expressed by his Church when contrasted with other Christian confessions. But the implication is that this is all the more valid within the contrast with other *religions*, for one, Islam, which is also the most recent one to have emerged.

III. 'IN THE DAYS OF THE NEW JEWS': ETERNAL STRUGGLE BETWEEN TRUTH AND FALSEHOOD

What, therefore, remained only implicit in letter 59, meant to be deciphered by Christian eyes and remain hidden to Islamic ears, can be unveiled easily through comparison with other letters by Timothy, this time aimed at his own people, or at least, at fellow Christians. We can apply this method to another element in the ‘Parable of the Pearl’, namely the idea of vindication of the truth at the end of times. When ‘the darkness of mortality passes, and the fog of ignorance dissolves’, the owner of the one true pearl will be revealed, and only he will rejoice, while all others ‘will weep, sigh, and shed tears.’ Once again, if in the dispute with the caliph this is said in generic terms, and the truth signified by the pearl is delayed until a time just as unknowable as the pearl’s owner, things change when Timothy is writing to his (Christian) friend Sergius. And, surprisingly, this comes in the opening of the other letter that deals with an interfaith dialogue, letter 40.

There is nothing stronger than truth and nothing weaker than falsehood. And all of this I will explain exactly, [namely] how, on the one hand, the defeat of truth [is] a victory forever and, on the other, the victory of falsehood [is] a defeat forever. **1,2** The signs proving both [claims] are that Christ was defeated on the cross, and the Jews and Satan were victorious. **1,3** Now, by appearing to be defeated, our Lord has defeated simultaneously the world and its ruler. [...] **1,5** For behold, not only in the days of Herod and Pilate, and then in the days of the ancient Jews there was such a defeat and [such] a victory between truth and falsehood, but also now in the days of the present rulers and in our times and in the days of the new Jews who are among us, the same fight and struggle is seen between falsehood and truth. For the offence of the cross has not yet ceased. **1,6** But there is no need to fear such a conflict and fight. For, if the apparent defeat of truth shows the shine of victory, as was explained above, how great and of what kind must the victory of truth be! **1,7** And if the victory of falsehood is a defeat, how it was revealed, how and how great must its defeat be called!²⁷

The revelation of the pearl, i.e., of truth, in letter 59 was destined to take place ‘in the world to come’ or ‘in the *time* to come’ (عالم... زمان), postponed to a distant, but certain future. Here in letter 40, the image is shifted somewhat and what we have is not a one-time revelation but a continuous, eternal

²⁶ HEIMGARTNER 2019V: 103. A rough English translation would be: ‘Because by us, too, the orthodoxy is correctly formulated and without change. Our faith has never had anything opposite to it, so that we would have added or taken something away from the Pearl of Truth, which the holy apostles in this region of the East handed down.’

²⁷ Transl. my own. Cf. HEIMGARTNER 2019v: 3–4.

struggle between truth and falsehood. Timothy operates on two chronological plains that appear to be in contradiction with each other. On one plain, our historical plain, Timothy provides this struggle with precise protagonists: Satan, the ‘old’ Jews, the ‘new Jews’ on the one hand; and Christ, ‘our Lord’, and the implied Christian audience, on the other. He also places the struggle in history, once ‘in the days of Herod and Pilate’, and now ‘in the days of the new rulers’ (the ‘new Jews’ here and elsewhere²⁸ is the epithet he uses to indicate the Muslims). On this level, truth is defeated repeatedly, and his enemies repeatedly celebrate their triumph, but both defeat and triumph are only apparent. This is where a second plain comes in: on an eternal plain (دائم/دائم, “forever” at various points in the passage), which seems to be beyond time rather than simply projected onto a distant future, a plain of present-in-eternity, as it were —on this plain, truth’s real triumph and falsehood’s real defeat are revealed. The Platonic echoes of this image are very intriguing. By saying that ‘the offence of the cross has not *yet* ceased’, I would suggest that Timothy is otherwise hinting at the possibility that the two plains will, in fact, eventually meet —or rather, that the chronological plain will cease to exist and dissolve into the eternal one.

And this brings us back to the idea of vindication at the end of time that we saw in the dispute with al-Mahdi. Once more, when the image of the pearl is transposed from a Christian-Muslim to an exclusively Christian context, Timothy’s thinking behind this image is exposed more fully. It is surprising, in the case of letter 40, that such a frontal attack on the rival religion of ‘the new Jews’²⁹ should introduce a dialogue that is conducted, like the one in letter 59, on the friendliest of terms. But, again, this is explained by the difference in audience: while the dialogue recounted in the rest of the letter presents Timothy in direct engagement with a Muslim scholar, the letter itself was meant to be read by Timothy’s friend Sergius (and, with all probability, by Timothy’s faithful all over the Middle East and beyond). In this sense, this opening almost serves as a warning, or a key to interpreting the dialogue to follow. Timothy is stressing the fundamental opposition between Christianity and Islam, which he describes as nothing short of an epic battle between good and evil. If we read the dialogue that follows in light of this, it becomes clear that Timothy’s aims when discussing with the Aristotelian nobleman have very little to do with the pursuit of disinterested philosophical truth and very much to do with the defence of his own religion —by whatever (intellectual) means necessary, I might add.³⁰

One final link exists between the opening of letter 40 and the ending of the dispute with al-Mahdi. For the caliph’s first reaction to Timothy’s telling of the parable is to ask him if the true owners of the pearl can be known in this world.³¹ The patriarch replies that they can be, but only partially, through the good deeds and miracles that they perform.

²⁸ As HEIMGARTNER2019V points out: ‘Die Bezeichnung der Araber als »die neuen Juden« findet sich ebenso in ep 24,9 (CSCO 139/93) und in seinem [i.e., Timothy’s] Rechtsbuch (§16; Sachau, *Rechtsbücher*, Bd. 2, S. 70/71).’ (n.8, p.4)

²⁹ It should also be mentioned here that, for Timothy, the comparison with the Jews probably carried with it heavily pejorative tones: Timothy was as fiercely Antisemitic as he was so gratuitously and stereotypically.

³⁰ In fact, a reading of letter 40 that failed to notice Timothy’s disingenuity would be rather deficient. That said, the discussion on Timothy’s use of Aristotelian logic to serve his own purposes would require a discussion of its own. One could do worse than to start by reading Heimgartner’s contributions on this issue in HEIMGARTNER 2012a and 2019a: ‘Es geht weniger um Wahrheitsfindung als vielmehr um Selbstbehauptung. Der muslimische Gegner kennt seinen Aristoteles recht gut, vermag an passender Stelle aus den *Kategorien* zu zitieren, aber Timotheos ist ihm überlegen. Er scheut sich auch nicht, falsche Schlüsse anzuwenden, und lockt ihn da und dort sogar in eine Falle.’ (p.104f.) See also WATT 2009, esp. 14ff. on Timothy’s translation of the *Topika* and on the dialogue with al-Mahdi.

³¹ Letter 59.21,6, rightly identified by Heimgartner as a question rather than as a statement (as it was rendered in Mingana’s translation).

As the lustre of a pearl is somewhat visible even in the darkness of the night, so also the rays of the true faith shine to some extent even in the darkness and the fog of the present world. God indeed has not left the pure pearl of the faith completely without testimony and evidence, first in the prophets and then in the Gospel.³²

Timothy then proceeds to list all the highlights of the Old and New Testament, down to the apostles, which testify, in his view, to God's plan to make the pearl "shimmer" in this world. He finishes by coming as close as possible to identifying the pearl with the Christian faith without explicitly doing so, i.e., without excluding the claim to the truth of the caliph's religion:

These signs, miracles, and prodigies wrought in the name of Jesus Christ are the bright rays and the shining lustre of the precious pearl of the faith, and it is by the brightness of such rays that the possessors of this pearl which is so full of lustre and so precious that it outweighs all the world in the balance, are known.³³

The equation pearl-Christianity is almost obvious; but apparently not so to al-Mahdi, who expresses the hope that he and his fellow Muslims may turn out to be, in the end, the true possessors of the pearl. In turn, Timothy seems to misunderstand the caliph's wish, or rather to toy with the caliph's incomprehension, as he prays that truly he might turn out to be the true owner, by which Timothy means that he prays the caliph might convert to Christianity. This exchange is perhaps one of the strongest pointers that this letter cannot be taken as a disinterested *Gedächtnisprotokoll*: the inability on the caliph's part to pick up on Timothy's implications regarding the symbology of the pearl by now appears to be a literary fabrication rather than a historical event. Even if the parable was in fact part of the exchange as it happened, it seems highly unlikely that this following part could have gone the way Timothy would have us believe. Instead, this re-elaboration served Timothy's aims with regard to the message he wanted to convey to his Christian audience: good deeds and miracles are on our side, there can be no doubt as to who the real owners of the pearl are. In addition to this, Al-Mahdi's incomprehension and the way Timothy takes advantage of it serve to depict the caliph in a very unflattering light when it comes to quick wit, all the more highlighting this quality in Timothy himself.

This same strategy is carried on through to the very end of the dialogue:

And our victorious King said: "Miracles have been and are sometimes performed even by unbelievers." —And I replied to his Majesty: "These, O our victorious King, are not miracles but deceptive similitudes of the demons, and are performed not by the prophets of God and by holy men, but by idolaters and wicked men. This is the reason why I said that good works and miracles are the lustre of the pearl of the faith. Indeed, Moses performed miracles in Egypt, and the sorcerers Jannes and Jambres performed them also there, but Moses performed them by the power of God, and the sorcerers through the deceptions of the demons. The power of God, however, prevailed, and that of the demons was defeated. [...]
At this our victorious King rose up and entered his audience chamber, and I left him and returned in peace to my patriarchal residence."³⁴

Unless we are meant to understand that the caliph left because he finally took offence at what Timothy was implying (which seems unlikely, given that Timothy returns "in peace" to his residence), here too, the patriarch is talking directly to the letter's audience more than to the caliph. After all that has been said, by suggesting that false miracles are in fact the product of demons, Timothy is reducing the whole

³² MINGANA 1928: 89 = HEIMGARTNER 2011: 21,7–8.

³³ MINGANA 1928: *ibid.* = HEIMGARTNER 2011: 21,11.

³⁴ MINGANA 1928: 90 = HEIMGARTNER 2011: 21,14–17.

of Islam to an evil, idolatrous sect. And once again, in support of this reading, we find here a clear connection to the theme developed at the beginning of letter 40: the fight of truth and falsehood, the “apparent” nature of false miracles, which in fact are nothing but deceptions and magic tricks.

IV. CONCLUSION: TIMOTHY’S AIMS

A close reading of letters 59 and 40 against each other and within the wider context of Timothy’s surviving literary output, especially in consideration of those letters (the vast majority, in fact) which are aimed solely at a Christian, often eastern Christian audience, has allowed us to put into question the received interpretation of the patriarch’s encounters with his Muslim colleagues. Both the dialogue with al-Mahdi and the one with an unnamed Aristotelian philosopher cannot be taken at face-value as faithful reports of real-life events, *Gedächtnisprotokolle*. Instead, Timothy has reworked both events in such a way as to serve his own purposes, through careful literary strategies that are intended to appeal and convey very precise messages to his Christian audience. Herein lies the meaning of the paper’s title: when discussing with high-ranking members of a competing religion, Timothy presents himself as talking *with* his enemies (the opposition with them stands despite the friendly setting), insofar as he cannot simply state facts and expect his adversaries to accept them as such, but rather needs to answer their questions and reply to their objections. On the other hand, when writing *to* his faithful, Timothy tends to provide ready-made and carefully pre-organised material that they may use when faced, in turn, by challengers from other confessions or religions, or even wavering ‘simple believers’,³⁵ thus leaving much less space open for debate. In between one stage —the real-life dialogue— and the other —the reported version thereof— there intervenes Timothy’s elaboration of the material, which needs to be closely inspected in order to uncover its inner workings and ultimate aims.

So, what were these aims? Only a preliminary answer can be given. Timothy I was the head of a church that during his patriarchate reached as far east as China but nonetheless was subject to the rule of a people that belonged to a different and directly competing religion. Now, Timothy’s letters bear witness to how their author thought one of his most important duties to uphold the merits of his Church (think, for example, of the claim to purity in the preservation of Christ’s message) and to defend his Church’s faith as the one true faith. This latter goal, Timothy had to articulate both in the face of Islam and in the face of other Christian confessions. As Jack Tannous had recently pointed out, we must remember that, despite the high-flying texts that have come down to us, the vast majority of the population was probably very marginally touched by theological debates.³⁶ Timothy’s letters too, were likely intended for a very limited, highly educated elite. Nonetheless, at their core, there transpires a preoccupation to strengthen the tenets of the eastern Syrian faith precisely to prevent any “simple believers” to be tempted by the other competing faiths, Islam in the first place. It could be objected that the tools Timothy was thus producing for his church’s members remained strictly literary and elevated in content. But this literariness was not without reason: the key to any interfaith debate lay in the written word,³⁷ be it in the Christian Scriptures alone or in the Scripture and the Quran. Together with the use of Aristotelian logic, this was the common factor in many collaborations between Christian and Muslim scholars. Their conclusions

³⁵ In the sense given to this expression by TANNOUS 2018.

³⁶ TANNOUS 2018, esp. part I (11–81).

³⁷ Crucially, TER HAAR ROMENY 2001: ‘It [i.e., letter 59] opens our eyes to the apologetic dimension of research into the biblical text’ (p.508). See also HEIMGARTNER 2018 and TAMCKE 2016.

may not have touched the population at large directly, but sure enough the indirect consequences must have been felt widely.

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