1014–1043: Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr on Christian Love for ʿAlī

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Abstract: The medieval Iberian Muslim scholar Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr includes striking expressions of inter-religious amity in a chapter of his main literary anthology. Noteworthy among these are two stanzas in which a Christian poet proclaims his affection for ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib, the cousin and son-in-law of Muḥammad. These poems draw our attention to the transmediterranean quality of Arabic literary discourse, since they—like most of the chapter's contents—originated in Iraq. They also highlight the hazy quality of medieval socio-religious boundaries and the potential of literary sources to expand our notions of how medieval Muslims expressed and debated their normative principles in writing.

Source

Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr, *Bahǧat al-maǧālis wa-uns al-muǧālis wa-šaḥḏ al-ḏāhin wa-l-hāǧis,* ed. Muḥammad Mursī al-Ḫūlī, 2 vols (i.e. vols 1,1; 1,2; 2), Cairo: al-Dār al-Miṣriyya li-l-taʾlīf wa-l-tarǧama, 1967–1970, vol. 1,2, p. 38. Translation adapted from: Luke Yarbrough, A Christian Shīʿī, and Other Curious Confreres. Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr of Córdoba on Getting Along with Unbelievers, in: *al-Masāq* 30/3 (2018), pp. 284–303, here: p. 285, URL: https://doi.org/10.1080/09503110.2018.1522021.

لزيبا النصرانيّ وكان يتشيّع	By Zībā the Christian, who was a Šīʿī:
عديٌّ وتيم لا أحاول ذكرَكم / بسُوءٍ ولكنّي محبّ لهاشمِ	ʿAdī and Taym, I am not trying to speak ill of you, but I am a lover of Hāšim.
وما تعتريني في عليّ ورهطِهِ / إذا ذكروا في الله لومة لائمِ	When it comes to ʿAlī and his clan and their religion, no reproacher's reproach discomfits me.
يقولون ما بال النصارى تحبهم / وأهلُ النهى من أعربٍ و أعاجمِ	People ask, "Why do even Christians love them, and wise Arabs and wise Persians?"
فقلت لهم :إني لأحسب حبَّهم / سري في قلوب الخلق حتى البهائمِ	I say to them, "I believe that love of them pervades the hearts of all creation, even the animals."
وله أيضاً	And it was also he who said:
عليٌّ أميرُ المؤمنين خليفةٌ / وما لسواه في الخلافة مطمعُ	ʿAlī is Commander of the Believers, Caliph; no one else can aspire to the caliphate.

فلو كنت أبغي ملّة غير ملّتي / لما كنتُ إلا مسلماً أتشيّعُ	If I desired a community other than my own, I could only be a Muslim Šīʿī.

Authorship & Work

[§1] Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr (d. 463/1071) was a renowned Muslim scholar of fifth/eleventh century al-Andalus, or Islamic Iberia. He lived through the dissolution of the Umayyad caliphate of Córdoba, his hometown, and its replacement by a constellation of local rulers across the peninsula. Several of these rulers, the so-called "party-" or "faction-kings" (*mulūk al-ṭawāʾif*), were his patrons, especially Muğāhid al-ʿĀmirī (r. 405–436/1014–1044 or 45), the ruler of Dénia (*Dāniya*). Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr seems to have been peripatetic, appearing also in the sources in Valèncіa (*Balansiya*), Jàtiva (*Šāṭiba*), Lisbon (*al-Ušbūna*), Badajoz (*Baṭalyaws*), and Santarém (*Šantarīn*). Most of his life seems to have been spent in scholarly pursuits rather than official employment as, e.g., a secretary or judge.

[§2] Although he is best known as a jurist (*faqīh*) of the Mālikī school, Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr also studied and composed works in a variety of other fields, including Prophetic tradition (*ḥadīṯ*) and biography (*sīra*), history, prosopography, Qurʾānic readings (*qirāʾāt*), commentary on poetry, and genealogy. The excerpt above is from his literary anthology, whose full title might be freely translated as "The Delight of the Learned Soirée, Making the Companion Gay and Pointing the Sagacious to What He Should Say" (*Bahğat al-maǧālis wa-uns al-muǧālis wa-šaḥḏ al-ḏāhin wa-l-hāǧis*). Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr completed this work no later than 434/1042–1043, when it was mentioned in a pamphlet by Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064).[1] It consists of 124 brief, eclectic chapters, each on a distinct theme, such as "the messenger", "greed and despair", "disputation and invective", and "fleas, lice, and mosquitoes". The author's stated goal within each chapter is principally to furnish morally edifying and entertaining material, beginning with the Qurʾān and *ḥadīṯ*, then proceeding to other types of material, including poetry and putative excerpts from earlier scriptures. This material is drawn mainly from sources composed in the eastern Muslim lands. A secondary goal, however, is also to stimulate debate in learned assemblies (*maǧālis*, singular *maǧlis*) by providing both "the moral and its opposite" (*al-maʿnā wa-ḍidduh*). However, it is often unclear where the moral message ends and its opposite begins; thus the work prepares the stage for lively debates. The chapter from which the poems above are taken is titled "fraternizing with someone who is not of your religion" (*bāb muʾāḫāt man laysa ʿalā dīnika*). We may safely generalize that the attitude of medieval Muslim scholars was often to emphasize boundaries between Muslims and non-Muslims, as well as the superiority of the former to the latter in all spheres of life.[2] This chapter, however, makes remarkable space for friendly relations between Muslims and adherents of other religions.

Content & Context

[§3] These two brief excerpts of poetry appear to have been composed about three centuries before the time of Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr, far across the Mediterranean in northern Mesopotamia. The Christian poet appears in other sources as Zabīnā[3], and other citations of the same lines are

[1] Puerta Vílchez, Ibn Ḥazm.
[2] Friedmann, *Tolerance and Coercion*.
[3] For poetry by a Christian "Zabīnā," see al-Zamaḫšarī (d. 538/1144), *Rabīʿ al-abrār*, ed. Muhannā, vol. 1, p. 400; al-Rāġib al-Iṣbahānī (d. 502/1108), *Muḥāḍarāt al-udabāʾ*, no ed., vol. 1, p. 312.

attributed to an anonymous Christian.[4] The poet first addresses his words to specific clans within the Qurayš, the Prophet Muḥammad's tribe. Taym and ʿAdī are, respectively, the clans of the first two caliphs of Islam: Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq (r. 10–12/632–634) and ʿUmar b. al-Ḫaṭṭāb (r. 13–23/634–644). Hāšim is the Prophet's own clan, and that of his cousin and son in law, ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib (r. 35-40/655-661). ʿAlī and his descendants, of course, are central, revered figures in Islam, and for Šīʿī Muslims in particular.

[§4] What makes this poem remarkable—both for medieval Muslims and for us—is that it conveys a Christian's affection for ʿAlī, and indeed for the Prophet's whole clan. The poet obliquely cites the Qurʾān by including the curious phrase "a reproacher's reproach" (*lawmat lāʾim*). In the Qurʾān (Q 5:54), this phrase denotes the blame laid on virtuous people by their misguided critics. These virtuous people who do not fear "the reproacher's reproach" are a somewhat mysterious group that God promises to bring in place of apostates; the verse says that they love and are loved by God, are submissive to believers but fierce against infidels, and struggle for God's cause. So when the poet mentions that he himself does not fear the "reproacher's reproach" of ʿAlī and his family, he is subtly interpreting the Qurʾān to include himself, a Christian, in this promised group. In the latter half of the first four lines, the poet acknowledges that others may think it strange for a Christian to love ʿAlī. But he asserts that to love him and his family is so natural that even the animals do it.

[§5] In the other, two-line excerpt, the poet voices a political message: only ʿAlī has a legitimate claim to lead the Muslim community as its caliph, whose official title was "Commander of the Believers" (*amīr al-muʾminīn*). What is more, the poet all but says that ʿAlī's followers, the Šīʿa, are the best religious community (except, perhaps, for Christians). If the poet wanted to leave Christianity—though it is clear that he does not, because he uses the Arabic conditional particle *law*, which refers to a hypothetical, unreal condition—he would only do so to become, he says, a Šīʿī Muslim.

[§6] We should consider two relevant historical contexts for this poetry: that of its composition in second-/eighth-century northern Mesopotamia, and that of its quotation by Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr in al-Andalus. In terms of its original context, some suspicion may arise as to whether its composer was really a Christian. The strongly pro-Šīʿī message of the poetry and the use of the Qurʾān raise the possibility that it was in fact composed by a Muslim who wished to advertise for Šīʿīsm by making even non-Muslims and animals sing the praise of ʿAlī. Nevertheless, it is by no means impossible or even improbable that the composer was really a Christian. The region of northern Mesopotamia had a strong Christian presence in the early Islamic period, which endures, to a lesser degree, to the present day. As historians have shown, Christians in that region were involved in the local political and military struggles of the early Islamic period.[5] Naturally, some of these struggles—such as the first *fitna*, or civil war, between ʿAlī and an Umayyad opponent (ca. 656–661), and even the ʿAbbāsid revolution (ca. 750)—had a pronounced Muslim sectarian aspect. Therefore it is quite possible that local Christians could have expressed warm sympathy with the followers of ʿAlī, who positioned themselves as righteous alternatives to the sinful Umayyads, in their anti-Umayyad struggles.

[§7] The other important context is that of Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr's al-Andalus. Here the relevance of Šīʿism is less salient. Although Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr himself quotes Šīʿī imams approvingly in "The Delight of the Learned Soirée," Šīʿism was often regarded as suspect in the Sunnī-

[4] The verse is elsewhere attested in Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. Dāʾūd al-Iṣbahānī al-Ẓāhirī (d. 296/909), *al-Zahra*, ed. al-Sāmurrāʾī, p. 518; al-Bayhaqī (fl. 3rd–4th/9th–10th cent.), *al-Maḥāsin wa-l-masāwī*, ed. Ibrāhīm, p. 63; Abū Ḥayyān al-Andalusī (d. 745/1344), *Tafsīr al-baḥr al-muḥīṭ*, ed. ʿAbd al-Mawǧūd and Muʿawwaḍ, vol. 6, p. 209; al-Qasṭallānī (d. 923/1517), *al-Mawāhib al-laduniyya*, ed. al-Šāmī, vol. 3, p. 366; al-Maqqarī (d. 1041/1632), *Nafḥ al-ṭīb*, ed. ʿAbbās, vol. 2, p. 377.

[5] Robinson, *Empire and Elites*, pp. 38, 148–149.

dominated lands of al-Andalus. It was the creed of a major geopolitical rival, the Fatimid caliphate of Cairo. In Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr's work, the Christian poet's affection for ʿAlī seems, therefore, less about ʿAlī or his Šīʿī followers than about ʿAlī's more basic identity as a Muslim. The warm Christian-Muslim feeling that the poetry expresses is perhaps more at home in Iberia of Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr's day than it would become in the succeeding centuries. Post-Umayyad al-Andalus in the fifth/eleventh century was nothing if not a multipolar world of shifting alliances, some of which crossed religious boundaries. Rulers like Muǧāhid of Dāniya formed ties with Christians. The mother of his principal heir was a Christian; this son, himself named ʿAlī, was raised as a hostage in Christian courts, absorbing Latin culture along the way. Dāniya had good relations with its Christian seaside neighbour, Barcelona, and in general the bipolar, zero-sum world of the Reconquista still lay in the future.[6] Amicable personal relations between Muslims and Christians were, therefore, not beyond the pale in the elite social contexts to which Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr had access. The chapter on "fraternizing" leaves it ambiguous whether such relations are the moral model for Muslims to embrace, or its opposite, included in the chapter in order to stir cultured debate.

Contextualization, Analysis & Interpretation

[§8] These hymns of praise to ʿAlī by a Christian poet are a tiny and somewhat exceptional sliver of the Arabic literary tradition. Nevertheless, they can help us to think about three key aspects of pre-modern transmediterranean history and inter-religious relations: (1) the transmediterranean quality of the Arabic literary tradition; (2) the fuzziness of group boundaries in many periods; and (3) the role of morally ambiguous literary sources as sites for normative debate among medieval Muslims.

[§9] The vast Arabic literary tradition, with all of its aesthetic and normative authority, was an inherently transmediterranean phenomenon. Our poems illustrate this: poetry composed in second-/eighth-century Iraq or Syria is here being reused in fifth-/eleventh-century al-Andalus, 4,000 km to the west, as fodder for normative debates. In fact, the majority of the citations in "The Delight of the Learned Soirée" came from sources composed in the eastern Mediterranean, especially in the region from Iraq to Egypt. The works of the Baghdad belletrist al-Ǧāḥiẓ (d. 255/868–869) were a favourite model. This was not unusual in al-Andalus. For example, the fourth-/tenth-century belletrist Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih (d. 328/940) had also relied heavily on eastern sources in composing his own literary anthology, "The Unique Necklace" (*al-ʿIqd al-farīd*). Very few of Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr's sources, by contrast, were from North Africa or al-Andalus. The literary models within which he was working were also transmediterranean. For example, his practice of including both "the moral and its opposite" was characteristic of eastern Arabic literary anthologies in the genre known as "merits and faults" (*al-maḥāsin wa-l-masāwī*), in which authors creatively catalogued both the good and bad aspects of a particular thing, such as a character trait. By the same token, Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr's work and the works of his western Muslim colleagues were read "back east." The modern editor of "The Delight of the Learned Soirée" worked from the three manuscripts he was able to locate: two in Cairo and one in Istanbul. Therefore, when it comes to studying the Arabic-Islamic literary and normative traditions around the Mediterranean, it would be a mistake to restrict oneself to a single regional focus, for the authors of our sources did no such thing.

[§10] The poems also hint at the porousness and complexity of identity and group affiliation in the pre-modern Mediterranean. Most of our sources were written by men like Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr—highly educated standard-bearers of particular religious communities—who rarely let on that those communities' boundaries were, in practice, fuzzy and contested. Our poems puncture

[6] Bruce, An Intercultural Dialogue.

the common but illusory notion of clearly bounded population groups with labels like "Christian" and "Muslim." Specifically, they signal that one's religious affiliation, political affiliation, and social ties did not always align. For example, we might reflexively assume that, as a rule, people of particular religious affiliations associated socially and politically with co-religionists, but in fact this was not always so. Here, the poet is avowedly a Christian, but he supports a Muslim political authority and seems to have strong ties to that authority's other followers—Šīʿī Muslims—who themselves formed a religious community. Mediterranean history is full of examples of Muslims and Christians who lived under and supported—to one degree or another—political authorities whose religions were at odds with their own. Christians and Jews under Muslim rulers (so-called *ḏimmī*-s) from North Africa to Central Asia, like Jews and Muslims under Christian rulers from England to Byzantium, had ties and loyalties that might or might not align with their religious affiliations. This reality created possibilities for complex individual and communal identities, as well as for suspicion, distrust, and accusations of disloyalty (e.g., of spying on behalf of one's foreign co-religionists). In Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr's chapter on "fraternization," it is frequently clear that social ties could cross the borders of religious communities. The question Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr raises for debate is whether or not this was a good thing.

[§11] Indeed, the re-use of these poems by a scholar like Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr draws our attention to literature as a site of normative contestation within Islam. Islam has often been characterized as a law-centered religion with rules, derived from the Qurʾān and *ḥadīṯ*, that govern Muslim life. But these poems illustrate that the Mālikī legal scholar Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr, his sources, and his readers saw a role for poetry and literary anecdote in telling Muslims what it meant to live out their Islam, including their relations with non-Muslims. In particular, the "The Delight of the Learned Soirée" dwells on points of moral ambiguity. The chapter on "fraternizing" first discusses a *ḥadīṯ* in which the Prophet Muḥammad warns against greeting non-Muslims, only for Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr to then invest great effort in interpreting the *ḥadīṯ* in a way that thoroughly undermines that directive. Numerous other anecdotes in the chapter depict Muslims and non-Muslims consorting amicably; for instance, a Muslim poet consoles his distraught Christian friend, whose nephew has converted to Islam.[7] To be sure, these morally loaded examples are "ambiguous" only against a background in which distrust and hostility between Muslims and non-Muslims was common. Nevertheless, they show that other, more irenic normative examples were available to Muslims, specifically through the media of poetry and literary anecdote. Literature had—as Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr states explicitly—a moral authority of its own.

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