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***Discerning the True Religion in Late Fourteenth-Century Egypt:
Pages from the Dayr al-Muharraq Edition of al-Hawi by al-Makin
Jirjis ibn al-'Amid***

Introduction

In recent years, Dayr al-Muharraq has shared some of its riches with the wider world through the publication of transcriptions of manuscripts from the monastery's library. As examples, I can point to the monastery's publication in two volumes of an Arabic-[language](#) collection of thirty homilies by St. Gregory Nazianzen (Dayr al-Muharraq 2003), as well as a single-volume copy of the Copto-Arabic Christological florilegium known as "The [Confession](#) of the Fathers" (Dayr al-Muharraq 2002).[1]

Both of these texts are important for understanding the [patristic](#) heritage available to medieval Arabic-speaking Copts; "The [Confession](#) of the Fathers," in fact, is an eleventh-century landmark in the history of the arabization of the Coptic heritage (Rubenson 1996: 8–10). As far as I know, until today it is only the Muharraq editions of these important collections that provide complete printed copies of them, which can then be fruitfully used alongside other scholarly studies.[2]

Yet more ambitious than these projects, and probably of even greater usefulness to the scholarly world, was the publication between 1999 and 2001, in four volumes, of *al-Mawsu'ah al-lahutiyyah al-shahirah bi-l-Hawi l-Ibn al-Makin* (The Theological Encyclopedia known as *al-Hawi* by Ibn al-Makin) (Dayr al-Muharraq 2009–11, henceforth abbreviated *Hawi*). The publication of *al-Hawi* was a major accomplishment. In the first place, with the Muharraq edition we have, for the first time in print, the *entire* text of a major work entitled (according to one important manuscript) *al-Hawi al-mustafad min badihat al-ijtihad*, which I have attempted to render as "The Profitable Compilation, from the Faculty of Ratiocination." [3]

The 'compilation' consists of two major parts, each divided into six (Part

One: an introduction and five chapters; Part Two: six chapters), with each chapter (*bab*) subdivided into three subsections (*fusul*). Before the Muharraq edition, only the introduction and the first three chapters had been published—and that in a rare volume published in Cairo in 1906 (Butrus ‘Abd al-Malik 1906); a later publication in Cairo (Tawadrus Shahhat and Fu’ad Basili n.d.) includes only the introduction and chapter one.

The Muharraq edition makes the *entire* text readily available—and, slowly but surely, students of Copto-Arabic [literature](#) and Coptic Church history have been picking it up and making use of it (Mikhail 2004: 365–67; Faltas 2010; Faltas 2011; Faltas 2012–13; Sidarus and Swanson 2013; Swanson 2014). There is even a one-volume condensation of the work now available in Cairo (Iskandar 2003), although this is perhaps best used as an extended table of contents that quickly leads the student back into the Muharraq edition.

Furthermore, my ‘soundings’ to date in the Muharraq edition suggest to me that it is a fairly close and faithful transcription of the manuscript, [\[4\]](#) without obvious signs of simplification or rewriting. What may strike the modern reader as infelicities in orthography or punctuation may, in fact, faithfully reproduce what is found in the manuscript. [\[5\]](#)

This impression of faithfulness should, of course, be tested; when Bishop Sawirus (Severus) states in his preface (*Hawi* 1:7) that the text should come to light “with the same expressions in which the manuscript is written, with slight changes to clarify the meaning,” the scholar who hopes for a careful transcription is given grounds for both a certain confidence (“the same expressions”) and some concern (“with slight changes”). [\[6\]](#) These changes include conforming biblical quotations to the Arabic “Smith—Bustani—Van Dyck” Version commonly used in the Coptic Orthodox Church today, and adding chapter and verse references.

Next, it is necessary to point out that the Muharraq edition participates in

a long-standing confusion between two Coptic authors who shared the name al-Makin Jijis ibn al-'Amid: a thirteenth-century historian, conventionally referred to as "al-Makin"; and the late fourteenth-century monk and author of *al-Hawi*, to whom one can refer as "al-Makin 'the younger'" or, as I shall do here, "Ibn al-'Amid." The Muharraaq edition of *al-Hawi* has an introductory chapter on "The Life of [Jirjis](#) ibn al-'Amid, known as Ibn al-Makin" (*Hawi* 1: 13–24) which draws on a variety of standard sources for Coptic Church history [\[7\]](#) in order to tell—mostly—the story of the *thirteenth-century* historian, into which a few notices about the *fourteenth-century* monk are then mixed.

The confusion between the two authors, while understandable, was cleared up by Georg Graf in 1947 (Graf 1947: 450–53), and the distinction between the two authors is made plain in a variety of recent studies, both in English (Moawad 2012; Sidarus and Swanson 2013; Sidarus 2013: 199–201) and Arabic (Wadi 1996–97: 457–58; Athanasiyus al-Maqqari 2012: 778–86).

Let us, therefore, be clear: the author of *al-Hawi* was a late fourteenth-century priest, civil servant, and practical physician who withdrew from life in the world to become a hermit near the Monastery of St. Arsenius (or Dayr al-Quseir) at Tura to the south of Old Cairo. He had composed *al-Hawi* by 1398/9, the date of an autograph copy. While he was undoubtedly from the same family as al-Makin "the elder," several generations had passed between the two, and their precise relationship is not known.

It is worth pointing out that distinguishing the thirteenth-century historian al-Makin from the late fourteenth-century hermit Ibn al-'Amid yields a very interesting result: *al-Hawi* does *not* come from the intensely fruitful period of the 'renaissance' or 'golden age' of Copto-Arabic literature in the thirteenth century, where, as a theological encyclopedia, *al-Hawi* would invite comparisons (perhaps not in its favor) with al-Mu'taman ibn al-'Assal's monumental *Majmu'¹ usul al-din* (Wadi 1997;

Wadi 1998—99), among other works.

Rather, *al-Hawi* comes at the end of the fourteenth century, a period in the Coptic Orthodox Church better known for the remarkable saints who strove to shore up the community in difficult times (for example, Murqus al-Antuni, Ibrahim al-Fani, Anba Ruways, and Patriarch Matthew I; see Swanson 2010b: 107—17; Tsuji in this volume) than for its theological sophistication. Precisely so, *al-Hawi* is an important witness to the ongoing theological life of the Coptic Orthodox Church beyond the thirteenth-century ‘renaissance,’ well into what has sometimes been seen as a period of intellectual stagnation.

The ongoing theological life to which *al-Hawi* contributed was not limited to that of Egypt. Perhaps in the late fifteenth century it was translated into Ge’ez and circulated among Ethiopian Orthodox Christians under the title *Talmid* (Colin 1985; Cohn 2010). We do not know where or by whom this translation was made. The *fact* of this translation, however, points to the importance of *al-Hawi* in the intellectual history of the Christianities (plural!) of the Nile Valley. It must be left to others to comment on the role of Dayr al-Muharraq, which was well known to medieval Ethiopian Christians (Bausi 2010), in the transmission of [literature](#) from the Egyptian to the Ethiopian church, and whether the translation of *al-Hawi* might have been part of that story.

***Al-Hawi* on Discerning the True Religion**

One could choose any number of topics with which to illustrate the way in which *al-Hawi* fits into the heritage of theological writing in Arabic. Here I would like to turn to a few pages in which Ibn al-‘Amid makes a contribution to one of the earliest apologetic topics in the history of Christian—Muslim controversy, that of how to discern the true religion from among the various religions on offer. Already at the beginning of the ninth century ad, the Melkite bishop and theologian Theodore Abu Qurrah had developed at least two separate apologetic approaches to the

issue.

One approach, which takes up a good part of his *Maymarfi wujud al-Khaliq wa-l- din al-qawim* (ed. Dick 1982:199—258; trans. Lamoreaux 2005:1—25 under the title “Theologus Autodidactus”), built on the conviction that human minds are capable of outlining the parameters of acceptable doctrines with respect to God, morality, and the afterlife, and can then discern which of the various doctrines offered by the religions conforms most [closely](#) to what reason demands (see also Griffith 1994). But in an appendix to the same work (ed. Dick 1982: 259—70; trans. Lamoreaux 2005: 41—47 under the title “That Christianity is from God”), Theodore *also* pioneered a very different approach to the same topic.

This time, he began with an analysis of the humanly comprehensible reasons for adopting a religion: coercion; gain in wealth, power, or status; license with respect to the passions; and the familiarity or attractiveness of the religion s teachings. He then proceeded to a step-by-step argument that the primitive Christian [faith](#) spread for *none* of these reasons; notably, its teachings were *not* familiar or attractive but novel, strange, and unappealing to natural human reason. But, the demonstration continues, Christian [faith](#) indisputably *did* spread—and so, therefore, must have done so not because of humanly comprehensible reasons, but because of [divine](#) power made manifest in evidentiary miracles.

And, thus, Christianity is the divinely-willed religion, QED! We note the somewhat different evaluations of human reason found in these two apologetic approaches. While both claim to be rational, in the first approach human reason plays a positive role in discerning religious truth, while in the second, the revulsion of natural human reason toward core Christian doctrines is made, paradoxically, into an argument for those doctrines’ truth. Whoever would have believed in the crucifixion of the incarnate Son of God for the redemption of the world had it not been for [divine](#) power made manifest in miracles?

It was the *second* approach—providing an analysis of worldly, humanly comprehensible reasons for accepting a religion that, on close inspection, turns out to be incapable of explaining the spread of the Christian faith—that caught on among the early Arabic-speaking apologists. We find versions of it in the works of other ninth-century gramophone Christian thinkers such as Habib Abu Ra'itah, 'Ammar al-Basri, and Hunayn ibn Ishaq (see, for example, Griffith 1979; Swanson 2010a; Swanson 2013b)—and furthermore, their versions of the apology were known to thirteenth-century Copts. We note, for example, that chapter 12 of al-Mu'taman ibn al-'Assal's *Majmu' usul al-din* consists of an extract from Hunayn's apology followed by a brief quotation from that of Habib (Wadi 1998—99:1 [text]: 278—84).

It is against this background that we may read *al-Hawi* and inquire about Ibn al-'Amid's approach to the question of how the true religion is to be discerned. One chapter where the question arises is part one, chapter 2, subsection 3, on the relationship between the Mosaic *shari'ah* and the Messianic *shari'ah* (*Hawi* 1:277—302). This word *shari'ah* is probably best translated 'way' rather than 'law': Ibn al-'Amid points out that the word is derived from *shari'*, the one who leads people to *al-tariq ila-llah*, 'the way to God' (277). Ibn al-'Amid affirms that God's ultimate purpose for humankind is constant: "the refinement of souls and their elevation to the world of light and eternity" (280).

But God works in a wisely calibrated, step-by-step manner in order to achieve God's purposes. Thus God first revealed, through the willing receptivity of the prophet Moses, the Way of Justice (*al-'adl*), which was appropriate to the weakness and limited understanding of those to whom it was revealed (280—81). In the Incarnation through the willing receptivity of the Virgin Mary, however, God revealed the Messianic *shari'ah* or Way of Grace (*al-fadl*): it is through Christ that one obtains the fullness of the blessing promised to all through Abraham (Genesis 12:3), "inexhaustible, imperishable good things" (288).

I have repeated the phrase “through the willing receptivity of. . . in order to emphasize a point important to Ibn al-‘Amid: that free human actors—the prophet Moses and the Virgin Mary—are critically important in the history of revelation. Questions such as “Why did God reveal at this particular time, and not earlier?” can be answered in terms of the mysterious but temporally located meeting of the [divine](#) will to reveal with the human being who was prepared and willing to receive the revelation (291-94).

Toward the beginning of the chapter, Ibn al-‘Amid had made the passing comment that God’s “scripturally revealed ways” (*al-shara’i’ al-naqliyya*) could be comprehensively categorized as establishing justice (*al- ‘adl*), or grace (*al-fadl*), or *their* combination (*al-majmuj*) (280).[\[8\]](#) Near the end of the chapter, this comment opens the way to an objection:

You have said that the comprehensive categorization of *shara’i’* [includes those that] establish justice, or grace, or the combination. You have claimed that the Mosaic *shari ‘ah* brought justice, and that the Messianic *shari ‘ah* brought grace. It is inevitable, then, that a third category appear, one that combines justice and grace, since no aspect of incompleteness whatsoever may befall the deeds of God (may he be exalted!). (294)

Although Ibn al-‘Amid does not say so, what appears to be coming to word here is a specifically Islamic argument; a frequently-heard modern form of it claims that Islam brings the divinely willed ‘middle way’ between a Judaism that (allegedly) stresses unbending justice and a Christianity that (allegedly) stresses impractical grace.[\[9\]](#) Ibn al-‘Amid makes several points in response. The Messianic *shari‘ah* with its evangelical teachings *already* incorporates the Mosaic *shari‘ah* the Golden Rule *is* “the Law and the prophets” (Matthew 7:12) (295); but the Messianic *shari‘ah* goes on to teach the love of enemies (Matthew 5:44,

There is no third way beyond the Messianic program (*minhaj*) that comprehends both. Anyone who calls to justice and grace beyond this Messianic program is not saying anything original, so that even if what that person says is true, that one is better categorized among the *chroniclers* of the past (*al-mu'arrikhin*) than among the *prophets* (296-97). Or, if there were, in fact, a third way, it could only represent a decline (*inhitat*) from that which is perfect to that which is lesser and lacking (*akhass wa-anqas*) (298)—and it is impossible to imagine God withdrawing his grace and leading his servants from that which is perfect to that which is inferior (298—99).

So far, there is nothing particularly surprising in this. Already in the eighth-century conversation between the Abbasid caliph al-Mahdi and Timothy the Great, catholicos of the Church of the East, a Christian theologian had insisted that, with the coming of the heavenly in Christ, there was no reason to accept any subsequent revelation (Mingana 1928: 39). A bit more surprising is Ibn al-'Amid's statement that the veracity of the claim that the Messianic *shari'ah* represents the pinnacle of generosity (*nihayat al-jud*) may be witnessed in practice: “The conditions of those who put it into effect and cling to its principles and ramifications bear witness to the veracity of the claim” (*Hawi* 1: 299); concretely, this has to do with the realization of the commandment to love all people, even one's enemies.

Ibn al-'Amid records the obvious objection: “One does *not* find this commandment [being observed] in any of the Christians!” (300) He responds that if close examination shows the prescription to be noble, then “even if the practice of what is prescribed turns out to be difficult, that does not detract from the perfection of the way.” In any event, there is the example of Christ, who not only gave and taught the commandment to love all people but also enacted it when “he voluntarily gave his body to death on the cross” (300).

This is followed by another objection—which leads us to what might be the most interesting and original point in the entire chapter. Ibn al-‘Amid has his interlocutor say:

Another *shari‘ah* has appeared since the “*shari‘ah* of perfection” [that is, Christianity], and has grown, and many from the nations have entered into it. It is present in many regions of the earth; its sword is victorious, its tower^[10] is lofty, and many people have believed in it. (300)

This objection brings to word another standard argument: that *worldly success is evidence for a religion’s truth*. In the present context, this argument is understood to be one made by *Muslims*, since this new, successful *shari‘ah* can only refer to Islam. However, Christians were by no means immune to the argument from worldly success, which had been a temptation since the time of the emperor Constantine, and would be a temptation whenever Christian armies were winning battles. And perhaps we can even see an echo of the argument from success in the popular argument for the truth of Christianity described above: Christianity can be seen to be true because of its extraordinary spread throughout the world, *despite* the absence of humanly comprehensible reasons that explain that spread.

Against this background, Ibn al-‘Amid’s response is significant: the argument from worldly success does not work! After all, *both* the Christian and the Muslim communities have experienced success, in different times and different places.

If you believe that the truth is present in any *shari‘ah* whose word stands, whose sword is victorious, and whose laws are manifest in one place but not another, and among one people but not another— then the affirmation is necessary that the Messianic [Christian] *shari‘ah* is *also* the

truth wherever you find that its word stands, its sword is victorious, and its tower lofty. (300)

Ibn al-'Amid goes as far as to claim that *most* of the people of the earth were, in fact, Christian—a dubious claim, but perhaps one that was tempting for a member of a community that had likely long since lost its numerical majority in Egypt, but which could still look north to Christian Europe or south to Christian Ethiopia. Ibn al-'Amid's point, however, is not to attempt to establish truth by a head count. Rather, he wants to make the point that worldly success provides no positive evidence for religious truth; otherwise different religions would have to be considered simultaneously true in different places, or consecutively true in a single place. And thus:

The scholars and estimable leaders of the Christian community were not content at all with such an inference to verify the reliability of the Christian call and the establishment of its principles. . . . For them, the continued existence of religious claims was not, on its own, sufficient evidence for the verification of a religious claim. There have been [numerous](#) religious claims, varied sets of customary practice, and many beliefs that have manifestly been in existence—their word standing, their sword effective—before the appearance of the Mosaic *shari'ah*, whose laws did not encompass all the nations, and before the appearance of *z shari'ah* that did spread in all directions, by land, and by sea. (301)

The various pre-Christian and even pre-Mosaic religious claims, customary practices, and particular beliefs extended to differences in who or what was worshiped, and thus, for Muslims as well as Christians, a variety of unwholesome doctrines. And thus:

The opponent affirms that these forms of worship are not the true way or the truthful opinions; rather they are depraved and reprehensible, not pleasing to God. Despite this, they continued

in existence for extended periods and ages of time. And so it is apparent that not every call that continues in existence for a period of time—and whose word stands, whose laws are manifest, whose sword is conquering, whose command is victorious—is something in which one must acknowledge the presence of the truth, nor must one rely upon and have recourse to it. (301—302)

Ibn al-'Amid may have been thinking of ancient Egyptian religion, or of Greek or Roman religion: these were powerful systems that sustained mighty empires—and yet no Christian or Muslim would acknowledge them to be religiously *true*.

Therefore, the inference [of the truth of a religion] from the aspect of its continuing existence, victory, and exaltedness of its word in a particular place and a particular time amounts to nothing: the argument based on it is flimsy and its bases failing and empty. (302)

If this is so, however, then anyone who sincerely desires to examine the truth of a religion must look with all one's rational capacities into its *content*—its actual commands and prohibitions—and do so “without stopping at names, or being hindered by customs or fettered by familiarity, traditions, and what comes naturally” (302) but with the sincere purpose of finding everlasting life, victory over the demons of nature, and the greatest possible godliness both for this life and for the life to come.

Conclusion: Discerning the True Religion in Late Fourteenth-century Egypt

What is striking in Ibn al-'Amid's chapter is the vigor with which he

rejects the idea of worldly success—whether in terms of continued existence, military victory, or cultural accomplishment and prestige—as in any way an indicator of a religion’s truth. In doing so, he may well have been countering forms of argumentation that he had heard from Muslims; but he also cut off at the root a Christian form of argumentation that had been a temptation from the time that Christianity achieved imperial approval under the emperor Constantine.

The assertion of Christianity’s remarkable spread had played a key role in the apology for the true religion that had become so popular among arabophone Christians of all Christian communities: the fact that Christianity spread *despite* the lack of humanly comprehensible reasons for its spread was itself an indicator of the not human but, rather, [divine](#) power in it. While Ibn al-‘Amid still clearly believed (and perhaps took comfort in) the remarkable spread of Christianity throughout the world, at least in this chapter it plays no probative role in his argument.

Ibn al-‘Amid’s prescription for discerning the true religion, then, is closer to Abu Qurrah’s *first* approach to the issue, in which he had affirmed the capacity of human reason to arrive at some basic truths with respect to God, the moral life, and the life to come. Ibn al-‘Amid’s confidence in the capacity of human reason may be seen from the vocabulary he uses to describe how one should think about the content of religious proposals: these require study and examination (*al-bahth, al-istiqrā’*; *Hawi* 1:299), as well as careful consideration and probing by the rule of syllogistic reasoning (*al-nazar fiha, sabruha bi-l-qanun al-qiyasi*; 302), while discerning and discarding tendencies merely to follow custom, tradition, or the lead of people of reputation (302). So equipped, Ibn al-‘Amid is convinced that rational people may see in the teachings of the Gospel the *shari’ah* of perfection that cannot be surpassed.

It is tempting to see in Ibn al-‘Amid’s approach to the question of discerning the true religion an approach particularly suited to his time at the end of the fourteenth century, during which the Coptic community had

suffered and had lost many prominent members through conversion to Islam (see, for example, Little 1976). It was no time for any sort of triumphalistic argument—such as an argument based on Christianity’s successful spread through the world, or one based on public shows of [divine](#) power.

Indeed, the 1380s and 1390s were not remembered for any public demonstration of Christian truth such as the Muqattam miracle of early Fatimid times (see den Heijer 1994), but rather for the public ‘performances’ of voluntary martyrs, both apostates from Islam who made public [confession](#) of their Christian [faith](#) and Christians who joined them by means of anti-Islamic preaching (see el-Leithy 2005: 101–39; Swanson 2010b: 114–17). Any ‘power’ possessed by the forty-nine martyrs of the time was demonstrated in extreme vulnerability, not in dazzling demonstration.

However, a Christian teacher such as Ibn al-‘Amid could still appeal to reason—as he could also point to those who, with respect to the commandment to love all people, “put it into effect and adhere to its principles and ramifications” and who thereby “bear witness to the veracity” of Christian teachings (*Hawi* 1:299). Is it possible that Ibn al-‘Amid was thinking of some of the remarkable saints of his own days? Murqus al-Antuni and Patriarch Matthew I are remembered for practical service and deeds of mercy that, while focused on the welfare of the Coptic community, were often extended to Muslims as well as Christians (Swanson 2010b; Swanson 2013b). And if the martyrs did not extend themselves in similar service, in their own way they attempted to follow the Christ who “voluntarily gave his body to death” (*Hawi* 1:300).

This chapter has presented just a tiny sample from *al-Hawi*, but this sample is perhaps enough to suggest that the work is important in a variety of ways, not least as an artifact of a significant period in the history of the Coptic community—one not usually known for its theological production. We owe a debt of gratitude to the monk of Dayr

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al-Muharraḡ who has done such a careful work of transcription, and to the monastery as a whole and to Bishop Sawirus for the publication of this remarkable text.

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[1] Note that the published volume carries the title *I'tirafat al-aba'*, "The Confessions of the Fathers" (in the plural), rather than the correct *I'tiraf al-aba'* (in the singular), "The Confession"—that is, the creed or the faith—"of the Fathers."

[2] Thus, the Muharraḡ edition of *I'tiraf al-aba'* can be used in conjunction with Georg Graf's careful outline and study (Graf 1937), while the Muharraḡ edition of the thirty homilies of St. Gregory Nazianzus may be read alongside the work of Jacques Grand'Henry and collaborators (see, for example, Grand'Henry 1981; Sauget 1983; Tuerlinckx 2001; and the critical editions of some individual homilies from the Arabic collection that have been appearing since 1988 in the Corpus Christianorum, Series Graeca, Corpus Nazianzenum).

[3] 'Independent reasoning' is probably more accurate than 'ratiocination'—but does not give any sense of the Arabic rhymed title.

[4] While I am speaking here of "the manuscript," in fact the Dayr al-Muharraḡ copy is a pair of volumes, one for each part, bearing the call numbers: Section XI, *kutub lahutiya wa- 'aqa'iddiya* 1–2.

[5] For purposes of my own study, I have made photocopies of chapters so as, by hand, to add (and occasionally remove) *hamza*, to add (usually) or remove dots so as to distinguish between final *ya'* and *alif maksura*, to add *shadda*, and to punctuate according to the sense of the text rather than according to the printed full stops, which, let it again be said, may

reflect markings actually found in the manuscript.

[6] Ashraf Najih Ibrahim ‘Abd al-Malak is preparing a doctoral dissertation on *al-Hawi* at the Pontifical Urbaniana University in Rome, which hopefully will clarify a number of questions surrounding *al-Hawi* as well as provide us a careful assessment of the published editions.

[7] For example, the well-known works of Kamil Salih Nakhlah, Anba Isudhurus, and Iris Habib al-Misri. The introduction also quietly draws on Wadi’s important Arabic-[language](#) essay on al-Makin ‘the elder’ (Wadi 1999).

[8] In fact, in *Hawi* 1: 280 we find the word *mawdub* but this must be corrected to *majmu* ‘ on the basis of both the sense and the self-quotation at page 294.

[9] In the background here is the *ummatan wasatan* of Q 2:143. For some understandings of this idea in Islamic tradition, see Griffel 2003.

[10] The word *manar* can mean ‘lighthouse’ or ‘minaret.’

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