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Reflections on Identity. The Suryoye of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries: Bar Salibi, Bar Shakko, and Barhebraeus

Herman Teule

Abstract

The present article studies some aspects of the literary output of three Syriac Orthodox authors, Dionysius bar Salibi, Jacob bar Shakko, and Gregory Barhebraeus, who are considered the most important representatives of the period known as 'the Syriac Renaissance' (twelfth and thirteenth centuries). The focus of this study is on the growing importance of Arabic, the concern for the preservation of Syriac, considered as an important identity marker, the influence of Muslim cultural patterns and the West Syrian attitude to Islam as a religious system, and, finally, the emergence or rejection of ideas which tend to consider the Christologies of the East Syrians and Chalcedonians acceptable.

Keywords

Language; identity; Syriac; Arabic; Syriac Renaissance; Islam; Christology.

The objective of the present paper is to discuss some elements in the writings of the authors Bar Şalibi, Bar Shakko, and Barhebraeus which can help our reflection on the process of identity formation in the complicated period of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, sometimes characterized as a Syriac Renaissance.¹

¹ On the renaissance, see Herman Teule, 'The Syriac Renaissance, an Introduction', in Herman Teule, Bas ter Haar Romeny, and Jan van Ginkel (eds.), *The Syriac Renaissance: A Period of Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue* (Eastern Christian Studies; Leuven, forthcoming in 2009); Herman Teule, 'La renaissance syriaque', *Irenikon* 95.2 (2002), pp. 74-94, with further literature.

Why These Three Authors?

Firstly, it is important to study different, authoritative, more or less contemporary authors together, since this is the only way to collect information about mainstream thinking in a certain period, which is somewhat obscured when one focuses on the literary production of a single author.

Secondly, all three writers are, to a certain extent, also considered by the present-day Suryoye as bearers of their identity and thus still relevant for our modern times. For instance, the *Luqbal Tayyōyē* (Against the Arabs), of Dionysius bar Salibi remains extremely popular reading among the West Syrians of today, as appears from the number of handwritten copies circulating in Suryoye diaspora circles or in the Middle East.² The same holds true for his *Fuššōg ewangilyon* (Gospel Commentary) still intensively studied by the Syriac clergy.³ Severus bar Shakko's theological and monastic handbook, *Ktōbō d-simōtō* (the Book of Treasures), was recently made available to the Suryoye who no longer read Syriac by the publication of an Arabic translation.⁴ As to Gregory Barhebraeus, modern editions and handwritten copies of most of his works abound not only in the diaspora, but also in the Middle East or India.⁵

² A few recent manuscripts: Ms. Rabban Said Cakici, Mor Afrem Monastery, Glanerbrug, copied in 1983 in Mezizah; Ms. Hori Gabriel Kaya, copied in 1997 in Hengelo by the owner, a manuscript in the possession of Raban Eliyo Öztaş (Mor Afrem Monastery, Glanerbrug), written in Damascus in 1754; a manuscript in the possession of Priest Samuel Essen, Enschede (no date). With thanks to Gabriel Rabo (Göttingen) and G. Acis, who refers to these manuscripts in his unpublished MA-thesis: *Traktaat van Dionysius Bar Salibi tegen de moslims. Inleiding en commentaar. Ktōbō d-ōrū'ōthō luqbal Tayyōyē* (Nijmegen, 2003), pp. 38-42. See Joseph P. Amar, *Dionysius bar Šalibi. A Response to the Arabs* (CSCO 614, 615, Syr. 238, 239; Leuven, 2005), ed. pp. v-vii (Amar lists 5 manuscripts), and Acis, *Traktaat*, pp. 37-39, who gives a list of 20 manuscripts.

³ A recent copy was made by Hori Gabriel Kaya from Hengelo (see note 2 above), who considers the copying of this manuscript as one of 'most important services he can offer to his community'. About this commentary, see now Stephen D. Ryan, *Dionysius Bar Salibi's Factual and Spiritual Commentary on Psalms 73-82* (Cahiers de la Revue Biblique 57; Paris, 2004), pp. 15-17.

⁴ By Behnam Daniel al-Bartali, Syriac Patrimony 24, Damascus 2007, with foreword by Bishop Hanna Ibrahim (Aleppo). See Herman Teule, 'Jacob bar Šakkō, the Book of Treasures and the Syrian Renaissance', in Juan Pedro Monferrer-Sala (ed.), *Eastern Crossroads. Essays on Medieval Christian Legacy* (Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies 1; Piscataway, 2007), pp. 143-154.

⁵ Hidemi Takahashi, *Barhebraeus: a Bio-Bibliography* (Piscataway, 2005), pp. 147-408.

In this sense, these authors are not only important for the study of the formation of identity in the Syriac Renaissance, but also play a role in the modern debate on identity and on the issue of how to relate to other confessions and other cultures.

The Islamic Cultural World

The first issue to be discussed is the position of these ecclesiastical authors towards the cultural environment in which they lived, that is, the world of Islam as a cultural and linguistic system, not so much as a religion. In the case of Bar Shakko, we know very clearly that he had a good command of Arabic—which for the Syriac Orthodox of this period is not self-evident (see *infra*). He studied logic, philosophy, and Arabic with the Muslim polymath Kamāl al-Dīn ibn Yūnus in Mosul, who, according to his biographer Ibn Khallikān, explained the *Injil* and the *Thora* to many Jews and Christians more proficiently than members of these religions themselves.⁶ This contact with Kamāl al-Dīn and possibly other Muslim scholars importantly influenced his literary output as we can see in his Book of Dialogues, which partly consists of a reworking of scientific theories elaborated by Muslim scholars, such as the *Kitāb al-mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya* by Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī—or rather a similar treatise in Arabic⁷—a work also known to Barhebraeus.

For our subject, it is important to note that he had a great interest in his native Syriac tongue and in maintaining the standards for a correct use of the language and the traditional literary styles, as appears from the sections on language, grammar, poetry, and metre in the Book of Dialogues.⁸ We must however accept the reality—at least for Bar Shakko, but he is not an isolated case—that, in the cultural and scientific field, the Syriac Orthodox community of Mosul was no closed entity, but shared the general culture

⁶ See Ibn Khallikān's *Wafayāt al-a'yān*, *Biographical Dictionary* 3, trans. William Mac Guckin de Slane (2nd ed.; New York–London, 1968), pp. 466–474.

⁷ Hidemi Takahashi, 'Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, Qazwīni and Bar Shakko', *The Harp* 19 (2006), pp. 365–379, esp. 367–372.

⁸ See Adalbert Merx, 'Historia artis grammaticae apud Syros', *Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 9.2 (Leipzig, 1889), pp. 1–47; J.P.P. Martin, 'De la métrique chez les Syriens', *Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 7.2 (Leipzig, 1879), pp. 68–70; Martin Sprengling, 'Antonius Rhetor on Versification with an Introduction and Two Appendices', *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 32.3 (1916), pp. 205–216, esp. 203–216 (= Appendix I); Martin Sprengling, 'Severus bar Shakko's *Poetics*, Part II', *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 32.4 (1916), pp. 293–308.

and science of its time. In the same way maybe also, in the field of arts in the Mosul area, it would be difficult to distinguish between Muslim and Christian artists or specific Muslim or Christian styles, as is highlighted in the introductory paper of this volume. It would be challenging to portray a person such as Barhebraeus, a polymath himself, as a scholar who tried to emulate the careers of contemporary Muslim scholars, such as Kamāl al-Dīn or the Persian philosopher/scholar Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī.

This brings me to an important subject, which, in my opinion, is somewhat underestimated in the discussions about the identity of the Suryoye, but which has its consequences for the debate of today. With Bar Shakko and Barhebraeus we have two authors who both wrote grammars of the Syriac language, which was for them an identity marker *par excellence*,⁹ but who were also familiar with Arabic and who found a good command of this language important. Of course, this situation was not entirely new. As early as in the tenth century, we have at least two important authors defending the religious identity of their Church exclusively in Arabic, Yaḥyā ibn 'Adī, with numerous works intended for both a Muslim and a Christian readership¹⁰ and Yaḥyā ibn Jarīr with his *Kitāb al-Murshid* (the Book of the Guide), a massive handbook of Christian theology,¹¹ entirely forgotten in the later tradition of the Suryoye.¹²

What is new, is that in the twelfth and especially the thirteenth centuries, this knowledge of Arabic also spread from Baghdad to the north, to the heartlands of *Suryōyutō*. Knowledge of Arabic became more and more necessary, not only to understand the Muslim cultural and scholarly achievements, as explained earlier, but also for the contacts with the outside world, be it the Crusaders or the Muslim authorities. But did Arabic, in this period, also become a means of expression of the Syrians among themselves, a language which they could consider as a vehicle for expressing their own identity and which they had assimilated?

The answer is not so easy to give: there are a number of indications that Arabic became more important, but we can also find that the knowledge

⁹ See the remarks by Barhebraeus in the introduction to his *Krōbō d-Ṣemḥē* (ed. Syrianska Riksförbundets Kultur Kommité i Sverige, 1983), p. 2.

¹⁰ On Yaḥyā, there is abundant literature, see, for example, Samir Khalil, *Yaḥyā ibn 'Adī (893-974). Taḥdīb al-Ahlāq* (Beirut-Cairo, 1994); Georg Graf, 'Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur 2', *Studi e testi* 133 (Città del Vaticano, 1947), pp. 233-249.

¹¹ For recent literature, see Ray Jabre Mouawad, 'La prière selon Yaḥyā ibn Jarīr (XIe siècle)', *Parole de l'Orient* 22 (1997), pp. 393-404.

¹² It is, for instance, not mentioned in *The Scattered Pearls* of Ignatius Aphram I Barsoum (2nd ed.; Piscataway, 2003).

of Arabic was not self-evident even among the higher clergy; for instance, Patriarch Dionysius VII needed an interpreter for his contacts with Muslim officials.¹³ And if Arabic had been widespread, it would not have been necessary for Barhebraeus to make Muslim culture and especially philosophy available in Syriac translations.

Barhebraeus had of course an excellent knowledge of Arabic, but is it right to consider him as an important representative of Syriac Orthodox Arabic literature? As a matter of fact, he only composed a very limited number of original writings in Arabic. The most important one is his abbreviated world history, *Mukhtaṣar ta'riḫ al-duwal*,¹⁴ but this is a case apart, since it not so clear whether he intended it for members of his own community. According to his brother Barṣaumo, he wrote it at the request of Muslims.¹⁵ If this is true—there are no compelling reasons to doubt it, but some scholars such as Larry Conrad¹⁶ or Françoise Micheau¹⁷ prefer to think of a Christian readership—it would be a work meant for outsiders. Two other original Arabic treatises, *Maqāla mukhtaṣara fī al-naḥs-al-baṣariyya* (Treatise on the Human Soul), based on some writings of Moses bar Kepa, and *Mukhtaṣar fī 'ilm al-naḥs al-insāniyya* (Shorter Treatise on the Human Soul) may have been composed for a Christian public that no longer could read it in the original language, but these writings never enjoyed great popularity.¹⁸

I would suggest that, for the period of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the acceptance of Arabic as a ecclesiastical and theological language, by which it became a marker of identity of the Suryoye, started with Barhebraeus and some of his successors and contemporaries. In the first place, one should think

¹³ Jean Baptiste Abbeloos and Thomas Joseph Lamy, *Gregorii Barhebraei Chronicon ecclesiasticum* (Leuven, 1872–1877), Vol. 1, Col. 717. See also Teule, 'The Syriac Renaissance, an Introduction'.

¹⁴ Barhebraeus, *Mukhtaṣar ta'riḫ al-duwal*, ed. Anton Salihani (Beyrouth, 1890; 2nd ed., 1958).

¹⁵ Abbeloos and Lamy, *Chronicon ecclesiasticum* 3, Col. 469.

¹⁶ See Lawrence I. Conrad, 'On the Arabic Chronicle of Barhebraeus: His Aims and Audience', *Parole de l'Orient* 19 (1994), pp. 319–378, esp. 337; for a discussion of the readership of the *Mukhtaṣar*, see Herman Teule, 'Barhebraeus' Syriac and Arabic secular Chronicles', in Krijnie Ciggaar, Adelbert Davids, and Herman Teule (eds.), *East and West in the Crusader States. Context-Contacts-Confrontations* (OLA 75; Leuven, 1996), pp. 39–49.

¹⁷ Françoise Micheau, 'Le Kāmil d'Ibn al-Aṭīr, source principale de l'Histoire des Arabes dans le *Muḥtaṣar* de Bar Hebraeus', *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph* 58 (2005), pp. 425–439, esp. 431.

¹⁸ Takahashi, *Bio-bibliography*, pp. 268–270.

of Bar Ma'dani—who is praised by Barhebraeus for his excellent command of Arabic¹⁹—, not so much for his Arabic confession of faith, which was meant for the outside the world, the Latin Christians,²⁰ but for his collections of Homilies to be read at the great liturgical feasts and intended for the faithful of his community.²¹ I also refer to Ibn al-Maḥrūma from Mardin and his polemical and apologetic *Ḥawāshī* (Notes, Comments) inserted into the *Tanqīḥ* of Ibn Kammūna²² or Daniel ibn Khaṭṭāb, also from Mardin, and his *Kitāb uṣūl al-dīn*, a compendium on the Syriac Orthodox Faith,²³ as well as the many translations or Arabic summaries he made of the work of Barhebraeus, making them accessible to a Christian public that apparently did not read them in Syriac.²⁴ This means that the acceptance of Arabic as a language for the community happened somewhat later than in the case of the East Syrians, where there is more continuity between the authors writing in the ninth and tenth century in Baghdad and those of the twelfth and thirteenth century in Mesopotamia.²⁵

The Religion of Islam

The next question we have to ask ourselves is how the Suryoye reacted to Islam as a religious phenomenon. In this period, Bar Salibi wrote an important treatise against the *Ṭayyōyē*, mentioned *supra*. In the first chapters, the author displays an excellent knowledge of the divisions in the Islamic world: he gives the names and nicknames of the different Muslim theological schools, which indicates that he was well informed about Islam. This impression is reinforced by the fact that he gives his Syriac readers a great number of sometimes substantial quotations from the Qur'ān in a Syriac translation, many more than

¹⁹ Abbeloos and Lamy, *Chronicon ecclesiasticum* 3, Col. 411-413.

²⁰ Herman Teule, 'It Is Not Right To Call Ourselves Orthodox and the Others Heretics. Ecumenical Attitudes in the Jacobite Church in the Time of the Crusaders', in Ciggaar and Teule (eds.), *East and West*, pp. 13-27, esp. 24.

²¹ Yuhannon Dolabani, *Mimrē w-mushhōtō d-simin l-Mor Yuhannon bar Mā'dani, Patriarkō d-Antyokyā* (Jerusalem, 1929; 2nd ed., Hengelo, 1980).

²² H. Bacha, 'Ḥawāshī (notes) d'Ibn al-Maḥrūma sur le "tanqīḥ" d'Ibn Kammūnā', *Patrimoine arabe Chrétien* 6 (Jounieh-Zouk Mikhael-Rome, 1984).

²³ Floris Sepmeyer, 'Book of the Principles of Faith, attributed to Daniel Ibn al-Ḥaṭṭāb', *Parole de l'Orient* 22 (1997), pp. 405-413.

²⁴ Graf, *Geschichte* 2, pp. 281-284; Takahashi, *Bio-Bibliography*, p. 106.

²⁵ See Teule, 'The Syriac Renaissance, an Introduction'.

in comparable treatises.²⁶ It remains to be determined whether this knowledge was firsthand or whether he relied on former works and on an extant Syriac translation of the Qurʾān. For our purposes, it is important to underline that the main aim of this work is to expose the inconsistencies of Muslim theology and to give the members of his community the tools to formulate answers to questions or objections formulated by Muslims. Bar Salibi's work is clearly an attempt at demarcation, at drawing borderlines: the Muslims are clearly 'the others'. In this way, his works resembles the *Ktōbō d-simōtō* of Bar Shakko. This work, probably written for the novices in the Monastery of Mar Mattai, contains some sections on Islam.

The Muslims—he calls them *ḥanpē*, *Ṭayyōyē* or *mḥaggrōyē*—are said to 'profess accusations against us'. The author does not make clear which accusations, but he gives a brief description of the Muslim faith in a chapter devoted to the different heresies:

This [sect] came into existence through someone called Muhammad. They say that he was a prophet and the messenger of God. They confess one God, Creator and Lord of all, who was not begotten nor did he beget (Q. 112) and who has no companion (*shawtōpō*). They say that the Tora, the Gospel and the [Book of the] Prophets were given by God and that they accept them. As a matter of fact, they do not comply with them at all. About Christ they think that he was truly the one who was foretold by the prophets, but that he was only an ordinary man and a righteous person as one of the prophets, but not the Son of God. They call him the Word of God and his spirit (cf. Q. 4:171), namely that through the Word of God he came into being without sexual union. They also say that Christ was not crucified and did not die, but that he only seemed to the Jews as the one whom they had crucified, and he hid himself from them (cf. Q. 4:157). They confess the Resurrection, the Judgment and the Retribution of Good and Evil. They also say that they have angels in Paradise, drinking and marriage, and many other things.²⁷

This relatively neutral and de facto description is put into perspective when read together with some other remarks about Islam and other religions in general. At the end of Memro II of this work, he discusses why Christians pray in the direction of the east and why they venerate the Holy Cross, which he calls—almost a challenge—the Sign of Christianity, symbol of victory and of redemption. At his second coming, Christ will bring it with him to

²⁶ See especially the chapters 25–30: Amar, *A Response*, ed. pp. 108–138, trans. pp. 100–134.

²⁷ Teule, 'Jacob bar Šakkō', pp. 148 ff.

confound the *kōpurē* 'pagans'. The last chapter bears the title: 'The religion of the Christians has more truth than all other confessions', which for Bar Shakko means that truth is to be found only in his own community.

According to the author, his views expressed in the *Ktōbō d-simōtō* are only a summary of a more elaborate treatise which he had composed on this subject and which was called *Šrōrō galyō*, the Evident Truth. This work is lost, but it was meant as a response to the questions and objections of *ḥeryōyē* 'heretics'. These heretics are essentially the Muslims, as appears from the following argumentation. Truth, he declares, is strong and can therefore subsist in itself, without the assistance of someone or something else. This is not the case for falsehood, which is weak and needs support, and is comparable to a sick person, who in order to stand or walk needs to lean on something. Falsehood is supported by three things: wealth ('corrupting rulers and judges'), power ('a monarch has the power to impose what is not true'), and the use of clever, cunning (*mhirut leššōnō*), and even deceitful language. It is clear that for our author those reasons which prompt some people to accept something which is not true, are allusions to Islam, without mentioning it. Bar Shakko only follows here some previous or contemporary theologians who reflected on the human motifs which brought some people to accept Islam.²⁸ We may conclude that the Book of Treasures is an attempt to demarcate and establish borderlines.

In the case of our third author, Barhebraeus, the approach is somewhat different. His overall attitude towards Islam has to be studied more closely. On the one hand, he follows the lines of thinking of Bar Salibi. Some passages in his *Civil Chronicle* go back to a work/works (possibly Michael the Syrian's *Chronicle*), used by Bar Salibi in his *Luqbal Ṭayyoye*.²⁹ But, unlike Bar Shakko or Bar Salibi, Barhebraeus never wrote a *Luqbal Ṭayyoye* or a work to confound

²⁸ One might think of Abū Rā'iṭa from his own community or a number of East Syrian theologians, from Ḥunayn ibn Iṣḥāq to Išo'yahb bar Malkon, see Teule, *Jacob bar Šakkō*, pp. 152-153.

²⁹ Cf. Paul Bedjan, *Ktōbō d-makṭbōnut zabnē d-sim l-Mōr Grigorios Bar 'Ebrōyō* (Paris, 1890), pp. 97-100; Ernest Wallis Budge, *The Chronography of Gregory Abū'l-Faraj, the Son of Aaron, the Hebrew Physician, commonly Known as Bar Hebraeus 1* (London, 1932), pp. 90-93; Amar, *Response to the Arabs*, pp. 2-4 (both Syriac text and trans.). Barhebraeus possibly used here passages from the *Chronicle of Michael the Syrian*, ed. Jean-Baptiste Chabot, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien, patriarche jacobite d'Antioche (116-1199)* (Paris 1899-1924), Vol. 4, pp. 406-407, trans. Vol. 2, pp. 404-405, but he used other sources as well. Some passages of the text of Bar Salibi have parallels in the *Chronicle of Michael the Syrian*. Amar suggests that Bar Salibi borrowed from Michael rather than the other way round.

the infidels. Despite the fact that in a number of passages in several works, he makes some apologetic efforts to explain and defend his Christian beliefs and to counter the objections from Muslim interlocutors,³⁰ his profound knowledge of and admiration for the scientific and cultural world of Islam has brought him implicitly to recognize in Islam some spiritual values, which he mainly discovered in the work of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, still a popular author in the Islamic world of his time. Ghazālī was for him a representative of a spiritual—non legalistic—Islam, whose views on ascetic mystical life, *mutatis mutandis*, could also be of relevance to his own community.³¹ It remains to be seen to what extent this vision was also accepted by later Syriac Orthodox generations, despite the popularity of Barhebraeus' ascetical and mystical writings.

Inter-Christian divisions

When speaking about borderlines, we also have to discuss the traditional inter-Christian divisions and the extent to which a distinct Christology was still thought to be important for the community's identity.

I begin again with Bar Salibi, or rather, with a further unknown Rabban Yeshu', a West Syrian monk from this period. This person is responsible for an interesting reflection on the traditional cleavage between the Christian communities of his time, asking himself: 'Is it right to consider only ourselves as orthodox and the others as heretics? Is it right to constitute ourselves the judge of other Christians?' His reflection did not earn him the sympathy of Bar Salibi, who, in his *Ktōbō d-durrōšē*, tries to demonstrate that, as a matter of fact, truth is ultimately only to be found within the Syriac Orthodox community; Chalcedonians and 'Nestorians' are to be refuted, not only on account of their diverging Christology, but even for their other ways of celebrating liturgy or different religious practices.³² How strongly he feels that his community has to be protected from foreign influences appears from the fact that he also attacks his fellow Miaphysites, the Armenians, for some superficial differences which do not have any bearing on the essence of religion. This opposition to the

³⁰ I limit myself to giving one example from Barhebraeus' *Treatise on the Incarnation*, see J. Khoury, *Le candélabre du Sanctuaire de Grégoire Abou'l-Faraj dit Barhebraeus. Quatrième base, de l'incarnation*, (PO 31.1; Paris, 1964), pp. 110–113, 116–121.

³¹ See Teule, 'Barhebraeus' Ethicon, Al-Ghazālī and b. Sīnā', *Islamochristiana* 18, pp. 73–86.

³² Teule, 'It Is Not Right To Call Ourselves Orthodox', pp. 17–18.

Armenians is very strange indeed,³³ since, in other Christological treatises, the West Syrians rather emphasize that their faith is in agreement with them and the Copts (for instance, Bar Ma'dani).

To a certain extent, a comparable picture is found in the work of Bar Shakko. Like Bar Salibi, he is convinced that the ultimate truth is only to be found within his own community. This becomes visible in the distinct way in which the West Syrians make the sign of the Cross—as Miaphysites, of course, with one finger—which is also an identity marker for Bar Salibi, or in the typical West Syrian wording of the *trisagion*. How deeply convinced he is of the exclusive truth of his own community can be seen in the somewhat strange, but original way in which he defends his Christology against the Dyophysites. Their objection that the term Mother of God is not biblical, is countered with the argument that the issue, the matter itself, precedes description and not vice versa: *ܩܘܕܫܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܩܘܕܫܐ ܩܘܕܫܐ*. In other words, since also the Dyophysites agree that Christ is God, and that therefore the term Mother of Christ is equal to Mother of God, it is not necessary to find this term in the Holy Scripture, in the same way as the basic truth of Christianity, 'Trinity', is not explicitly mentioned in the Bible either. It is clear that Chalcedonians and Dyophysites belong to the heretics. In this respect, Bar Shakko thinks like Bar Salibi, be it in a much more scholarly and moderate way.³⁴ He does not make any pronouncements on the Armenians, most probably for the simple reason that there were none in the regions where he lived.

When turning to our last author, we know that his views were relatively different. On the one hand, we find a number of writings, his *Candelabrum of the Sanctuary* or his *Letter* to the East Syrian Patriarch Mar Denhā, in which he emphasized the importance of a correct Christological formula, that of his own community. On the other hand, he did not see the other Christian communities as heretics, and, at the end of his life, in his *Book of the Dove*, he is even prepared to recognize the relativity of the Christological formulas, including that of his own Church,³⁵ or in other words, to give up the identity

³³ As remarked by Stephen Ryan, an explanation for the polemical tone in his *durrāshā* against the Armenians may be found in the fact that as newly appointed bishop of Mar'ash he was carried off as a prisoner of war by the Armenians who captured the city in 1155, see Ryan, *Dionysius bar Salibi's Commentary on Psalms*, pp. 5–6.

³⁴ Teule, *Jacob bar Šakkō*, pp. 149–150.

³⁵ For a survey of Barhebraeus' ecumenical thinking, see Herman Teule, 'Gregory Barhebraeus and his Time: the Syrian Renaissance', *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 3 (2003), pp. 21–43, esp. 33–34.

markers which played such an important role in the past. In this respect, his attitude is very different from that of Bar Shakko or Bar Salibi. And we know that this inclusive, ecumenical way of thinking was not just his personal intuition, but was already found in the writings of some earlier theologians of the West Syrian community. We heard an echo in the voice of Rabban Yeshu‘—though it is extremely difficult to establish where Barhebraeus found inspiration for this way of thinking.

Conclusion

For this paper, we selected three Syriac authors who can be considered important representatives of the period of the Syriac Renaissance and whose writings are still read today. We discussed a few works characteristic of their attitude towards the cultural world of Islam, their concern about the preservation of Syriac and, at the same time, their acceptance of Arabic, their views on Islam as a religion and their relationship with the other Christian communities. It is clear that the same issues are still important for the discussions on identity of today, where *Suryōyutō* is often reduced to an exclusively ‘Syrian’ or ‘Assyrian’ identity, ignoring the long history of cultural (and religious) interaction with the Arabic, Muslim world, as exemplified by the writings of the three selected authors.

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