

## More about the Unknown Splinter Group of Nestorians

In a previous article in this *Revue*<sup>1</sup> I quoted a passage from Shahrastānī consisting of two parts. In the first part, Shahrastānī reproduces in the name of the Nestorians a trinitarian formula which reads that « the hypostases are not superadded to the essence (*al-dhāt*) and they are not it (*huwa*) »<sup>2</sup>, that is to say, they are neither other than the essence nor are they the same as the essence, which means that they are neither existent nor nonexistent. In the second part, he gives it as his own opinion that this new trinitarian formula is analogous to Abū Hāshim's formula for modes<sup>3</sup>, which usually reads that « the modes are not God and they are not other than God »<sup>4</sup>, or that they are « neither existent nor nonexistent »<sup>5</sup>. In my article I tried to show, with regard to the first part of Shahrastānī's statement, the possibility that a certain Group of Nestorians in Irak during the reign of Caliph Ma'mūn in the early part of the ninth century under the leadership of a Bishop called Nestor did frame a new trinitarian formula with a view to accommodating the Christian doctrine of the Trinity to the Muslim doctrine of attributes. With regard to the second part of the statement, I tried to show that this new trinitarian formula, on the basis of Shahrastānī's comparison of it to Abū Hāshim's formula for modes, implied an attenuation of the belief in the reality of the hypostases and hence a deviation from the orthodox conception of the Trinity which was originally held by the Nestorians.

In my present paper I shall try to show that Shahrastānī's testimony as to the use of such a formula by certain Nestorians can be corroborated by external evidence, but, as for his comparison of this new trinitarian

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1. Cf. Vol. VI (1960), pp. 249-253.

2. Shahrastānī, *Mīlāl* (ed. Cureton), p. 175, ll. 11-12. The pronoun *huwa*, « he », has no antecedent in this formula. I take it to be a corruption of *hiya*, « she », of which the antecedent is *al-dhāt*, « the essence ». Hence I translated it by « it ».

3. *Ibid.*, I. 14.

4. Baghdādī, *Fayḥ* (ed. Cairo, 1910), p. 182, l. 14.

5. *Ibid.*, I. 5.

formula with Abū Hāshim's formula for modes, it is open to doubt, for I shall try to show, that a formula analogous to this new trinitarian formula had been used by orthodox Muslim Attributists as an expression of their belief in the reality of attributes.

I shall discuss Shahrastānī's identification of the two formulae first.

It happens that long before Abū Hāshim used the formula « not God and not other than God » for his unorthodox doctrine of modes Sulaymān b. Jarīr used the same formula for the orthodox doctrine of attributes<sup>6</sup>. Since Sulaymān b. Jarīr died in 785, which is before the reign of Ma'mūn, during which reign the new Nestorian trinitarian formula appeared, whereas Abū Hāshim died in 933, long after that reign, it is quite evident that it is in the light of the formula as used by Sulaymān b. Jarīr rather than in the light of the formula used by Abū Hāshim that the new Nestorian formula is to be studied.

Studied in the light of this orthodox Muslim formula, this new Nestorian formula, it can be shown, is no deviation from the orthodox Christian conception of the Trinity, though the change in its phrasing may be assumed to be an attempt at a verbal accommodation to the Muslim doctrine of attributes.

Let us examine the two parts of this new formula.

As for the first part of the formula, namely, that the hypostases « are not superadded to the essence », if we assume that its phrasing was meant to correspond to that part of the orthodox Muslim formula which asserted that the attributes « are not other than God », we must also assume that it has the same meaning as its counterpart in the Muslim doctrine. Now the expression « are not other than God » in the Muslim formula means, it can be shown, that the attributes are coeternal with God and that they are not separable from Him. Consequently the expression « not superadded to the essence » must similarly mean that the hypostases are coeternal with the essence and that they are not separable from it. But this is good Christian doctrine ; and thus the difference between the expression « not superadded to the essence » in the new trinitarian formula and the expression « one essence » in the original trinitarian formula is only verbal.

As for the second part of the new Nestorian formula, which we have taken to mean the hypostases are « not the essence », even on the assumption that the phrasing was meant to correspond to that part of the Muslim formula which asserted that the attributes « are not God », we shall try to show that the framers of this new Nestorian formula did not deviate from the orthodox Christian conception of the Trinity, according to which each of the hypostases is God.

6. Ash'arī, *Maḥāḍāt al-Islāmiyyin* (ed. Ritter), p. 514, ll. 15-16 ; p. 547, l. 14 ; cf. p. 70, ll. 8-10. Sulaymān b. Jarīr al-Zaidī was a Shi' ite Attributist.

It will be noticed that the formula does not say that the hypostases are not God ; it only says that the hypostases « are not it », that is, the *dhāt*, « the essence »<sup>7</sup>. Now the Arabic term *dhāt*, « essence », stands here for the Greek οὐσία in the Cappadocian « one *ousia*, three hypostases ». But according to the orthodox Christian conception of the Trinity, while the expression « one *ousia* » means not only that all three hypostases are coeternal and inseparable in *ousia* but also that they are one in Godhood, still the hypostases, by reason of their being really distinct from each other, are not assumed to be altogether the same as the essence ; they are assumed to be in some respect distinct from the essence, as may be gathered from the analogies by which the Church Fathers tried to explain the relation between them and the essence. Thus, according to Basil and John of Damascus, the relation between the essence and the hypostases is explained after the analogy of the relation between the species « man » and individual human beings, such as « Peter, Andrew, John, and James », mentioned by Basil<sup>8</sup>, or « Peter and Paul », mentioned by John of Damascus<sup>9</sup>. Similarly Augustine, who rejects the analogy of the relation between species and individual, explains the relation between essence and hypostases after the analogy of the relation between the common matter gold and three statues made of gold<sup>10</sup>. Thus, according to either analogy, the hypostases in their relation to the essence are in some respect not altogether the same as the essence. Consequently with regard to the statement in the second part of the new Nestorian formula, namely, that the hypostases « are not the essence », while to the Muslims it might have sounded like their own statement about the attributes, that they « are not God », to the Nestorians themselves it meant that, though the hypostases are one in essence in the sense that they were one in Godhood, they « are not the essence » in so far as the essence is related to them either as a species to individuals or as gold to statues made of gold.

Thus, while verbally this new Nestorian formula was phrased like the orthodox Muslim formula for attributes, in meaning it does not differ from the Cappadocian formula « one essence, three hypostases ».

Now for the external evidence corroborating Shahrastānī's testimony as to the use by certain Nestorians of a formula which differed from the Cappadocian formula generally used by Nestorians. This external corroborative evidence is to be found in a work by Joseph al-Baṣīr, who flourished either in Irak or in Iran at the beginning of the eleventh century, which is before the time of Shahrastānī, and so what he says cannot be ascribed to the influence of Shahrastānī's statement. The evidence of al-Baṣīr,

7. Cf. above n. 2.

8. *Epist.* 38, 2 (PG 32, 325 B) ; 38, 3 (328 A).

9. *De Fide Orth.* III, 4 (PG 94, 997 A).

10. *Enar. in Ps.* 68, I, 5 (PL 36, 844-845) ; *De Trin.* VII, 6, II (PL 42, 944). Cf. my *Philosophy of the Church Fathers*, I, pp. 337-338, 347-348, 350-352.

as we shall see, will also corroborate our view that the new Nestorian formula for the Trinity is analogous to the Muslim formula « not the same as God nor other than God » as used by the orthodox for attributes and not as used by Abū Hāshim for modes.

Two statements are quoted by al-Baṣīr in the name of « the Christians », which I shall reproduce here in reverse order. The second of these statements reads as follows : « In a similar way they say : Three hypostases, one substance (*jauhar*), one God »<sup>11</sup>. This is an accurate restatement of the Cappadocian trinitarian formula, in which the term *ousia* is translated, as it often is in Arabic versions of this formula, by « substance » rather than by « essence » (*dhāt*)<sup>12</sup>. As for the phrase « one God », it is quite correctly added as an explanation of what is implied in « one substance ». The first statement is embedded in the following passage : « The view of the Christians is analogous to the view of the Attributists. The Attributists assert that we do not describe the knowledge of God either as existent or as nonexistent, either as created or as eternal, either as the same as God or as other than God. The Christians likewise assert that, with regard to the hypostases, we do not say that they differ from each other and we do not say that they are each the same as the other, so that, with regard to the hypostasis of the Son, they do not say either that it is the same as the hypostasis of the Father or that it is other than it »<sup>13</sup>.

In this latter quotation, the statement that « the hypostases are not different from each other and they are not each the same as the other », which al-Baṣīr quotes in the name of the Christians, reflects the formula quoted by Šahrastānī and it points to the use of that formula by the Christians referred to by al-Baṣīr. But it will be noticed that the Muslim formula with which al-Baṣīr compares this statement of the Christians is ascribed by him not to Abū Hāshim but to « the Attributists », which Attributists he subsequently identifies with « Kullabites » (*kullābiyyah*)<sup>14</sup>, that is, followers of Ibn Kullāb (d. 845), who was an orthodox believer in the reality of attributes<sup>15</sup> and, like his predecessor Sulaymān b. Jarīr, used a formula for the expression of his belief in real attributes which was later adopted by Abū Hāshim as an expression for his belief in modes. Now, as far as I know, there is no reference anywhere to the use by Chris-

11. *Kitāb al-Muhtawī*, Arabic in Hebrew characters, Ms. Kaufmann in the Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest, fol. 250, ll. 2-3; Hebrew translation, *Sefer Ne'imoi*, with interpolations by the translator, MS. Warn. 41, 1, Leiden, fol. 22b, l. 22.

12. Cf. my paper « The Muslim Attributes and the Christian Trinity », *Harvard Theological Review*, 49 (1956), p. 15, n. 71.

13. Arabic, fol. 251, l. 14 - fol. 250, l. 2 (the pagination in this Ms. runs wrongly from left to right); Hebrew, fol. 22b, ll. 16-22.

14. Arabic, fol. 249, l. 8 - fol. 246, l. 9; Hebrew, fol. 23a, l. 16 - fol. 23b, l. 29 (quoted in P. F. Frankl, *Ein Mūtaʿzilītiſcher Kalām aus dem 10. Jahrhundert*, 1872, pp. 53-55).

15. *Maḳālāt*, p. 169, ll. 10-13; p. 514, ll. 15-16; p. 546, ll. 9, 11; p. 548, ll. 1-2.

tians of the statement that « the hypostases are not different from each other and they are not each the same as the other », though it is not contrary to the Christian conception of the hypostases in their relation to each other. Undoubtedly, then, this statement was quoted by al-Baṣīr from Christians in his own locality, either Irak or Iran, in either of which places the Christians were predominantly Nestorians, but the fact that he also quotes in their name the Cappadocian formula shows that they were orthodox in their conception of the Trinity. Furthermore, the fact that he compares this statement with a formula used by Muslims who believed in the reality of attributes shows that the Christians whose statement he quotes believed in the reality of the hypostases of the Trinity.

We thus have here corroborative evidence that among the Nestorians in Irak and Iran there were those who, in an attempt to accommodate their doctrine of the Trinity to the Muslim doctrine of attributes, adopted a formula like that quoted by Shahrastānī, but that formula was used by them not in the sense in which it was used by Abū Hāshim as an expression of a belief in modes but rather in the sense in which it was used by some Attributists as an expression of their belief in the reality of attributes. Those Nestorians, therefore, still continued to be orthodox in their trinitarian belief : the accommodation was only verbal.

I shall now try to show, on the basis of a passage in Saadia, how the same splinter group of Nestorians also changed the formula for their christological doctrine, and this, again, in an attempt to accommodate their conception of Jesus to that current in Islam.

Saadia, in a work written in 933 in Baghdad, about a century after the rise of that splinter group of Nestorians and in a place near the place where that group arose, discusses the Christology of four Christian sects<sup>16</sup>. The second of these sects can be identified as the historically known Nestorians. The fourth sect is described by him as that which « appeared only recently » and its Christology is reproduced as follows : « They assign to Jesus the position of a prophet only and they interpret the sonship of which they make mention when they speak of him just as we interpret the Biblical expression 'Israel is My first-born son' (Exod. 4 : 22), which is merely an expression of esteem and high regard, or as others [ = Muslims] interpret the description of Abraham as the 'friend' of God [Surah 4 : 124] »<sup>17</sup>. Now by this fourth sect with its Ebionitic type of Christology Saadia could not have meant the Samosatenians or the Arians or the Macedonians, all of whom held such a Christology, for all of them were known to Arabic-speaking peoples at the time of Saadia as old Christian sects and Saadia could not have referred to any one of them as a sect which « appeared only recently ». Quite evidently the reference is either to an

16. Cf. my paper « Saadia on the Trinity and Incarnation », *Studies and Essays in Honor of Abraham A. Neuman*, 1962, pp. 547-568.

17. *Emunot ve-De'ot* II, 7 ; Arabic (ed. Landauer), p. 90, l. 21 — p. 91, l. 2.

old sect which had recently adopted this Christology or to an entirely new sect which had revived this Christology. Who was then this sect ?

Here, again, we may get an answer to this question in that passage in Shahrastānī from which we have gathered our information about that splinter group of Nestorians who reframed their trinitarian formula. In that passage, dealing with the Christology of the Nestorians, after reproducing the view that is traditionally ascribed to them, namely, that in the born Christ there are « two hypostases and two natures »<sup>18</sup>, Shahrastānī discusses various christological views held by various groups of Nestorians and in the course of his discussion he reproduces a view which he introduces by the words, « And Photinus and Paul of Samosata say »<sup>19</sup>. From the context, however, it is evident that these introductory words mean, « And[some Nestorians, following] Photinus and Paul of Samosata, say ». The view which he ascribes to those Nestorians who followed Photinus and Paul of Samosata reads as follows : « The Messiah took his origin from Mary ; he is a righteous servant and created, except that God has honored him and favored him because of his obedience and called him 'son' by adoption and not by begetting and union »<sup>20</sup>. This is exactly like the christological view ascribed by Saadia to the sect which « appeared only recently ». What we have here then is, again, a report that a certain group of Nestorians, of whom Saadia knew that they « appeared only recently », that is, about seventy years before he was born (882), during the reign of Ma'mūn, and in the neighbourhood of Baghdad, where Saadia wrote that statement, in an attempt to accommodate their belief about Jesus with that of the Muslims, according to whom Jesus was « only an apostle of God » (Surah 4 : 69), rephrased their original Nestorian Christology into an Ebionitic form of Christology. That they should have done so is not surprising. From its very beginning, Nestorianism was variously represented. Already during the lifetime of its founder, two Latin Church Fathers represented it as an Ebionitic Christology, like that we have quoted from Shahrastānī, even comparing it, like Shahrastānī, to the Christology of Photinus and Paul of Samosata. Thus Cassian compares the Nestorian heresy to the Ebionitic and Photinian heresies and describes it as believing that Christ is a mere man (*homo solitarius*)<sup>21</sup> and Marius Mercator finds that Nestorius, like Paul of Samosata, believed that Christ is the Son of God only as a reward of good actions and by adoption, not by nature (*pro meritis, et ex adoptione, non ex natura*)<sup>22</sup>.

Probably such a conception of Christology had already been vaguely floating about among the Nestorians in Irak when it was crystalized by a splinter group among them during the reign of Caliph Ma'mūn.

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18. *Milal*, p. 176, l. 6.

19. *Ibid.*, l. 11.

20. *Ibid.*, ll. 11-13.

21. *De Incarnatione Christi, Adversus Nestorium* I, 2 (PL, 50, 18-19 and V, 2 (98 f.).

22. *Epistola de Discrimine, etc.* 2 (PL, 48, 773 B).