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# From Tillable Fields to Men's Equal Partners: The Treatment of Women in Early Muslim–Christian Polemic

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**Abstract:** Even though women and questions of gender difference are not a core issue in medieval Eastern Christian–Muslim polemic, there are numerous arguments that go back and forth between Muslims and Christians that revolve around women. In the large corpus of polemical texts from the Middle East between the 8th and the 13th centuries, it can be noted that criticism of the other religion involves pointing out illogicalities and absurdities in each other's doctrines and rituals. Carefully constructed arguments against the claim to Divine endorsement of the faith of the other party are frequently interlaced with criticism of their alleged immoral behavior. Although women feature mostly in the emotive sections of the polemical compositions, there are also reasoned debates about the issue of gender equality in the eyes of God. The discussion of these texts here brings out a range of diverse ideas about women that function primarily as sources for subsidiary arguments against the religious other. At the same time, this study reveals that these arguments were not invented ad hoc. They show the interconnectedness of works within a corpus of polemical texts that spans five centuries.

**Keywords:** Muslim-Christian relations; gender studies; polemics; medieval Islam; Eastern Christianity; Armenian attitudes to Islam; Christian Arab attitudes to Islam



**Citation:** Roggema, Barbara. 2024. From Tillable Fields to Men's Equal Partners: The Treatment of Women in Early Muslim–Christian Polemic. *Religions* 15: 555. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15050555>

Academic Editor: Golda Akhiezer

Received: 25 March 2024

Revised: 22 April 2024

Accepted: 25 April 2024

Published: 29 April 2024



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## 1. Introduction

Among the many famous writings of the Islamic reformist thinker from India, Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817–1898), is a pamphlet on the rights of women (Khan 1962, pp. 201–5; Moaddel and Talattof 2000, pp. 159–62). This powerful piece starts off as a rebuttal of the double standards of developed countries in their critique of the status of women in Muslim countries. Khan points his arrows first and foremost at Britain, where, he claims, the concept of equality of men and women was loudly proclaimed but not legally implemented. He stresses that until 1870, English women had no right to keep their property during marriage and widowhood. All their possessions, including the profits of their own labor, would go to their husbands. They had no freedom to buy and sell, or to bring a lawsuit against someone, without the permission of their husbands. In Sayyid Ahmad Khan's view, "it is obvious that the English consider women quite insignificant, unintelligent, and valueless". He finds it astonishing that they nonetheless "strongly criticize" the condition of women in Muslim countries. Rather than turning the entire pamphlet into a *tu quoque* exercise, Ahmad Khan switches to an inward look and admits that in his own country a respectful, just, and loving approach to women is often lacking. He attributes their inferior status to the backwardness of India, not to Islam itself, and he calls for greater awareness of what Islam really preaches so as to improve women's lives. Civilizational progress will not only make the lives of women better, but it will also help to bring out the enlightened character of the Islamic religion.

Ahmad Khan's powerful piece revolves around several sources of tension created by diverging perspectives not so much on whether men and women are equal but on how their equality should be reflected in societal relations and women's rights. It underscores

the perpetual tension of norm versus reality in Islam, and more specifically, customary gender relations versus the imagined essence of Islam. The assumptions and claims of Sayyid Ahmad Khan are clearly formulated in response to European critique of the status of women in the Muslim world. He does not defend Islam as true but as enlightened and the reflections in his pamphlet derive from the tension between traditionalism and modernity.

From his time on, it is easy to trace the dots to broader intercivilizational debates in the twentieth century. Much less clearly visible are the dots that lead us back to the medieval period. Muslims have been subjected to this kind of criticism from early Islamic times onward but also vice versa. Christian writings from the Middle East and Europe whose primary topic is differences between Islam and Christianity mostly focused on doctrinal issues, such as the Trinity, the nature of Prophethood and free will versus predestination. The position of women is *prima facie* not a central issue that deserves to be addressed. Yet, a perusal of many of the texts written about and against the religious other during the period of the eighth to the thirteenth century reveals that the differences between the image and status of women in the two religions are highlighted with some frequency and serve a variety of polemical functions.

What I would like to explore in this paper is how issues of difference between Islam and Christianity appeared in texts in which women do play a role and to use my exploration of the polemical topoi I found and present here to take a close look at some of the workings and functions of interreligious polemic in general. Rather interesting passages about women in early Muslim–Christian polemical exchanges have not received much attention in scholarly research on polemics let alone been researched systematically.

The corpus of polemical texts which Christians and Muslim exchanged throughout the early and classical Islamic period is extensive and variegated. The texts in this corpus contain a wealth of different ideas about the religious “other” as well as sophisticated arguments as to why the other religion is false. The main challenge their authors took upon themselves was to refute the other religion and to prove their own was true. Moral outrage that derives from the encounter with different customs, precepts, and religious ethics, such as the Christian response to Islamic polygamy, does not necessarily have an obvious effect in polemics for the simple reason that a sense of estrangement or outrage is not an argument in favor or against a religion; apologists were aware that before attacking or mocking the supposedly unethical customs of the other, it should be proven why the religion that promotes them does not come from God. Therefore, we can hypothesize that the arguments regarding women and gender difference only play a subsidiary role in our corpus of polemical texts. My task is to show how. The way in which I will analyze the various relevant texts is by looking at how the argument fits in the text as a whole, what emotive language is being used, and whether anything can be extrapolated from these texts about different attitudes to women.

## 2. Points of Controversy

### 2.1. *Marriage and Divorce*

There is no single event in Muhammad’s life which has drawn more attention from his adversaries than his marriage to Zaynab bint Jaḥsh, who eventually became his seventh wife. She was his cousin and she was married to Muḥammad’s adoptive son Zayd ibn Ḥāritha. Muḥammad fell in love with her, but starting a relationship with her was hindered by the fact that she was already wed to Zayd and that Zayd was perhaps not a son by blood but nevertheless a son, which would give the matter a semblance of incest. These obstacles were overcome when God expressed His endorsement in a revelation (Q 33:37). When Christians around the Near East and in Europe became acquainted with Islam, they turned this well-known episode in Muḥammad’s life into a flashpoint around which they constructed their polemics. It encapsulated several moral judgments about the Prophet. Not only could the story be used to claim that Muḥammad had excessive sexual desires, but it was also a target for Christians who opposed polygamy and divorce. Another challenge was the fact that the story was taken as a clear sign that Muḥammad created Qur’anic verses

as needed. In other words, there is a double rejection here: the rejection of a man considered lascivious and the rejection of a man considered a false prophet. In his monumental study, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image*, Norman Daniel described how this story made its way to Europe and remained popular for centuries (Daniel 1993, pp. 118–23 and passim). Its origins were in the East, where we find allusions to it from the eighth century on in, among others, in Greek, Arabic, and Armenian (Schadler 2018, pp. 117–18; Bottini 1997, pp. 118–19; Melkonyan et al. forthcoming).

Beyond the story of Zayd and Zaynab, in the earliest Eastern Christian texts about Islam one finds that the Islamic concept of divorce was generally frowned upon. Christians objected to polygamy and divorce. One of the particular aspects of Islamic regulations of divorce was the legal requirement for a wife, after having been repudiated by her husband three times and having fulfilled a waiting period after each, to first have relations with another man, before she would be permitted to marry again with her first husband (Schacht 2000). The rationale of the law is thought to be that it prevents the first husband from cruelly repudiating his wife multiple times, which could cause the wife to end up in an endless cycle of waiting periods.

Christians in the Middle East looked at it quite differently. The topic features, for example, in one of the versions of the letter which the Byzantine Emperor Leo III (r. 717–741) allegedly sent to the Umayyad Caliph ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (r. 717–720). These two sovereigns are believed to have exchanged several letters which became popular reading around the Mediterranean, where they were reworked in Greek, Arabic, Aljamiado, Latin, and Armenian. The complex history of their transmission has finally been fully mapped out (Burman et al. forthcoming; Hoyland 1994; Kim 2017). In addition, the best preserved version, the Letter of Leo III which was preserved in Armenian in the Chronicle of Ghevond, has recently appeared in a new richly annotated English translation (La Porta and Vacca 2024). In this Armenian version of the letter, the emperor uses rather condemnatory language to rebuke Muslims for the way in which they make women go through their divorce. Caliph ‘Umar II had defended this practice of divorce in his own letter by adducing the Biblical story of David who took Uriah’s wife (La Porta and Vacca 2024, p. 152). Emperor Leo was not in the least convinced by the Caliph’s recourse to the Bible. He argued in response that only adultery can be a cause for divorce according to the Gospel. The moral outrage he voices about Islamic divorce stands out among all comparable texts for the strong condemnatory tone he uses. He first expresses his moral indignation about the fact that intercourse with women is described as “tilling the fields” in the Qur’ān:

“I will allow myself to mention the impure command of your lawgiver concerning men having relations [67v] with women, about which I am ashamed to speak, [and] to bring up the example of plowing the fields, through which some of you have learned to have relations with women with such obscenity in the manner of a plough . . . And you, when you are satisfied with your wives, as if with food, then you want [to leave them] and you leave [them]. So if it were possible, I would not say anything about the shameful remarriages, as you first allow others to profane a wife and then you take [her]. Where shall I put the unscrupulous fornication of your concubines, for whom you expend all the possessions and spoils of man? Buying expensive possessions at high cost, you satisfy that obscenity with her and then sell [her] like an animal”. (La Porta and Vacca 2024, pp. 152–53)

Emperor Leo III spares no words to underscore all he considers reprehensible in Muḥammad’s model for relations between members of the two sexes. He objects to divorce for random reasons and believes that it is allowed in Islam for the sole purpose of making unlimited sex possible. This is not only objectionable as such, but he also believes it to be indicative of a lack of consideration for the women, since they can be easily disposed of as though they are nothing more than objects and, moreover, need to have intercourse with another man before being able to return to their original husbands. The reader of Leo’s letter will be led to believe that women are doubly mistreated by their husbands.

These forceful words are quoted in a long interreligious debate in Armenian from the ninth or tenth century entitled “History of the religious man holy Makar and the Emir and Aftap’ar and the Jew and Nestor and the sorcerer who believed in Christ” (Melkonyan et al. forthcoming). The fact that the passage reappears in this text, which is known in many manuscripts, suggests that Leo’s assessment of man–woman relations impacted the Armenian image of Islam. In a slightly more sober account that probably partly derives from Leo’s letter, the famous Byzantine theologian John of Damascus (d. c. 749) describes the same remarriage custom (Schadler 2018, pp. 131, 228–29; Gleib and Khoury 1995, pp. 80–81; Sahas 1972, pp. 138–39), which he traces straight back to the Zayd and Zaynab affair. Perhaps it became such a well-known sore point that the East Syriac redactor of the Syriac Legend of Sergius Bahīrā described it in just one line as one of the deplorable influences of the Jewish convert Ka’b al-Aḥbār on Islam: “when a woman is repudiated, if another man does not take her, he cannot return to her” (Roggema 2009, pp. 304–5). Judaism allows divorce and it is not surprising therefore that the anonymous Syriac author regards it as a product of Jewish influence on Islam, which he highlights as part of an attempt to show that Islam is a human construct. Interestingly, this author does not highlight the apparent immorality of a woman having intercourse with another man only to be able to go back to her original husband, but rather the opposite situation in which a woman as well as her former husband will be suffering from this law if the woman cannot find anyone with whom she will marry for the time being.

In the Fatimid period, a certain learned young man called Ibn Rajā’ converted from Islam to Christianity. He then went on to write a detailed refutation of his former religion. To him too, the regulations with regard to divorce are a source of indignation. Like Emperor Leo III, he uses the specifics of Islamic divorce arrangements to add force to his general depiction of Islam as a carnal instead of spiritual religion. His knowledge of Islamic law, acquired during his previous life, leads him to go into detail about two legal caveats regarding the process of becoming free to remarry one’s previous husband. The first is that the required intercourse that will set the women free, as it were, is not valid if this occurred during menstruation. Secondly, the required intercourse is not valid if the new husband did not have an erection. Ibn Rajā’ cites a ḥadīth in which proper sex is graphically described, so as to leave no doubt about what counts as a physical union and what does not count. To Ibn Rajā’ this is a “shameful and despicable tradition which has made you disgraced and contemptible among all peoples” (Bertaina 2022, pp. 290–91). After this exclamation, he returns to the dialectical style that characterizes many literary Christian–Muslim debates, which are constructed in such a way as to prepare the reader for possible counterarguments coming from the opponents or perhaps from one’s own reasoning. Here, Ibn Rajā’ writes

“Suppose they answer us: ‘He made that a punishment to penalize us with it if we made three divorces permanently. . . . So he would refrain [from divorce] and take it as a lesson and never go back to it’”. (Bertaina 2022, pp. 292–93)

Ibn Rajā’ sees the counterclaim only as a further opportunity to expose what he perceives as the absurdity of Islamic Law. According to him, punishment should be increased for repeat offenders as a deterrence. Instead, Islamic law neither augments the punishment nor prevents subsequent cycles of repudiation, waiting periods, and obligatory second husbands. Interestingly, Ibn Rajā’ says he wants to spare his Christian readers further details. As is often assumed, the intended readership is not the opponents addressed in his book, but rather his own community whose members might learn from the book how to address questions of Muslim–Christian difference in their own lives, and be influenced by this image making that creates a strong sense of otherness vis-à-vis Muslims.

Every argument that goes around comes around and ultimately the Christians were put on the defensive, having to explain why they do not allow divorce and polygamy. The famous Mu‘tazilī theologian ‘Abd al-Jabbār (d. 1025 CE) explained in great detail in his *Tathbīt dalā’il al-nubuwwa*, “The Confirmation of the Proofs of Prophethood”, how Christianity came into being. The core of his exposition is the idea that Christianity came about as a compromise between Jewish Christians, who followed the true practices of

Jesus Christ, and the Romans, who were willing to embrace Christianity only to a certain extent. The rituals of Christ were lost in this process of compromising with the Romans, and the resulting corruption of Christ's ideas, scripture, and way of life also affected the norms for relationships between men and women. Christ "conducted himself, in regard to marriage, divorce, inheritance and punishments, in the way the prophets did before him" (Reynolds and Samir 2010, p. 88) and "He also required the major ablution for menstruating women" (Reynolds and Samir 2010, p. 86). The gap between the practice of Jesus Christ and the beliefs and rituals of Christians as they became known was due to this process of acculturation and negotiation that took place in early Christianity. The prime culprit was the Apostle Paul, who was a Jew and yet was willing to abandon the Mosaic Laws in order to ingratiate himself with the Roman elite and the pagans around Antioch who were not very interested in change. One of the first things 'Abd al-Jabbār raises with regard to the resulting degenerated Christian practice is the general lack of hygiene. Christians do not perform ablutions and reject the concept of ritual cleansing, which leads them to perform their prayers while soiled from defecation and sex. He proceeds to describe the many changes that the Apostle Paul supposedly introduced after contact with the Romans. One specific Roman idea to which he had to give in was monogamy (Reynolds and Samir 2010, p. 101). 'Abd al-Jabbār claims Roman women detest both divorce and polygamy. When questioned about these topics by the Romans, Paul had hypocritically asserted that his people had the same attitude to these issues. In this way, Christianity was Romanized. A particular aspect of 'Abd al-Jabbār's etiology of Christianity is that it provides him with an excuse not to look at the meaning or causes of certain Christian doctrines and rituals; they can be explained away as Pauline accidents. As far as women are concerned, the corollary of this etiology is that women's behavior and norms are not actually set by Christian norms of chastity and monogamy. This is not stated explicitly, but 'Abd al-Jabbār makes it sufficiently clear that in the end, Christian women do very much what they want. He speaks mostly of Byzantine women. Looking at scattered remarks about them in the *Tathbīt dalā'il al-nubuwwa*, we learn that to them monogamy is a rather empty concept. Women might go to monasteries to look for physical intimacy (Reynolds and Samir 2010, p. 121; see also Sizgorich 2013), they might become informal concubines (Reynolds and Samir 2010, p. 121), or they might decide not to get married in order to be freer in their choices (Reynolds and Samir 2010, p. 116). What is basically presented in an anecdotal way is nonetheless part of 'Abd al-Jabbār's refutation of Christianity. What was 'Abd al-Jabbār trying to achieve? There is not a straightforward answer here, but it is clear that image making is part of polemics, even if an opponent would argue that anecdotes carry us away from the intrinsic norms and values of one's religion. It reminds us of the fact that polemics are often not only about refuting but also about undermining the credibility of the opponent.

## 2.2. Circumcision

'Abd al-Jabbār's work draws heavily on the ninth-century thinker and litterateur from Basra, al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 869). He wrote a "Refutation of the Christians" that also has a series of anecdotes about Byzantine women in it. As Nadia el-Cheikh has shown clearly (El-Cheikh 1997, 2015), there were entertaining polemical topoi being transmitted about these women, who were far away enough from the heart of the Caliphate to allow for some fantasy and exaggeration and yet familiar enough because of 'Abbasid-Byzantine contacts to resonate with readers. Al-Jāḥiẓ reflects on Christian women both from Byzantium and Iraq and presents an intentionally ambiguous picture. He mentions the practice of monastic celibacy, together with wars, sterility, and the prohibition of remarriage, polygamy, and concubinage, and he wonders—certainly not without a tad of irony—how the Christian communities manage to sustain their numbers and whether deep down they are not imitating the austerity of the Manichaeans (Newman 1993, p. 707). After much reflection, he admits having liked Christians in the past and having preferred them over the Jews. Yet later in life he had become aware of the immense moral failure of the Christians, which is their

practice of castration. This is “the greatest mutilation and the gravest sin” (Newman 1993, p. 708). In his *Kitāb al-ḥayawān*, he devotes some more lines to his outrage about castration but adds that for women, castrates are a great source for long and dynamic intercourse (Al-Jāḥiẓ 2003, pp. 32–36). Al-Jāḥiẓ also believes that the refined looks of Christians are often misleading; they eat pork, do not perform ablutions, and have intercourse during menstruation (Newman 1993, p. 708).

Whereas these scattered comments give the impression that Christians are not successful procreators, women are nonetheless unrestrained in their passions. Al-Jāḥiẓ sees their promiscuity as problematic, and believes one of the causes is the lack of strong admonitions in their scriptures about the fire of hell. The reason for women’s lustfulness is the fact that they are not circumcised (Newman 1993, p. 708). In his *Kitāb al-ḥayawān* al-Jāḥiẓ also defended female genital mutilation, as he claimed that it increases one’s beauty. More importantly, it reduces a woman’s sexual pleasure, which diminishes the chances of adultery (Al-Jāḥiẓ 2003, p. 38). The reader was probably expected to take the benefits of female circumcision for granted and disregard the subsurface tension with the author’s prior outrage about castration as a form of mutilation.

As it turns out, female circumcision comes up in some of the Christian polemical texts against Islam too. It was not without controversy in early Islam because it is not commanded in the Qur’an (Eich 2019; Berkey 1996) and presumably Christians became aware of intra-Muslim discussions on the topic. To begin with, circumcision of men was clearly a major bone of contention between Christians and Muslims. The discussion revolved mostly around two points. First of all, it was related to the discussions about *naskh*, abrogation. The fact that both Jews and Muslims believed that circumcision is a divine commandment forced Christians to take on a defensive stand. It was up to them to demonstrate that the commandment had been abolished by Christ, which was not an easy task, since Muslims were readily pointing out that Christ himself was circumcised. The issue provoked discussions about the rationale behind it. Was it a symbol of communal identity or was it (also) commanded on hygienic grounds? Those who took that first approach made the argument that circumcision was only commanded to Abraham as a distinctive symbol of God’s covenant with his people; that covenant has subsequently been undone by the Incarnation. It had no intrinsic value otherwise (e.g., Nasry 2010, pp. 101–4; Nasry 2008, pp. 173–75). Christians who instead focused on that second interpretation claimed that the foreskin is part of God’s creation and that it is absurd and insulting to think that God intended to equip men with an unclean and functionless body part that should be removed.

It is rarer to find debates about female circumcision (nowadays called “female genital mutilation”). It appears as a topic in two early Christian refutations of Islam that we have already encountered above. In the final chapter of his survey of heresies, the “Heresy of the Ishmaelites”, John of Damascus labels Muḥammad as a pseudo-prophet who was educated by an Arian Christian. He enumerates the aspects of Islam which were the most salient to him, such as the belief that Jesus was not really crucified and that it was merely his shadow. He addresses the claim that the Qur’an was revealed by God and tries to refute it by referring to Islamic conditions for trustworthiness: one needs witnesses. Whereas many ordinary acts of Muslims, such as marrying or buying and selling, need witnesses, for the Divine origins of the Qur’an witnesses are lacking. Qur’anic elaborations of Biblical stories are simply dismissed as ridiculous, as are aspects of the Islamic afterlife. His final comments about what he regards as absurd Islamic practices end with a reference to female circumcision. John seems aware that this is not in the Qur’an, for after finishing the critique of the Qur’an, he mentions it as one of the laws that Muhammad made (Schadler 2018, pp. 232–33; Sahas 1972, pp. 140–41; Gleis and Khoury 1995, pp. 82–83).

In the Armenian Letter of Emperor Leo III, the practice of female circumcision features too. Leo pointed out that Muslims cannot claim continuous practice from Judaism. As we have already seen above with ‘Abd al-Jabbār, Muslim theologians were prone to regarding Christianity as the odd religion out on account of its divergence from laws that Jews and

Muslims follow. Emperor Leo replies to this framing of Christianity as having arbitrarily abandoned Mosaic Law. For example, he objects to the Muslim critique of baptism as an unsanctioned substitute for circumcision. Not only is Christ's own baptism the basis for the Christian practice, but it is also a symbol of a new covenant. Emperor Leo asks "If Christ, the teacher of the true Law, had not eliminated circumcision, sacrifice, and the Sabbath, then what new covenant did He make?" (La Porta and Vacca 2024, p. 147). In other words, the rite of baptism should be regarded as one of many changes that point at a new covenant. A further point he makes is that Muslims themselves cannot claim to be following the ancient laws, since "you shame not only the men but also the women with this disgrace, regardless of age" (La Porta and Vacca 2024, p. 147). What he tells his correspondent is that two things clearly go against the idea that Muslims are following in the footsteps of the Jews: the age at which Muslims perform circumcision and the fact that women get circumcised too.

Discussions about whether circumcision is a Divine command or not continued over the centuries. In the late tenth- or eleventh-century East-Syrian theological apologetic handbook entitled *Kitāb al-Majdal*, "The Book of the Tower", its author, 'Amr ibn Mattā, develops the arguments further, but builds forth on the same ideas about its specific function within the Israelite community. Since the new covenant, God is indifferent to it and his original commandment was certainly not to signal or bring about purity, but rather to distinguish and to preserve the community. With the latter argument the author alludes to female circumcision:

"The strongest indication that circumcision [was re-introduced] for the [sole] purpose of [keeping the people] segregated, not for the sake of kinship or [ritual] purity, is the fact that it is prescribed for males, but not for females, and that Abraham was circumcised, but not Sarah: if [the purpose of circumcision] were happiness and grace, pure women would not be deprived of it". (Seleznyov 2014, pp. 126\*, 140)

At first sight, we see the argument of John of Damascus and Emperor Leo III repeated, but the apologist has a more profound point to make as well:

... "because there were many good and pure women among them, those who prophesied and were mothers, sisters, daughters, and wives of prophets, kings, and high priests. There were noble women, famous for their asceticism, who practiced virtue and were thus equal to righteous men. Since the goal of circumcision was to keep the males and preserve their stock, practicing it was not necessary for women, even as [both males and females] were equally praised for [their other] endeavors". (Seleznyov 2014, pp. 126\*, 140)

It is typical of this type of apologetic text that the reasoning that guides the passage is not made fully explicit. Why does the author bring up noble women? It seems the author believes he has already refuted the possibility that the circumcision was to indicate kinship. In a next step, he wants to show that it was not for purity either. The first premise is that there were women who were noble, virtuous, righteous, and modest. Next, it is claimed that God assesses believers equally for their behavior and faith. This leads to the conclusion that circumcision cannot be for purity, because if circumcision were for purity, then many good women would miss out on what God has given as a regulation to humankind and remain in an undeserved state of impurity all their lives. Since such an inequity that clearly puts women at a disadvantage is not to be attributed to God, it can be ruled out that God commanded this for the sake of purity.

Towards the end of his chapter, the apologist moves on from addressing the practice among Jews to the Islamic practice of it. He uses the same argument we have already encountered with Leo III and John of Damascus, drawing on the knowledge that some Muslim women get circumcised as well. It was a custom but became a law that was wrongly and anachronistically "added to God's command to Abraham" (Seleznyov 2014, pp. 131\*, 147).

The author further undermines the legal and spiritual value of Islamic circumcision (for both sexes) by referring to the advent of the Turks in the Middle East. These “Sons of Qantura”, as he calls them, were not used to circumcision and therefore they did not observe the commandment. As a result, Islamic law changed. It is interesting to notice how the author claims that this racial and cultural shift in Middle Eastern demographics should be seen as a concrete sign that the need for circumcision as a means to distinguish the community from others is no longer there. On the contrary, the intermingling of communities is what makes them thrive, he claims. Moreover, he tells us, in the end it is one’s individual devotion that makes one superior in the eyes of God (Seleznyov 2014, pp. 131\*, 148). The fact that a Christian apologist uses historical changes in Islamic law to invalidate Jewish claims of superiority reveals a remarkable level of interreligious entanglement.

The discussion continued over the centuries. Further intricate arguments can be found in the long critique of the Gospels written by the Ḥanbalī scholar Najm al-Dīn al-Ṭūfī (d. 1316) (Demiri 2013). He rehearses many arguments as to why the Divine commandment to Abraham to cut the foreskin is binding for all of his offspring, whether Sons of Isaac or Sons of Ishmael. The Christians are either living in error or else they are not descendants of Abraham, he argues (Demiri 2013, pp. 458–61). If Christians want to claim that they base themselves on the practice of later Christians (probably meaning the Apostles, lit. *khulafā’ uhu*, “his [Christ’s] successors”), al-Ṭūfī is happy to dismiss their judgments as fables. He also alludes to the objection that the author of the above-mentioned *Kitāb al-Majdal* presented that God would have imposed it on both genders. He refers to others, who “hold two extreme positions: it being obligatory for both of them [i.e., men and women] and it not being obligatory at all (*wa-‘adamuhu*). This statement demonstrates that the Christians are misguided.” (Demiri 2013, pp. 458–59). The fact that al-Ṭūfī only makes a cryptic reference here to the question as to whether women should be circumcised too, probably means he presumed that his readers would recognize the original point to which he responds: God would have imposed it on everyone; not just on one gender. The question is, however, how al-Ṭūfī replies to that. He does not claim they say “it being obligatory for both of them [i.e., men and women] or it not being obligatory at all”. He clearly states that they claim it as being “obligatory for both of them [i.e., men and women] and it not being obligatory at all (*wa-‘adamuhu*)”. His point is that it is contradictory of Christians to demand a coherent and just commandment from God (circumcision should be for all) and then reject and disregard it at the same time (there is no circumcision for anyone). Although al-Ṭūfī and the author of the *Kitāb al-Majdal* have opposing views, they weave together logical points with a strong sense of indignation about the irrationality of the other.

### 2.3. Impurity

The type of intertwining of seemingly rational discourse with implicit or semi-explicit prejudices that we have come across already in the texts that touched on adultery, polygamy, and circumcision in all likelihood helped readers to strengthen their convictions and their awareness about boundaries between their belief system and that of the other, and also the boundaries in real life between members of the two communities. In this regard, it is not surprising that the issue of purity and impurity—a topic of boundary making par excellence—features in our texts. We already saw how the author of the *Kitāb al-Majdal* denied that God’s commandment to Abraham with regard to circumcision had anything to do with purity. Although his argument was presented as part of his discourse about abrogation, it goes without saying that it is also an indirect defense against the accusation that Christians are impure. When this opinion was voiced by polemicists, they often piled up several aspects of Christian customs to create an image of an unclean community: consuming pork and blood, failing to perform ablutions, and having intercourse during menstruation. As we already saw above, al-Jāhīz bundles these habits together as mutually reinforcing negative images that should help his audience feel his repulsion vis-à-vis the Christians. The origins of this type of image making can be found in Jewish responses

to Christianity and, as with circumcision, the dismissive attitude of Muslims to Christian behavior was grounded in the idea that Christians have gone off the straight path that was laid out by God to Abraham and Moses. In this type of discourse, there is a special place for women whose perceived inferiority could be exploited to enhance the unclean image. To quote al-Jāhīz on the Christians, “His wife, too, is unclean. She does not purify herself from the courses, and in addition to this, she too is uncircumcised”. (Newman 1993, p. 708).

Muslims only needed to evoke the image of what bloody part of the female body the supposed “God” of the Christians came from to realize that this religion was very different from theirs (e.g., Griffith 1990, pp. 322–23). The functions and ubiquity of this type of polemical exploitation of the woman’s body have been carefully analyzed by Alexandra Cuffel (Cuffel 2007) and, with regard to early Jewish-Christian interaction, by Charlotte Fonrobert (Fonrobert 2000). I will restrict myself here to pointing out how comments about the alleged impurity of Christian women feature in Ibn Taymiyya’s well-known *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ li-man baddala dīn al-Masīḥ*, “The correct answer to those who altered the religion of Christ”. In what is probably the longest Muslim refutation of Christianity, we find again a cluster of Christian impurities:

“one may even pray while in a state of major or minor impurity or while carrying anything that is filthy. They also eat forbidden foods such as blood, dead animals and pork, except for whoever dislikes such foods and people are considered to be free to choose to eat them or not”. (Ibn Taymiyya n.d., p. 79)

The interesting aspect of this passage is how Ibn Taymiyya used this image for not so much his refutation of Christianity but as an argument for Islam. First he described Jewish attitudes to (im)purity. According to him, the Jews were deprived of many of the good things of life, but added to their own discomfort by being overly concerned about the ritual purity. He refers to the laws of *nidda*, the Jewish regulations regarding menstruating women. According to Ibn Taymiyya, these laws are extreme:

“They exaggerated much in avoiding filth to the extent that they did not eat with, drink with or sleep with menstruating women. They also used to cut any places on their clothing that had sexual impurities instead of rubbing or cleaning them”. (Ibn Taymiyya n.d., p. 79)

The stark contrast that Ibn Taymiyya created in this way between Jewish and Christian regulations and attitudes to impurity forms his stepping stone to the portrayal of Islam as a very balanced religion that follows a middle course (Hoover 2022). His contemporary Ibn Abī Ṭālib al-Dimashqī also depicts Judaism and Christianity as polar opposites and even claims that Jewish women were circumcised while Christian women are impure because they are not (Ebied and Thomas 2005, pp. 219–21). Both thinkers used their negative perception of Christians as a building block for their perceived need for Islam in the world.

How would a community defend itself against the accusation that it is unclean? In the case of Christians in the Middle East, how did a minority community that was living under the rule of the other religion defend itself against such a prejudice? One Arabic text in which, I argue, a subtle defence against this image making is constructed is the “Debate of George the Monk with three Muslims” (Ibrahim and Hackenburg 2022). Written in the thirteenth century by a Christian, it is supposed to reflect an interreligious discussion at the Ayyūbī court in Aleppo in the year 1216. The literary qualities of the text show us that even if it might be based on a live discussion, the final product is a carefully polished text in which literary flourishes are added to create the sense of an unbridgeable divide between the lifestyles and spiritual aptitude of the two parties.

The protagonist, George the monk, is depicted as the model of simplicity, modesty, and moderation, while the Muslim princes at the Sultan’s court in Aleppo are depicted as elegantly dressed and luxuriantly perfumed and quite naive. Despite their external differences, what the conversation partners nonetheless agree on is that a sound discussion of religious truth needs to involve all the major religions. They agree that these would be four: Judaism, Sabianism, Christianity, and Islam (Ibrahim and Hackenburg 2022, pp. 224–25).

Unsurprisingly, the conversation soon becomes a game solely for representatives of the latter two. The monk resorts to narrative theology to convince his audience of the logical consistency in the Christian story of creation, human error, the Divine incarnation, and redemption. His explanations do not seem to resonate with the Muslim princes. They prefer to focus on the fact that the monk is uncircumcised. This provides the occasion for the monk to explain why he hardly washes himself. He believes that dirt which is external has nothing to do with internal cleanliness. One of the Muslims seems to agree, and in a contorted way confirms the superficiality of cleanliness produced by circumcision and ablutions. The creation of an image of Christian piety as a form of inner purity is a process that is stretched out over the entire debate. An important strategy is to redirect the alleged contrast between purity and impurity to a debate about spirituality versus materiality and physicality. In the comparisons between Christian and Muslim rituals, we are pushed to accept that the physicality of the water of baptism is merely to make the spiritual essence of the sacrament visible, while Islam's rituals and customs are mostly invented to fulfil people's desires. Islamic rituals are portrayed as devoid of spiritual meaning (Ibrahim and Hackenburg 2022, pp. 298–308). This polemical strand culminates in an unsympathetic description of the Ḥajj. One of the Muslims is portrayed as trying to persuade the monk to come on pilgrimage too. He feigns enthusiasm, which leads one of the Muslims to brag about all the good things to be enjoyed in Northern Arabia on one's way to Mecca. The monk mocks the Muslim by showing interest in the beautiful women of Arabia who resemble the virgins of paradise. Followed by a final paragraph in which the monk ridicules the stages of the Ḥajj, we are led to believe that the Ayyūbī emir praised and rewarded the monk. The sum of this final part of the debate is that Islamic rituals are made to fit a sensual and material approach to life. Women, in this case, the imaginary virgins of Northern Arabia, who resemble the *ḥūr al-ʿayn* and whom the pilgrims will encounter on their way to Mecca, are part of the anti-spiritual image that the author is trying to create in response to the Muslim critique of seemingly crude Christian habits. What seems coarse, dirty, and austere in the lifestyle of the Christian must ultimately be understood as the antithesis of a materialistic lifestyle and therefore be spiritual (Ibrahim and Hackenburg 2022, pp. 318–27). It is a logic that Muslim ascetics would understand, but it is not the aim of the author to find a point of contact with a segment of Muslim society but rather to dismiss mainstream Muslim society as incapable of grasping true spirituality. The critical reader will nonetheless notice that the Christian author also views women as objects, since renouncing the material world includes renouncing women.

#### 2.4. Equality

In the type of texts I analyze here, which belong to a corpus of Middle Eastern polemic texts written by Christians and Muslims between the eighth and thirteenth centuries, it can be observed that claims made about the veracity of one's faith were often presented in dialectical format. The texts could be used as models to prepare the reader for live encounters with believers of the other religion and also to enhance one's conviction of being in the right religion. The dialectical format was useful in that it laid out how critical comments could be anticipated. Authors experimented widely with arguments which could undermine the claim to a Divine origin of the other religion. Most refutations had a strong apologetic purpose too. Disproving the other went together with showing why the arguments from the other side did not hold water. A lively example is a text that became very popular among Syrian Orthodox and Melkite Christians. It is the religious dialogue between the Melkite apologist Theodore Abū Qurra (d. c. 820) and a group of Muslims at the court of the Caliph al-Ma'mūn (Griffith 1999; Awad 2020). This text, of which numerous manuscripts survive, may well be a somewhat later creation that was projected back to the time of al-Ma'mūn. The thrust of the text is self-evident: Abū Qurra undermines Muslim arguments against Christianity on the basis of reason and the Qur'ān while refuting many aspects of Islam along the way. One of the issues Abū Qurra is portrayed as tackling is life after death according to the Qur'ān. He denies that there are female companions given to

men in heaven: “This is something God never created” (Nasry 2010, p. 127; Nasry 2008, p. 189). He provides the following justification for his bold statement:

“If this [paradise] were, as you recounted, prepared for you, who are the husbands of your wives in the hereafter? For behold, you have denied them, and have chosen over them the companions with beautiful, big, and lustrous eyes, and abandoned them [the wives] in anguish and great grief, while you are joyful and glad with the companions with beautiful, big, and lustrous eyes. You attribute to God tyranny and injustice, for behold He has made wives for the men and did not make husbands for the women” (Nasry 2008, p. 189; 2010, p. 128).

The claim of the heavenly maidens is boldly invalidated by the assertion that this would constitute an injustice on the part of God, since it implies that men receive more rewards than women. This is unjust vis-à-vis the women. More emphatically, Abū Qurra states that it would be unjust to attribute unjust and arbitrary choices to God. The Muslim interlocutor does not respond. Beyond doubt, the text is meant to appeal to those who were invested in the thought of the Mu‘tazila, the rationalist theological school that thrived in the first half of the ninth century in Iraq. Its most important doctrines were God’s unity and justice. Since God’s justice was believed to be infinite, there cannot be a lopsided paradise in which some receive larger rewards than others. Believing in it would constitute heresy.

There is no answer to Abū Qurra’s point and the reader has to believe that the Muslims were silenced. The argument lived on. In the twelfth century, an anonymous East-Syrian Christian elaborated on it in his long refutation of Islam that is contained in his “Commentary on the Nicene Creed”. It is a long text that betrays the author’s profound knowledge of Islamic theology, grammar, and exegesis. When it comes to the issue of the afterlife according to Muslims, he is more outspoken than Abū Qurra about the idea of men and women having been created equal. His reasoning is as follows: men and women are both *mukallaf*, obliged by Islamic law and accountable to God. In the afterlife, men are given *ḥūr al-‘ayn*, the heavenly maidens, for them to enjoy, while women not only lack that promise, but they will also find themselves without their husbands, for they will be too busy spending time with their new partners and “there is a bias (*tahāmul*) in that” (Masri 2011–2021, vol. 3, pp. 237–38). A hypothetical reply follows: it is likely that women will be with their men and enjoy the *ḥūr al-‘ayn* as well. But here a new bias comes to the surface, according to our author, a woman who did not marry during her life on earth will not be able to enjoy that situation. Moreover, how should one imagine a situation where the *ḥūr al-‘ayn* turn out to be much more beautiful than the wife? The man will no longer be held accountable under Islamic law, as in earthly life, and be susceptible to moral pressure to pay some attention to his wife as well.

This East Syrian author suggested Muslims do not have much more to lean on than their Qur’anic text. All they can do is argue that the heavenly rewards are true because they are promised in the Qur’ān and that they have to be accepted by faith. This argument, however, would be a valid point for Christians as well, according to the apologist. He says the same counts for himself with regard to the promise of a spiritual heaven in the Bible: he accepts this on faith (Masri 2011–2021, vol. 3, p. 238). As is often the case, the disputational stalemate is the end of the argument. This does not mean the argument is unresolved. Invalidating a polemical argument of the religious other is a victory for an apologist on the other side.

### 3. Concluding Discussion

In the pamphlet by Sayyid Ahmad Khan on the rights of women, described at the opening of this article, the author tried to accentuate the differences between two cultures and religions by accentuating the difference in the way they treat their women. Despite the distance between the two that he wants to underline, it is nevertheless the case that he constructed his discourse on a presumed communality: the belief that women *should* have rights equal to men.

The more ancient polemical texts reviewed in this article contain many topoi and arguments that are known on both sides and rehearsed and adjusted over the centuries, yet the ethical and philosophical starting points are hardly ever self-evident. One might argue that this is because these are not discussions about shared or diverging ethics to be begin with. These are texts that want to put the other religion in a bad light and in order to do so many themes and argumentative strategies are combined. Ethical arguments, including those about women, serve that ultimate purpose. They are interesting to observe and analyze because the negative portrayals of the other religion reflect back on the self. To what extent do women have the right to enjoy sexual intercourse? Why would remarrying after one's husband's death be immoral? How can we define gender equality, if the bodies of men and women are not the same? What is the importance of purity and how can it be defined? Although some of these seem modern questions and hence anachronistic ones, the texts do build their rejections of the other on norms that are answers to such questions. Looking at the assortment of topics, certain patterns are noticeable. Reprehensible customs and habits are mostly believed to be manmade and therefore not possibly part of God's will. Rather than claiming for example that Islamic divorce law is an invention and not a Divine command, the immorality of it is rhetorically accentuated and its consequences blown out of proportion in order for it to be convincingly dismissed as manmade. An appeal to the readers' outrage adds to the force of arguments. The human fingerprints which the polemicists claim to see in each other's laws are brought to light in the same way: certain reprehensible behaviors are labeled as not from God because they are invented, outdated, Jewish in origin, not based on Scripture, corrupted, unfair, filthy, or exaggerated. What the discussions of the rules for and customs of women achieve is not so much the refutation of the other religion as a sense of moral superiority that reinforces the envisioned appraisal of the other faith. The arguments and accusations that fly back and forth can only function if the reader is somehow convinced that the described behavior and/or treatment of women is the written or unwritten norm. Qualms about casual behavior, for example, women mingling with the other sex and members of other religious communities in taverns or bathhouses (Gottheil 1921; Cuffel 2009), do not appear, since they do not pertain to the norms of the faith but to the accidents of life. An exception is al-Jāhīz, who focuses on how Christian norms seem to be there for women to disregard. What the authors on both sides have in common is the notion that interaction with women should be regulated. It is not hard to see how the descriptions of women's affairs are also prescriptions. The way in which men and women got to know women from the other religion was through interaction in Muslim societies where Christians were often numerous. There is a wealth of fascinating literature on how complex and multifaceted interactions were, how the challenge of boundary keeping was constant and how absolute distinctions between the ways of life of Muslim and Christian women were absent (e.g., Simonsohn 2023; Al-Qattan 1999; Doumato 1991). Polemical literature in this regard served a specific purpose in the background, as it reinforced a clear image of whom one should not become.

**Funding:** The author gratefully acknowledges that research towards this paper was carried out under the auspices of the European Research Council (ERC)-funded Consolidator Grant 865067.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declare no conflicts of interest.

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