

**Early Christian Sects  
and Schisms in *Al-Milal wa al-Niḥal*:  
A Study on Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Karīm  
al-Shahrastānī**

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**Abstract**

Abū al-Faṭḥ Muḥammad Ibn ‘Abdul al-Karīm Ahmad al-Shahrastānī (1086/479–1153/548) was one of the most prominent, multifaceted and creative Muslim thinkers in Islamic Thought. He embodied the multi-disciplinary mastery and unity, personal integrity and courage of the Islamic religious-intellectual ideals. His contributions to scholarly works were manifold which cover a wide range of Islamic Thought including theology, philosophy and Qur’ānic sciences. Among his major works were those dealing with *tafsīr*, *kalām* and philosophy. This paper attempts to explore his

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*M. Azizah & Noor Shakirah / TAFHIM 8 (2015): 19–36*

contributions to *religionwissenschaft* with a specific reference to his observation on early Christian sects and schisms in his magnum opus, *al-Milal wa al-Nihal*.

#### **Keywords**

Shahrastānī, Christianity, sects, schisms, ʿĪsā, religion.

### **The life and works of Al-Shahrastānī**

**H**is full name as recorded by the Muslim biographers of learned men in Muslim history, is Abū al-Faḥḥ Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Karīm ibn Aḥmad Tāj al-Dīn al-Shahrastānī (d. 1153/548). His surname was Abū Muḥammad, but he is generally known as al-Shahrastānī. He also received other honorific titles such as the most meritorious man (*al-Afdal*) or the leader (*al-Imām*). Although most of the scholars agreed that he was born in the small city of Shahrastān, they had disagreement regarding the date of his birth. Shams al-Dīn Abū al-ʿAbbās Ahmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Khallikān (d. 1281/682) states that according to his own notes, al-Shahrastānī was born in 1076/469 and passed away in 1153/548. However, according to ʿAbd al-Karīm ibn Muḥammad al-Samʿānī (d. 1166/562), al-Shahrastānī himself, when asked, told him that he was born in 1086/479. Other authors give the dates 1074/467 and 1076/469 but the testimony of al-Samʿānī seems the most authoritative.

Most of al-Shahrastānī's principal masters were in their turn disciples of ʿAbd al-Mālīk ibn Yūsuf al-Juwaynī (d. 1085/478). In al-Shāfiʿī's law (*fiqh*), he was the pupil of Abū Muzaffar Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Khawāfi (d. 1106/500). He learned commentary of the Qurʾān (*tafsīr*) and theology (*kalām*) from Abū Qāsim Salmān ibn Nāsir al-Ansārī (d. 1118/412), and commentary of *Aḥādīth* (Prophetic Traditions) from Abū al-Ḥassan ʿAlī ibn Ahmad al-Madīnī (d. 1100/494).

*Early Christian Sects and Schisms in Al-Milal wa al-Nihal*

Al-Shahrastānī was responsible for a score of works, which cover a wide range of Islamic sciences including theology, philosophy and Qur'ānic sciences. Among his major works besides *al-Milal wa al-Nihal*, are those dealing with *tafsīr* such as *al-Manāhij wa al-Āyāt*, *Qisṣat Mūsā wa al-Khidir*, *Sharḥ Sūrat Yūsuf*, and *Mafātīh al-Asrār wa Maṣābih al-Abrār*;<sup>1</sup> with *kalām* such as *Mas'alah fī Ithbāt al-Ḥawhar al-Fard*, and *Nihāyat al-Iqdām fī Ilm al-Kalām*;<sup>2</sup> and with philosophy such as *Shubuhāt Aristātālīs wa Ibn Sīnā wa naqduhā* and *Muṣāra'at al-Falāsifah*.<sup>3</sup> The last two works are attacks against peripatetic philosophy as taught by Ibn Sīnā.

Despite these merits, al-Shahrastānī was nevertheless accused of having Shi'ite tendencies, especially in support of the Isma'īlites. Nonetheless, such accusations are refutable in view of the intense piety al-Shahrastānī manifested in most of his writings. For instance, in both *al-Milal wa al-Nihal* and *Nihāyat al-Iqdām fī Ilm al-Kalām*, al-Shahrastānī surveyed the full range of beliefs within Islam in order to make clear for others the nature of sectarian differences and their deviation from the path of Islam. Should he restrain himself from flailing at the weaknesses or excesses of sectarians, it is only because he possessed an implicit faith in the ability of his fellow Muslims to respond to the fair, even-handed treatment of those who differed from them. The charge that he was preoccupied with philosophy may be admitted, but it is no exaggeration to assert that for al-Shahrastānī, the best of philosophy is expressed in

1. Muḥammad 'Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī, *Mafātīh al-Asrār wa Maṣābih al-Abrār*, ed. 'Abd al-Muhsīn Jā'irī et al., 2 vols. (Teheran: Markaz Intishārat Nasakh Khuta, 1988).
2. Idem, *Nihāyat al-Iqdām fī Ilm al-Kalām*, ed. Alfred Guillaume (Cairo: Maktabat al-Thaqafah al-Diniyyah, n.d.).
3. Idem, *Struggling with the Philosopher, A Refutation of Avicenna's Metaphysics: A New Arabic Edition and English Translation of Muḥammad 'Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī's Kitāb al-Muṣāra'a*, ed. and trans. Wilferd Madelung and Toby Mayer (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001). For detailed accounts of his surviving works, see also Carl Brockelman, *Geschichte Der Arabischen Litteratur*, 2 volumes with 3 supplement bands (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1937), Supplement 1: 762–3.

religion, the best of religion in prophecy, the best of prophecy in Muḥammad and only the Muslims correctly interpret the revelation delivered to Muḥammad.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Al-Milal Wa Al-Nihal***

A number of writings have been credited to al-Shahrastānī, but the major source of his fame is the *al-Milal wa al-Nihal*, a monumental treatise on religious sects and philosophical groups. Its popularity in the medieval period is amply attested to by the existence of numerous studies in many libraries all over the world. In the book, al-Shahrastānī treats all the Muslim and non-Muslim sects as well as several philosophical positions known in his time with due balance and absence of vituperation. His intention, thus, is to highlight the historical account of the sects as well as to point out their emergence, survival and religious practices. Since his work was like a small but concise encyclopedia, al-Shahrastānī gives fair criticism on these sects. In addition, he makes a clear distinction between truth (*haqq*) and falsehood (*bāṭil*) which he expresses throughout his presentation of the sects in *al-Milal*.

Concerning his typology of world religious traditions and ideologies, al-Shahrastānī ranks each non-Muslim religious tradition and ideology according to its proximity to Islam. Based on the religious and quasi-religious groups known to him, he classifies the religious traditions of non-Muslims into four general categories. The first category comprises the recipients of revealed books (*kitāb munzal*), i.e., the Jews and Christians. The second consists of the recipients of scrolls (*suhuf*), i.e., the Zoroastrians, Sabians and Manicheans. The third constitutes those who subscribe to laws and binding

4. For detailed accounts of his life and works, see for instance: Muhammad ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī, *al-Milal wa al-Nihal*, ed. by Amīr ‘Alī Mahnā and ‘Alī Ḥasan Fā‘ūr, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Ma‘rifah, 1997), 1: 11–5; Zuhair al-Dīn al-Bayhaqī, *Tārīkh Hukamā’ al-Islām*, ed. by Muḥammad Kurd ‘Alī (Damascus: Majmā al-Lughah al-‘Arabiyyah, 1946), 141–2; and Khayr al-Dīn al-Ziriklī, *al-‘Ā‘ām: Qāmūs Tarājīm*, 8 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-‘Ilm li al-Malāyīn, 1984), 6: 215.

*Early Christian Sects and Schisms in Al-Milal wa al-Nihāl*

judgments without the benefit of a revealed book, i.e., the ancient Sabians, and the fourth category represents those who have neither a revealed book nor fixed laws, i.e., the ancient as well as the materialist philosophers, the star-worshippers and the Brahmans.<sup>5</sup>

Within this structure, al-Shahrastānī presents a vast range of data, as varied in quality as it is broad in scope. He takes into account the claims and arguments of all these religious-philosophical groups and then exhibits the irrational and illogical aspects of their ideas and beliefs. In terms of presenting the issue under debate, he directly proceeds to the main points, records the arguments of the opponents and then refutes them by means of his clear and strong presentation. The way he treats the sects is also consistent and systematic. For instance, all philosophies and religious systems that do not accept the phenomenon of prophecy are grouped together. Judaism and Christianity, due to their proximity to and affinity with Islam in their belief in God, Prophecy and the Scriptures, are dealt with more comprehensively than other religious traditions and philosophical ideologies. So far as his presentation of the religious scriptures of the Jews and Christians is concerned, his main criterion is that a scripture, which is revealed by God, cannot be inconsistent and contradictory in its contents and teaching.

Before turning to the early Christianity sects and schisms as perceived by al-Shahrastānī, it is noteworthy to briefly exhibit the features of *al-Naṣārā* (the Christians) as explicated in the Qurʾān.

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5. Al-Shahrastānī, *al-Milal*, 1: 49–50.

### Christians (*al-Naṣārā*) in the Qurʾān

The term *al-Naṣārā* occurs fourteen times in the Qurʾān.<sup>6</sup> In all the fourteen *surahs*<sup>7</sup> in which the term *al-Naṣārā* is employed, it refers to a group of people who believe in the Oneness of Allāh, the One Creator and the Provider of the Universe. They believe in the divine call of Israel’s prophets, in the revealed books of Allāh, such as the Torah and the Psalms of David, and in the religion of Prophet Ibrāhīm. However, as their masses and their main sects started to believe in the Trinity instead of the absolute unity of God, rejected the prophethood of Muḡammad, obsessed with ʿIsā and his miracles,<sup>8</sup> as well as deified him as the son of God, and as their religion began to suffer adulteration and modification, they were no longer true believers.<sup>9</sup>

Etymologically, the term *al-Naṣārā* is derived from the verb *naṣara* which signifies “to help or assist.”<sup>10</sup> However, pertaining to the technical meaning “*al-naṣārā*,” al-Ṭabarī offers three reasons why *al-naṣārā* is designated to this group

6. Muḡammad Fūʿad ʿAbd al-Bāqī, *al-Muṣam al-Mufahras lil Alfaz al-Qurʾān: bi ḡāṣṣat al-Maṣḡal-Sharīf* (n.p: Dār al-Fikr, 1994), 875–6.
7. See, for instance, *al-Baqarah* (2): 111, 113, 120, 135, and 140; *al-Māʾidah* (5): 14, 18, and 51; *al-Tawbah* (9): 30; as well as *al-Ḥajj* (22): 17.
8. For more details and critical study on the miracles of ʿIsā, see Abū al-Fidāʾ Ismāʿīl ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿAẓīm*, 4 vols. (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Kutub al-Thaqāfiyyah, 1994), 2: 485–90. See also Neal Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity: The Representation of Jesus in the Qurʾān and the Classical Muslim Commentaries* (Houndmills: Macmillan Press LTD, 1991), 142–54.
9. Abū Muḡammad ʿAlī ibn Hazm, *Kitāb al-Faṣl fi al-Milal wa al-Aḡwā wa al-Nihal*, ed. by Ahmad Shams al-Dīn, 3 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1999), 1: 64; and al-Shahrastānī, *al-Milal*, 1: 262–3.
10. Abū al-Husayn Ahmad ibn Fāris al-Lughawī, *Muḡmal al-Lughah*, ed. Zahr ʿAbd al-Muḡsin Sulṭān, 4 vols. (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Risālah, 1984), 3: 870; Husain ibn Muḡammad al-Rāḡhib al-Aṣḡānī, *al-Mufradāt fi ḡharīb al-Qurʾān: fi al-Lughah wa al-ʿAdab wa al-Tafsīr wa ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān*, ed. Muḡammad Khalīl ʿAytānī (Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrifah, 2001), 497; and Muḡammad ibn Muḡarram ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab*, ed. Amin Muḡammad ʿAbd al-Wahāb and Muḡammad al-Sadiq al-ʿUbaydī, 18 vols. (Beirut : Dār Iḡyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 1999), 14: 160–62.

*Early Christian Sects and Schisms in Al-Milal wa al-Niḥal*

of people. The first reason is that the term, one of whose root meanings in Arabic could be “to help,” or “to offer assistance,” is designated to the group due to their support (*nusrah*) for each other and their offer of mutual assistance (*tanāsūr*) among themselves, and above all, to Prophet ‘Isā. The second reason for such a term is due to their place which is called *Nāṣirah* (Nazareth), with Prophet ‘Isā himself being called *al-Nāṣirī* (the Nazarene). The third reason, however, is based on the question asked by Prophet ‘Isā to his disciples, “*man anṣārī ilā Allāh*” (who will be my helpers),<sup>11</sup> as recorded in *al-Ṣaff* (61):14.

Al-Ṭūsī agrees with al-Ṭabarī on the above explanation. Yet, al-Ṭūsī shows more inclination towards linguistic rather than geographical etymology. In other words, al-Ṭūsī is of the view that the term *al-naṣārā* is rooted in the verb *naṣara* (assist) rather than the village, which the peoples were associated with.<sup>12</sup> Al-Zamakhsharī, however, narrows the threefold etymological identification of *al-naṣārā* to a single one: that *al-naṣārā* is designated to the group due to the assistance provided to Prophet ‘Isā.<sup>13</sup> Successors like al-Shahrastānī, al-Rāzī and Ibn Kathīr, who spend some time enumerating various interpretations, still maintain that the term *al-naṣārā* most probably derives from the area called *Nāṣirah*.<sup>14</sup>

In view of all the Qur’ānic verses in which the term *al-Naṣārā* has been employed, some of the verses further clarify the position of the group and the most fundamental of which is in the following passage:

11. Abū Ja‘far Muhammad al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān fī Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, ed. Maḥmūd Shākir, 30 vols. (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 2001), 1: 252.
12. Abū Ja‘far Muhammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī, *al-Tibyān fī Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, ed. Aghā Buzruk al-Ṭahrānī, 10 vols. (Beirut: Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, n.d.), 1: 281–2.
13. Abū Qāsim Jār Allāh Maḥmūd ibn ‘Umar al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf ‘an Ḥaqā’iq Ghawāmid al-Tanzīl wa ‘Uyūn al-Aqāwīl fī waḥī al-Tāwīl*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Salām Shāhīn, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1995), 1: 148.
14. Al-Shahrastānī, *al-Milal*, 1: 262–3; al-Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, 16 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Ghad al-‘Arabī, 1991), 15: 523–4; and Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, 4: 361–2.

*M. Azizan & Noor Shakirah / TAFHIM 8 (2015): 19–36*

Verily, “those who have attained faith” (*inna alladhīna āmanū*) as well as “those who follow the “Jewish faith” (*wa alladhīna hādū*), and “the Christians” (*wa al-nasārā*) and “the Sabians” (*wa al-ṣābiʾīn*)—“all who believe in Allāh and the Last Day and work righteousness” (*man āmana billāh wa al-yawm al-ākhir wa ʿamila ṣālihān*)—shall have their reward with their Lord, on them shall be no fear nor shall they grieve.<sup>15</sup>

Al-Ṭabarī, in his treatment of the above passage, differentiates the faith of the Muslims from that of the Jews, Christians and Sabians. He explains that the phrase *inna alladhīna āmanū* (those who have attained faith) signifies the faith of Muslims that remains firm and steadfast in Muḥammad. In other words, there is no conversion among the Muslims in their faith as they do not change from one religion to another. Rather, their faith stands firm and unchanged. However, the belief of the Jews, Christians, and Sabians does involve a conversion or change from a former belief, that is, turning from a previous belief in their respective prophets to an acceptance of Muḥammad. Hence, should the Jews, Christians and Sabians place their faith in Muḥammad along with Muslims who believe in Allāh and the Last Day, they will be recompensed for their action in the hereafter.<sup>16</sup>

However, Ibn Taymiyyah is of the view that this passage does not praise either of them after their corruption. In fact, the meaning of the passage pertains only to the Muslims who believe in Muḥammad and that of the Jews, Christians and Sabians who follow their religion respectively before its corruption and alteration.<sup>17</sup> This, in turn, implies that should they remain steadfast with the original teachings of their respective prophets, they will submit to Islam and place faith in Muḥammad whence he is sent.

15. *Al-Baqarah* (2): 62.

16. Al-Ṭabarī, *Jamīʿ al-Bayān*, 1: 254. Cf. al-Ṭūsī, *al-Tibyān*, 1: 283–4; and al-Zamaksharī, *al-Kashshāf*, 1: 148–9.

17. Ahmad ibn ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm ibn Taymiyyah, *al-Jawāb al-Sahīh: A Muslim Theologian’s Response to Christianity*, ed. and trans. Thomas F. Michel S. J. (New York: Caravan Books, 1984), 246–7.



*Early Christian Sects and Schisms in Al-Milal wa al-Nihal*

By comparing the above two interpretations, it is evident that although there are subtleties between the two assessments, both scholars obviously are in agreement on one issue, that is, the acceptance of Muḥammad. As our particular interest is that of the Christians, we would like to point out that it is on this basis that al-Attas recurrently proffers that there are two Christianities. Expounding and elaborating the first group, al-Attas elucidates, that the group represents those who adhere to the pristine and true Christianity, which conformed to Islam. They are those of the true believers (*mu'min* and *muslim*) that believe in the original and true teachings of 'Isā before the advent of Islam,<sup>18</sup> such as *al-Hawāriyyūn*<sup>19</sup> (the disciples of 'Isā) as illustrated clearly in the Qur'ān, *al-Ṣaff* (61): 14.<sup>20</sup> Such recognition is due to their assistance, which they willingly and sincerely offer to 'Isā. They are the true adherents of 'Isā who believe in him as the prophet of Allāh who was sent to the Children of Israel. They believe in the authentic Evangel (*al-Injīl*), the revealed book sent upon 'Isā from Allāh. They help him in his lifetime and mission to deliver the revelation of Allāh and carry out his teachings and exercises after him truly and honestly. After the advent of Islam, should they have known the fact of Islam and should their belief (*īmān*) and submission (*islām*) was truly sincere, they would have embraced Islam.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, should these Christians still adhere to the bona fide teachings of 'Isā, they will submit themselves to Muḥammad. In so doing, they do not change their religion as it is part of their religion to place faith in Prophet Muḥammad, and to submit to his law whence he is sent. In fact, they would

18. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: ABIM, 1978; repr., Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1993), 20–21, hereinafter page reference is to the reprint edition.

19. Although the Qur'ān does not identify them by their names, some theologians do provide exhaustive commentaries on them. See for instance: Al-Ṭabarī, *Jamī' al-Bayān*, 3: 335–7, and 8: 102–4; ibn Ḥazm, *al-Faṣl*, 1: 288–90; and al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, 4: 234–5.

20. See, for instance, *Al Imrān* (3): 52, and *al-Mā'idah* (5): 111–2.

21. Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 20–21.

*M. Azizah & Noor Shakirah / TAFHIM 8 (2015): 19–36*

become true Muslims and would receive double reward in the hereafter. Allāh says:

But they are not all alike, among the People of the Book there are upright people who recite Allāh’s messages throughout the night, and prostrate themselves (before Him) (*Laysū sawā’ min Ahl al-Kitāb ummatun qāi’matun yatlūna āyāt Allāh anā’ al-layl wa hum yasjudūn*). They believe in Allāh and the Last Day, and enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong, and vie with one another in doing good works, and these are among the righteous. And whatever good they do, they shall never be denied the reward thereof, for Allāh has full knowledge of those who are conscious of Him.<sup>22</sup>

The second group, however, represents the Christians who from the very beginning have altered the original, and departed from the true teaching of ‘Isā. In a strict sense, it is they who launched a series of nuisance attacks against the Muslims from the early time of the Prophet Muḥammad until the present time. The following Qur’ānic passage, however, will suffice to exemplify this point of view:

And (likewise) from those who say, “behold we are Christians,” We have accepted a solemn pledge, and they too have forgotten much of what they had been told to bear in mind (*Wa min alladhīna qālū innā al-Naṣārā akhadhnā mīthāqahum fanasū ḥazān mimmā dhakarū bihi*)—wherefore We have given rise among them to enmity and hatred, (to last) until Resurrection Day (*fa’aghraynā baynahum al-’adāwah wa al-baghdā’ ilā yawm al-qiyāmah*), and in time Allāh will cause them to understand what they have contrived.<sup>23</sup>

22. *Āl Imrān* (3): 113–5. See *ibid.*, 110 and 199, as well; and also *Fāṭir* (35): 32.

23. *Al-Mā’idah* (5): 14. See *ibid.*, 13, 18, 51, 72 and 73, as well; and also *al-Baqarah* (2): 111–113, 120 and 135.

*Early Christian Sects and Schisms in Al-Milal wa al-Niḥal*

The Christians claim that they are the bona fide adherents of ʿĪsā. Yet the Qurʾān elliptically rejects their assertion because they have wrongfully and intentionally elevated ʿĪsā to the status of divinity. This act of belief is considered an act of concocting polytheism (*ibtadaʿū al-shirk*). By virtue of having gone astray from the divine teachings of ʿĪsā, and thus from the true faith in Allāh, Allāh has promised them enmity and hatred against each other and they are subjected to continuous mutual persecution and unceasing wars until the Judgment Day. They were the ones who influenced and shaped Western Christianity, the Christianity now known to us. Since their holy scripture, the Evangel, is rooted in partly from the genuine and true revelation of ʿĪsā, the Qurʾān classifies them as belonging to the People of the Book (*Ahl al-Kitāb*).<sup>24</sup>

Al-ʿAttas also espouses that between the two groups, one of them does not profess real belief in the Trinity, Incarnation, Redemption and other dogma related to these doctrines. Instead, they privately profess belief in Allāh alone and in the Prophet ʿĪsā. They set up regular prayers to Allāh and do good deeds in the way they are spiritually led to do. While in this condition of faith they are truly and sincerely unaware of Islam and of the Prophet Muḥammad, or they might have known Islam, yet they have acknowledged it wrongly due to devious confusions caused by their leaders who not only suppress the truth of the Prophet Muḥammad, but also conceal the veracity of Islam. These Christians are those referred to in the Qurʾān as the nearest in love to the believers in Islam. To date, continues al-ʿAttas, these Christians and other People of the Book like them are found among mankind and it is to them sometimes the term muʾmin (believer) is applied.<sup>25</sup> The following Qurʾānic passages describe clearly the features of this group:

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24. Al-ʿAttas, *Islam and Secularism*, 21.

25. *Ibid.*

*M. Azizah & Noor Shakirah / TAFHIM 8 (2015): 19–36*

And thou wilt surely find that of all people they who say, “behold we are Christians,” come closest to feeling affection for those who believe (in this divine writ) (*wa latajīdanna aqrabahum mawaddatan lilladhīna āmanū alladhīna qālū innā Nasārā*). This is so because there are priests and monks among them and because these are not given to arrogance. For when they come to understand what has been bestowed from on high upon this apostle, thou canst see their eyes overflow with tears because they recognize something of its truth and they say: “O Sustainer we do believe make us one then with all who bear witness to the truth” (*rabbānā āmannā faktubnā ma‘a al-shāhidīn*). “And how could we fail to believe in Allāh and in whatever truth has come unto us, when we so fervently desire that our Sustainer count us among the righteous” (*wa mā lanā lā nu‘min billāh wa mā jā’anā min al-haq wa natma‘u an yudkhillanā rabbunā ma‘a al-qawm al-sālihīn*). And for this their belief Allāh will reward them with gardens through which running waters flow therein to abide, for such requital of the doers of good whereas they who are bent on denying the truth and giving the lie to Our messages—they are destined for the blazing fire.<sup>26</sup>

The aforementioned discussion serves as a nutshell background to the following early Christian sects and schisms as perceived by al-Shahrastānī and Ibn Ḥazm. Although some of these sects have already been extinct, they still serve as historical and factual evidences of sects and schisms in Christianity.

### **Descriptions of Christian Sects and Schisms**

The Christians are split into 72 sects. The presentation of Christian sects and schism, however, are divided into two parts. The first part comprises the Unitarian sects whereas the second comprises the Trinitarian sects:

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26. *Al-Mā‘idah* (5): 82–6.

*Early Christian Sects and Schisms in Al-Milal wa al-Nihal*

*Unitarian Sects*

To this group belong the three sects, namely: the Arians; the Paulinists; and the Macedonians. What follows are brief descriptions of each sect.

The Arians (*Aṣḥāb Ārīūs*)

They were the adherents of Ārīūs ibn Asfānūs ibn Batlinus (d. 336 C.E.), also known as Barshīd by his tribe. He was a priest in the city of Qisīs in Alexandria and a contemporary of Constantine, the founder of Constantinople and the first Roman emperor who accepted Christianity and became his follower. He was also a Roman scholar and a collector of many books who graduated from the School of Theology (*Madrasah al-Lāhūtiyyah*). It is said that he held one book, which tells about the descendants of Satan and Jinnee, their places, branches, and works in the whole region. His sect believed in the unity of Allāh and held ʿĪsā as a human servant, a creature and Word of Allāh through whom Allāh created the universe.<sup>27</sup>

The Paulinists (*Ashāb al-Būlisiyyah al-Shamshātī*)

They were the followers of Paul of Samosata, a bishop of Metropolitan of Antioch before the emergence of the Trinitarian Christianity. This sect still retained the original teachings of ʿĪsā. They believed in the pure and exact monotheism and placed faith in ʿĪsā as a servant of Allāh and His prophet. Allāh has created ʿĪsā from the womb of his mother, Maryam without any participation of a male. Hence, ʿĪsā is a natural human being and there is no divinity in him.<sup>28</sup>

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27. Ibn Ḥazm, *al-Faṣl*, 1: 64.

28. Ibid.

*M. Azizan & Noor Shakirah / TAFHIM 8 (2015): 19–36*

### The Macedonians (*Ashāb Maqdūniūs*)

They were the adherents of Macedonius, a bishop of Constantinople after the emergence of the Trinitarian Christianity. This sect believed in the unity of Allāh and held that ʿIsā is a human being, a created servant, and a prophet of Allāh like the rest of the messengers. To them, ʿIsā was also the Holy Spirit (*Rūh al-Qudus*) and the Word of Allāh (*Kalimat Allāh*). They believed that Allāh created both the Holy Spirit and the Word of Allāh.<sup>29</sup>

### *Trinitarian Sects*

Under this group, at least eight sects can be identified, i.e.: the Collyridians; the Melchites; the Nestorians; the Jacobites; the Julianistes; the Apollinaristes; the Sabelliens; and the Photiniens. Brief explanations of them are as follows:

#### The Collyridians (*Al-Barbarāniyyah*)

This sect believed that both ʿIsā and his mother are deities other than Allāh. Ibn Ḥazm is of the view that this sect is already extinct.<sup>30</sup>

#### The Melchites (*Al-Malkāniyyah*)

The Melchites originated from Rome. They are the religious rite of all Christian kings and their people of all Christendom except those of Ethiopia and Nubia. All Christians of Africa, Sicily, Andalus and Syria belong to this group. Their belief is that God means three things: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. All of them are eternal. Maryam gives birth to the eternal god who is both the divine and the human. Hence, ʿIsā is truly god and truly man. Their belief is that the Word of God has united

29. Ibid., 65. Cf. al-Shahrastānī, *al-Milal*, 1: 265.

30. Ibn Ḥazm, *al-Faṣl*, 1: 65.

*Early Christian Sects and Schisms in Al-Milal wa al-Niḥal*

with ʿĪsā’s body and his divinity like an amalgamation of milk and water. It was the human in him that was crucified and killed and nothing happened to the divine in him. Members of this sect also have their own perspectives on Judgment Day. They believe that on Judgment Day, man would arise but only with his soul and not with the body. The punishment for wickedness is abject misery whereas for the good is happiness and joy. They also repudiate the activity of eating, drinking and marriage in heaven.<sup>31</sup>

The Nestorians (*Al-Nastūriyyah*)

They are named after *Nastūr* or Nestorius, the bishop of Constantinople. They interpret the Evangel using their minds. Their belief is that God is one and consists of three substances but these substances are not His additional essence. These three substances are “existence,” “knowledge” and “life.” The Word of God has incarnated in ʿĪsā’s body, but neither as an amalgamation as claimed by the Melchites, nor conspicuousness as asserted by the Jacobites. Rather, it united with his body like the rays of sun that shine on and illuminate crystal glass.

Members of the sect also maintain that Allāh begot the deity but He did not beget the man. This deity then incarnated with ʿĪsā’s body when he was born. Hence, ʿĪsā is a possessor of both deity and human nature. His body is constituted of two elements which are the eternal and temporal substance. He is the true god and the true man and both the characteristics are one in his body. They also differ from the Melchites and Jacobites on the issue of his crucifixion. They say that ʿĪsā is crucified in his human nature and not in his divine nature, for he is a deity and a deity does not feel pain.

Some among them also opine that Allāh is one. ʿĪsā comes from the Virgin Mary. He is a pious and mortal man. Due to his obedience, Allāh granted him His grace and

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31. Ibid.; and al-Shahraṣṭānī, *al-Milal*, 1: 266–8.

*M. Azizan & Noor Shakirah / TAFHIM 8 (2015): 19–36*

appointed him as His son. Hence, he is appointed as the Son of Allāh, not through birthright or incarnation, but due to his obedience to Allāh. The Nestorians also have their own view on religious practices. They said that should a man endeavours to worship Allāh, avoids eating meat and refuses to have sexual contacts, his essence will be purified. He will then ascend to heaven and see Allāh with his naked eye. All the secrets of the earth and heaven will be revealed before him. Aside from this, there is also a report saying that some of the Nestorians refuse to believe in the allegorical expression and they agree upon the divine decree as understood by the Qadarites. The group is mostly found in Syria, Iraq and Iran of today.<sup>32</sup>

The Jacobites (*Al-Ya‘qūbiyyah*)

They are named after Ya‘qūb al-Bardha‘ānī, or Jacob Baradaeus @ Baradei in English, a bishop in Constantinople. They maintain that ‘Isā himself is Allāh and that Allāh died when He was crucified and killed. After this assassination, the whole universe was without its Provider and Maintainer for three days. Then Allāh rose up and returned to His place. Allāh then became originated and the originated became eternal. It was Allāh who was conceived and carried in Maryam’s womb. Hence, ‘Isā is truly god whose appearance are of divine nature and human nature. Due to this combination, he, thus, possesses one element, which makes him the true god and the true man. This process happens neither by means of the incarnation nor by part of it. He is Allāh, he is man and both of them are one according to their belief. In a strict sense, they aver that ‘Isā is Allāh. They live mostly in Ethiopia, Sudan and part of Egypt.<sup>33</sup>

32. On such descriptions, see ibn Ḥazm, *al-Faṣl*, 1: 65; and al-Shahrastānī, *al-Milal*, 1: 268–70.

33. For details, see ibn Ḥazm, *al-Faṣl*, 1: 66–7; and al-Shahrastānī, *al-Milal*, 1: 270–72.



*Early Christian Sects and Schisms in Al-Milal wa al-Niḥal*

The Julianistes (*Al-Ilyāniyyah*)

This sect got its name from a place called *Alyān*. They held that Maryam was not pregnant for nine months. She only conceived ʿĪsā in her womb like a flow of water. That is to say that Allāh blew His Word, ʿĪsā, into Maryam’s ear and simultaneously Maryam then gave birth to ʿĪsā.<sup>34</sup>

The Apollinaristes (*Al-Bālyārasīyyah*)

They were the people who deviated from the Shiʿites *Bābilūdūs*. They held ʿĪsā as a father of flaming fire, which is separated from the huge body of fire. They also believed that both ʿĪsā and Mary are deities other than Allāh.

The Sabelliens (*Al-Sabāliyyah*)

The sect was also known as *al-Sabāliyūsīyyah*, a name attributed to its founder, Sabiliyyūs from *Qasāwasah*, Egypt. They held that Allāh punished the Israelites with mosquitoes with an appearance of a Father. Sometimes He will become like a human being with the appearance of a Son. He will then appeared as a Holy Ghost when He incarnated with the prophets.

The Photiniens (*Al-Būṭīnūsīyyah*)

They held that Allāh is the Father and ʿĪsā has incarnated with Him. Hence, ʿĪsā is the Son of Allāh but he suffered and felt pain like other human beings.

### Conclusion

In al-Shahrastānī’s view, the Christians are not disbelievers on the basis that they are the holders of revealed books whose

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34. Al-Shahrastānī, *al-Milal*, 1: 265, n. 4.

teachings are monotheistic from the very beginning. Instead, they are misbelievers in the sense that they refuse to accept the truth of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him). Due to this position and as the holder of revealed books, the Quran calls them the People of the Book. Although dichotomised into sects and schisms with manifold doctrines, most of the Muslim scholars are of the view that they have not reached the stage of polytheism and thus do not belong to the category of the Polytheists. This is due to the fact that they are originally monotheistic, and thus are not identical to the polytheists who worship idols from the very beginning. Indeed, they have committed polytheism by associating Allah with partners and sons, yet this act of polytheism is nothing but an act of concocting polytheism (*ibtada'ū al-shirk*) and not the act of committing polytheism itself. Despite the differences in belief, it is extremely imperative to note that Islam gives them rights to exist and freedom to exercise their religious practices. Such an environment of religious freedom given to them is a clear indication that Islam is a religion of tolerance with other religious traditions.