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ABU OSMAN AL-JAHIZ'S POLEMIC REGARDING CHRISTIANS IN IX

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Abstract. During the Abbasid period, representatives of other nations also participated alongside the Arabs in the development of Arabic literature. Baghdad, as a cosmopolitan city, embraced various ethnic and religious communities. On the other hand, Muslim peoples living over a vast area stretching from the borders of France to China contributed their share to the common cultural heritage. But even though this contribution originated in the Arabic language and was in the spirit of Islam, each nation, each society added its ethnic shades to the all-Muslim culture, brought different notes to the Arabic literature with elements related to its past culture, religious customs and traditions, and way of thinking.

If in the first phase of the Abbasid period, non-Arab tendencies prevailed and criticized the past and traditions of the Arabs through satire, in the second phase starting from the third decade of the 9th century, Arab nationalists began to criticize the non-Arab peoples, especially the Persians, attempting to prove their ethnic superiority and ancient cultures. In religious-ethnic discussions, the attitude towards Christians had a special place. Thus, during the Abbasid era, inter-religious relations were not rooted only on the basis of tolerance, but sometimes moved to the level of heated discussions and even religious conflicts. These can be grouped as follows:

- The Arabic literature of the Middle Ages has acquired the character of the all-Muslim literature created by various ethnic and religious societies since the Abbasid period.
- Christian scholars and writers played an important role in the cultural life of the Abbasid period.
- Although some territories incorporated into the Arab-Islamic world as a result of the conquests belonged to Christians, who were considered “People of the Book”, a strong process of Arabization occurred in these regions, ultimately leading to the emergence of Arab-Islamic culture there.

Key words: Abu Osman al-Jahiz, ar-Radd ala-n-nasara, Christian population living under Abbasid rule, polemics of Arab authors regarding Christians, multicultural Abbasid society.

Introduction. The religious diversity of the Abbasid period was reflected in a number of works written at that time. One of these works is "الرد على النصارى" (أبو عثمان عمرو بن بحر بن محبوب البصري) (ar-Radd ala-n-nasara) – “Response to Christians” by Abu Osman al-Jahiz, one of the encyclopedic minds of the Middle Ages. Jahiz's appeal to this topic was related to the state of the Abbasid society. It is known that Islam did not touch the religion of the Jews and Christians, who were the people of the book, they have come under the protection of Muslims by paying a life tax like *ahlu-z-zimma* (أهل الذمة). Since the Umayyads were satisfied with this tax, they were not interested in reducing the number of the Christian population at the expense of those who worshiped Islam. Before Islam, Christians of the eastern provinces were under the patronage of the Sassanids. In the West, there was the Byzantine Empire, which was ambitious in spreading Christianity. The emergence of the new religion led many Christians to accept the protection of the Islamic state. The Umayyads, who expanded the borders of this state to endless territories, did not have much interest in the conversion of the people of the book to Islam. During the Abbasid period, however, the situation changed: the socio-political and economic status of those who accepted Islam improved significantly. For this reason, many Christians converted to Islam, which caused concern among Christian religious leaders (Platt and Gibson, 2018). Such a concern, in turn, created polemics between Christians and Muslims.

It is known that al-Jahiz, who joined the Mu'tazili (المعتزلة) sect, created his own direction – al-Jahiziya (الجاحظية). The works of the writer, one of the ideologists of the Mu'tazila, reflect Mu'tazilism

through their methodology. Thus, most of al-Jahiz's works are polemical in spirit. Throughout the work, the writer enters into a dispute with his opponents, expresses his opinion and thoughts. One of such question-and-answer and discussion works is "الرد على النصارى" (ar-radd ala-n-nasara) – "Response to Christians". Although the writer does not indicate a specific name, he enters into a dispute with supporters of Christianity. It turns out that the Christians with whom he is arguing oppose a number of provisions of Islam, claiming that these provisions do not convey the truth. In response, the writer opposes the fallacies of Christians from their books, stating that these fallacies lead to heresy. On the other hand, Jahiz stands as a defender of Islam and defends a number of provisions reflected in the Qur'an regarding Judaism and Christianity.

Discussion.

1. Al-Jahiz's views on Christians

The above-mentioned work of Al-Jahiz interests us from the point of view of reflecting the religious diversity of the Abbasid era. This diversity is reflected in attitudes towards various religious doctrines. Let's take a look at the excerpt directed against Muslims in the language of the following Christians:

"وذكرتم أنهم قالوا: زعمتم أن عيسى تكلم في المهد، ونحن على تقديمنا له، وتقريبنا لأمره وإفراطنا بزعمكم فيه، على كثرة عددنا وتفاوت بلادنا واختلافنا فيما بيننا، لا نعرف ذلك ولا ندعيه، وكيف ندعيه ولم نسمعه عن سلف ولا ادعاه منا مدع. ثم هذه اليهود لا تعرف ذلك، وتزعم أنها لم تسمع به إلا منكم، ولا تعرفه المجوس، ولا الصابئون، ولا عباد البددة من الهند ... (Al-Sharqawi, 1991) "وغيرهم، ولا الترك والخزر ..."

"You (Muslims) claim that Jesus Christ spoke when he was in the cradle. We are not aware of such a claim, even though we are of the religion of Christ and are close to him. However, we as Christians are more in number and our countries are different from your countries. We have never heard such a claim from our predecessors. Such a claim is also unknown to the Jews. They say they heard it from you. The Magi, Sabeans, Buddhists, Hindus, Turks, and Khazars also know nothing about this".

This part of the work is of great importance and reflects the ethnic and religious diversity of the Abbasid society. Here, alongside the Muslim, Christian, and Jewish religions, we see the Magi (worshippers of Zoroastrianism), the Sabeans, and the Buddhists (عباد البددة). In addition, the writer mentions the Turks, Hindus, and Khazars as well. What is important is that all these communities started arguing and expressed their opinions about Jesus speaking in the cradle. The mosques of Baghdad come to life, where religious and philosophical debates are boiling before the eyes of man.

The relationship between Muslims and representatives of different religions in the work is interesting. Why were Christians treated better during the Abbasid period than Jews? What factors determine the relationship between individual religious communities? Jahiz turns to history and writes:

"فلما صار المهاجرون لليهود جيرانا، وقد كانت الأنصار متقدمة الجوار، مشاركة في الدار، حسدتهم اليهود على النعمة في الدين، والاجتماع بعد الافتراق، والتواصل بعد التقاطع، ومالئوا الأعداء والحسدة، فجمعوا كيدهم، وبذلوا أنفسهم وأموالهم في قتالهم، وإخراجهم من ديارهم، وطال ذلك واستفاض فيهم وظهر، وترادف لذلك الغيظ، وتضاعف البغض، وتمكن الحقد وكانت النصارى لبعد ديارهم، من مبعث النبي ﷺ ومهاجره، لا يتكلفون طعنا، ولا يثيرون كيذا، ولا يجمعون على حرب." (Al-Sharqawi, 1991)

"The emigrants (who had migrated from Mecca) became neighbors to the Jews. They lived in the houses of the helpers. The Jews were jealous of the gift of Islam to them. It was not their eyes that the people who had once fallen apart should come together. They plotted and spent their wealth and lives in hostility against the Muslims. They tried to expel the Muslims (from Medina), and wrath, anger, and hatred filled their hearts. However, the Christians lived far from the areas where Islam originated and from the Prophet (PBUH). They did not insult the Prophet or devise malicious plans like the Jews, nor did they start fighting against the Muslims".

Thus, from the work of Al-Jahiz it can be seen that the attitude towards Christians at the time of his life was much better than towards the Jews. Al-Jahiz states that its roots are connected to the history of Medina after the migration of Islam. It is known that before the migration, the Jewish tribes in

Yathrib (Medina) held great power. They skillfully took advantage of the hostility between the Aws and Khazraj tribes.

O. G. Bolshakov indicates that after the Hijrah, the Jews from the Banu Nadir tribe allied with the Meccans and attempted to expel the Muslims from Medina. The Jewish poet Kab ibn Al-Ashraf (كعب بن الأشرف) was murdered for this reason (Gasimova, 2019). It is for this reason that Al-Jahiz declares that the hearts of Muslims were broken against Jews, and they were more gentle with Christians. He also does not forget to mention the migration of the Muslims to Abyssinia and how the Abyssinian ruler received them with kindness. In his view, as people's hearts become lenient toward one group, they grow hostile toward its enemies:

"...وكلما لانت القلوب لقوم غلظت على أعدائهم...." (Al-Sharqawi, 1991)

Al-Jahiz shows that some people are looking for an expression of good attitude towards Christians in the Qu'ran:

كَلَّا سَيَكْفُرُونَ بِعِبَادَتِهِمْ وَيَكُونُونَ عَلَيْهِمْ ضِدًّا (28) أَلَمْ تَرَ أَنَّا أَرْسَلْنَا الشَّيَاطِينَ عَلَى الْكَافِرِينَ تَؤْزُرُهُمْ أَرْجَا (38) فَلَا تَعْجَلْ عَلَيْهِمْ
إِنَّمَا نَعُدُّ لَهُمْ عَذَابًا (48) يَوْمَ نَحْشُرُ الْمُتَّقِينَ إِلَى الرَّحْمَنِ وَفْدًا (58)

82. No! Those "gods" will deny their worship of them and will be against them opponents [on the Day of Judgement].

83. Do you not see that We have sent the devils upon the disbelievers, inciting them to [evil] with [constant] incitement?

84. So be not impatient over them. We only count out to them a [limited] number.

85. On the Day We will gather the righteous to the Most Merciful as a delegation (Quran, Surah Maryam 19)

But Al-Jahiz states that Christians are not meant as a people in the ayahs. In his opinion, this specifically refers to the Christians who had a positive attitude toward the Prophet during the period of his prophethood. Because already in the time of Al-Jahiz, Christians who entered into disputes with Muslims represented various branches of this religion. Al-Jahiz mentions the Nestorians (نسطورية), the Melkites (معلكية), the Jacobites (يعاقبة) (Al-Sharqawi, 1991). This fact itself testifies to how different branches of Christianity itself were represented in the Abbasid society. Al-Jahiz continued and stated that at the time of the formation of Islam, the two main rulers of the Arabs were Christians: These were the Lakhmids and the Ghassanids:

"كما ذكر اليهود أنه جاء الإسلام وملوك العرب رجلان غساني ولخمي، وهما نصرانيان، وقد كانت العرب تدين لهما، وتؤدي الإتاوة لهما، فكان تعظيم قلوبهم لهما راجعا إلى تعظيم دينهما".

(Al-Sharqawi, 1991)

"Jews note that at the time of the formation of Islam, the Arabs had two rulers: Ghassanid and Lakhmid rulers. Both of them were Christians. The Arabs obeyed them and paid tribute. Bowing to these people led to bowing to their religion".

Al-Jahiz mentions the spread of Christianity among Arab tribes before Islam. He states that Christianity was widespread among the Lakhm, Ghassan, Guda'a, Tayy, Rabia, and Taghlib tribes.

After mentioning all this, al-Jahiz returns to his time. It is known that the main opponent of the Abbasid state was the Christian Byzantine Empire. It was not just a competition, it was accompanied by constantly renewed battles. Notably, the Abbasid Caliph al-Mu'tasim Billah (المعتصم بالله) is known for his successful military campaigns against the Byzantine Empire (e.g., the conquest of Amorium). It is also known that during the early period of Abbasid rule, the Shu'ubiyya movement had gained strength. The Shu'ubiyya claimed to possess a nobler lineage, a more authentic heritage, and to be bearers of a richer cultural legacy compared to the nomadic Arabs. The Persians were proud of their ancient states, and the Greeks were proud of their philosophical works.

Apparently, during the time of Al-Jahiz, Christians were proud to be carriers of the ancient Roman-Greek cultural heritage. In this case, al-Jahiz counters their claims and points out to Christians that Greek culture has a different meaning than Roman culture:

"ولو علمت العوام أن النصارى والروم ليست لهم حكمة ولا بيان، ولا بعد روية، إلا حكمة الكف، من الخراط والنجر والتصوير، وحياسة البزيون، لأخرجتهم من حدود الأدباء، ولمحتهم من ديوان الفلاسفة والحكماء؛ لأن كتاب المنطق والكون والفساد، وكتاب العلوي، وغير ذلك، لأرسطاطاليس، وليس برومي ولا نصراني. وكتاب المجسطي لبطليموس، وليس برومي ولا نصراني. وكتاب إقليدس لإقليدس، وليس برومي ولا نصراني. وكتاب الطب لجالينوس، ولم يكن روميا ولا نصرانيا. وكذلك كتب ديمقراط وبقرط وأفلاطون، وفلان وفلان. وهؤلاء ناس من أمة قد بادوا وبقيت آثار عقولهم، وهم اليونانيون، ودينهم غير دينهم، وأدبهم غير أدبهم. أولئك علماء، وهؤلاء صناع أخذوا كتبهم لقرب الجوار، وتداني الدار، فمنها ما أضافوه إلى أنفسهم، ومنها ما حولوه إلى ملتهم. إلا ما كان من مشهور كتبهم، ومعروف حكمهم، فإنهم حين لم يقدروا على تغيير أسمائها زعموا أن اليونانيين قبيل من قبائل الروم، ففخروا (Al-Sharqawi, 1991) بأديانهم على اليهود..."

"I wish people knew that Christians and Romans had neither wisdom (philosophy) nor declaration (art of words), nor foresight. Among them, only a man named Bizyun had exceptional skill in masonry, carpentry, painting, and weaving. I take them out of the ranks of philosophers and writers. They have no place in literature and philosophy. For it is Aristotle who is the author of books on logic, the universe, corruption, and celestial bodies. Aristotle was neither a Roman nor a Christian. Ptolemy, who wrote the Almagist, was neither a Christian nor a Roman. There is also the book of Euclid. Euclid was neither a Christian nor a Roman. In the same way, Democritus, Hippocrates, Plato were not Romans or Christians. These individuals have perished, but their intellectual contributions belong to a living nation. They are Greeks. Neither their religion nor their literature has any connection with the Christians. They were all artists and scientists. Christian Romans adopted their works when they lived next door to the Greeks. The Romans sometimes made additions to these books, sometimes they tried to change them. When they failed to do this, they claimed that "the Greeks are a branch of the Romans" and then boasted in front of the Jews.

The main thing in this passage is that al-Jahiz considered the Greeks to be a lost people. It is known that an important branch of ancient culture is associated with the name of the Greeks. The Romans rendered incomparable services in statecraft and the Greeks in philosophy. Apparently, in the ninth century Abbasid society, the Greeks were also presented as Roman-Christians. All of them collectively represented the Christian Roman-Byzantine Empire, the main political rival of the Arab Caliphate, for which al-Jahiz was a passionate advocate. Al-Jahiz's opposition to Christians was primarily due to this bigotry.

Another reason for al-Jahiz's opposition to the Christians was his Mu'tazilism. The Mu'tazilites were completely opposed to attributing human traits to God and the idea that humans are manifestations of God. Al-Jahiz states that "the religion of the Christians resembles the religion of the heretics. They even remind of materialists. Christians sow the seeds of doubt and wonder among people. You will not find a people more inclined to heresy than them". (Al-Sharqawi, 1991).

Al-Jahiz opposes the doctrine of Christians that Jesus is the son of God. In this matter, he also reflects the opinion of the other side according to his own method. According to Christians, if Muslims accept Prophet Abraham as Khalilullah (friend of God), why do they not want to see Jesus as the son of God? (Al-Sharqawi, 1991). According to al-Jahiz, the main mistake of Christians is that they literally understand that Jesus is called "the son of God" in the Bible, they do not understand that the word has a figurative meaning. Al-Jahiz reflects the Islamic worldview and states that God cannot have his own son, nor can God adopt someone as a son (Al-Sharqawi, 1991)

قُلْ هُوَ اللَّهُ أَحَدٌ (1) اللَّهُ الصَّمَدُ (2) لَمْ يَلِدْ وَلَمْ يُولَدْ (3) وَلَمْ يَكُنْ لَهُ كُفُوًا أَحَدٌ (4)

Say, "He is Allah, [who is] One

Allah, the Eternal Refuge.

He neither begets nor is born,

Nor is there to Him any equivalent." (Surah Ikhlas, 112)

On the other hand, the notion of considering Jesus as God is also condemned in the work. Al-Jahiz states that Jesus addresses the apostles as "my brothers" in the Gospels. If Jesus is God, then should the apostles be considered brothers of God, or are they Gods themselves?

Al-Jahiz states that the attribution of anthropomorphic adjectives to God originates from Jewish religious books. In Jewish literature, Ezra is called the son of God. It is stated that God's hands are tied (مغلوقة – maghlūqa). Under the influence of this, Christians also claimed that Jesus was the son of God:

وَقَالَتِ الْيَهُودُ عَزْرَ بْنَ اللَّهِ وَقَالَتِ النَّصَارَى الْمَسِيحُ ابْنُ اللَّهِ ذَلِكَ قَوْلُهُمْ بِأَفْوَاهِهِمْ يُضَاهِئُونَ قَوْلَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا مِنْ قَبْلُ قَاتَلَهُمُ اللَّهُ أَنَّى يُؤْفَكُونَ (03)

The Jews say, “Ezra is the son of Allah”; and the Christians say, “The Messiah is the son of Allah.” That is their statement from their mouths; they imitate the saying of those who disbelieved [before them]. May Allah destroy them; how are they deluded? (Surah Taubah, 9)

The condemnation of the Christian trinity in the Qur'an does not escape al-Jahiz's attention.

لَقَدْ كَفَرَ الَّذِينَ قَالُوا إِنَّ اللَّهَ ثَالِثُ ثَلَاثَةٍ وَمَا مِنْ إِلَهٍ إِلَّا إِلَهٌ وَاحِدٌ وَإِنْ لَمْ يَنْتَهُوا عَمَّا يَقُولُونَ لَيَمَسَّنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا مِنْهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ (37)

They have certainly disbelieved who say, “Allah is the third of three.” And there is no god except one God. And if they do not desist from what they are saying, there will surely afflict the disbelievers among them a painful punishment. (Surah Al-Maidah 5)

2. Jahiz's attitude to the role of minority Christians in Muslim society

All these polemics reflected in the work reflect the intellectual picture of the Abbasid society. This was a period when extensive discussions and debates were opened in Islam as a result of the translation of Greek philosophical works. These disputes also indicate the extreme convergence of different religions. The heretical movements arose precisely from the changes in religious concepts, which were influenced by other religions. Previous scientific studies note that heresy emerged under the influence of Zoroastrianism. Medieval Arab authors, while connecting the meaning of “zindiq” with Persian beliefs, emphasize that the root of the word is the word “zand”, which means an interpretation of the Avesta. Ibn Manzur points out that the Persians referred to the commentaries written on the Avesta as “zand”. These interpretations sometimes did not correspond with the general content and ideas of the Avesta and reflected distorted, heretical ideas. They referred to those who deviated from Zoroastrianism and engaged in heresy as *zandi* (يذند). In this way, the interpreters who have misinterpreted the Avesta according to their own desires and distanced themselves from its true essence are meant. Later, the Arabs used this word, which they inherited from the Persians, to express those who worshiped dualism. Thus, the term that once referred to those who opposed Zoroastrianism transformed into an expression denoting those who did not adhere to Islamic laws in Abbasid society (Damirova, 2022).

The opening of such a polemic by the Islamic thinker against the Christian faith is of interest from the point of view of reflecting the mental picture of the time. From al-Jahiz's work, it can be inferred that although the Christians were associated with heresy and innovation in the Islamic context, they were able to hold high positions in the administrative system.

Christians served as secretaries to sultans and practiced medicine and pharmacy for those in positions of authority. For this reason, their influence in society was stronger. However, the Jews were, at most, engaged in tanning and butchery (Al-Sharqawi, 1991).

Al-Jahiz considers entering into marriage of people of different religions as one of the main means of mixing people. In this area, he criticizes the Jews because they do not intermarry with other nations. Al-Jahiz considers it an abnormal case, far from humanity. Only animals such as camels, horses, donkeys, and so on mate with their own kind (Al-Sharqawi, 1991). While the Jews distance themselves from other nations, Christians, despite remaining in their religion, give the impression of having fully embraced Islam.

وتسموا بالحسن والحسين، والعباس وفضل وعلي، واكتنوا بذلك أجمع، ولم يبق إلا أن يتسموا بمحمد، ويكتنوا بأبي القاسم. فرغب إليهم المسلمون، وترك كثير منهم عقد الزناير، وعقدها آخرون دون ثيابهم، وامتنع كثير من كبرائهم من إعطاء الجزية، وأنفوا مع (Al-Sharqawi, 1991) أقدارهم من دفعها، وسبوا من سبهم، وضربوا من ضربهم.

"Their names are Hasan, Huseyn, Abbas, Fazl and Ali. "Similarly, their kunyas are also like this. They quickly went from being named Muhammad to being called Abu al-Qasim. Therefore, they are liked by Muslims. Many Christians no longer wear the zunnar (belt), and if they do, they tie it under their private clothing (so that it remains unseen). Many Christians have refused to pay the jizyah (tax). If someone insults a Christian, they will respond with insults; if someone strikes them, they will strike back".

In this passage, we see the means that a minority community in Islamic society resorts to in order to protect itself. They try to resemble Muslims both in their names and in their clothing so that they do not attract attention. Some even refrain from wearing the zunnar (Zunnar refers to the belt worn by non-Muslims, especially Christians, around their waist – Encyclopedia of Islam, Zunnar) in such a manner. It seems that their status as a minority compels them to protect themselves. They try to protect themselves from persecution by responding to insults with insults and to blows with blows.

Despite being a minority, they do not hesitate to attack the Islamic religion, its prophet, and the prophet's family. Al-Jahiz shows that Muslims did not experience the same evil from the Jews or the Sabians as they did from the Christians. Because the Christians distort Islam based on weak hadiths and sow seeds of doubt in the hearts of the common people.

According to Al-Jahiz, the main scourge of Islam is that every Muslim considers himself Mutakallim (the speaker مَلِكُتَم). However, it is not the common people but the scholars who should respond to the accusations and claims of the Christians.

".....ومن البلاء أن كل إنسان من المسلمين يرى أنه متكلم....." (Al-Sharqawi, 1991)

In the work "Response to the Christians" رَدُّ عَلَى النَّصَارَى (ar-Radd ala-n-nasara) the issue of celibacy–abstaining from marriage–within Christianity is also addressed. Christian clerics do not marry, and those who marry enter into marriage only with one woman.

Al-Jahiz states that such a custom as the castration of male children also comes from Christians and condemns this custom. He calls this habit unmerciful (الرحم قلة) and "the corruption of hearts" (فساد القلوب) (Al-Sharqawi, 1991). And the worst thing is that Christians spread this hated custom among Muslims. In Al-Jahiz's opinion, the main misfortune of Islam is that every Muslim considers themselves a mutakallim (one who speaks or has authority). Then these boys convert to Islam and get rid of slavery (Al-Sharqawi, 1991).

After all this, Al-Jahiz states that although Christians wear clean clothes, they are, in terms of morality, the most vile people. He condemns the fact that Christians do not perform ablution, eat pork, and that Christian women do not bathe and purify themselves after menstruation. (Al-Sharqawi, 1991). It is also interesting that Christianity did not appear as a unified religion in Abbasid society. Nestorian, Jacobite, and Maliki Christians explain the same religious events and rulings in completely different ways. That is why, according to al-Jahiz, it is extremely difficult to understand the true nature of Christianity (Al-Sharqawi, 1991).

Conclusion. Thus, it can be said that Abbasid society was quite diverse in terms of ethnicity, religion, and culture. It seems that the Golden Age of Arab culture in the 8th to 10th centuries was a result of this diversity and multicultural system. This diversity was more evident in the Christian territories conquered by the Arabs, namely both in Andalusia and Sicily.

Al-Jahiz's work "Response to the Christians" الرد على النصارى (ar-Radd ala-n-nasara) serves as an important source for studying interreligious dialogue during the Abbasid period. The work testifies to the importance of religious dissociations in the intellectual environment of Baghdad. On the other hand, one can observe that, regardless of religious affiliation, educated individuals held high positions in the caliph's court and in government administration. Despite the religious-ethnic diversity, the rapprochement of people with clothing and lifestyle is also striking.

In this work, it is clearly evident that a Muslim scholar opposes Christians, which stems from his Arab-Islamic zeal.

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