

**THE APOLOGY OF AL KINDY, WRITTEN AT
THE COURT OF AL MĀMŪN (A. H. 215; A.
D. 830) IN DEFENSE OF CHRISTIANITY
AGAINST ISLAM. WITH AN ESSAY ON ITS
AGE AND AUTHORSHIP READ BEFORE THE
ROYAL ASIATIC SOCIETY**

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The apology of Al Kindy, written at the court of Al Māmûn (A. H. 215; A. D. 830) in defense of Christianity against Islam. With an essay on its age and authorship read before the Royal Asiatic Society by al Kindi Abd al Masih ibn Ishak

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(A.H. 215; A.D. 830)

IN DEFENCE OF
CHRISTIANITY AGAINST ISLAM.

With an Essay on its Age and Authorship read before the
Royal Asiatic Society.

BY

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P R E F A C E.

I MAY say at once that my primary object, in the present undertaking, is to place the APOLOGY of AL KINDY in the hands of those who will use it in the interests of the Christian faith.

At the same time, apart from the religious aspect, the Apology possesses a very peculiar interest of its own. My attention was first directed to it by the Turkish Mission Aid Society, which printed very carefully the text from two imperfect manuscripts. A cursory perusal convinced me of its high dialectic merit, and also of its presumable authenticity, as belonging to the age—the third century of the Hegira (about 830 A.D.)—in which it purports to have been written. I accordingly published a short sketch, with a few extracts, in the *INDIAN FEMALE EVANGELIST*.¹

Further study deepened the conviction. The Apology is quoted by the well-known writer Al Bîrûni (about 390 A.H.), as the Epistle of “Abd al

¹ *Indian Female Evangelist*, London, Nisbet and Co., April, 1881, Art. I.

Masîh *ibn Ishâc*, Al Kindy." This quotation, while proving the currency of the work in the century following that in which it was written, has given rise to a confusion, in the minds of some, between our Author and the famous Al Kindy (ABU YÛSUF IBN ISHÂC), "the Philosopher of Islam," who also flourished at the Court of Al Mâmûn. I was led therefore to inquire carefully into the question of authorship.

The "Philosopher" was unquestionably a professed Mahometan, which at once dispels the notion that he could have had any hand in the Apology. But the Beni Kinda (whence the title *Al Kindy*) formed a great clan of themselves, who, advancing from the south, spread over the centre and north of Arabia, and had, in the fifth and sixth centuries of the Christian era, a distinguished rôle in the history of the Peninsula.¹ At the rise of Islam, though the greater part of the tribe, headed by the celebrated Al Ashâth, passed over to the faith of Mahomet, still a respectable minority appear to have continued their attachment to the Christian religion; and in the time of Al Mâmûn, this remnant must have afforded ample numbers to produce other men of distinction bearing the tribal title of *Kindy*, besides the great Philosopher. That our Author belonged to such a branch of the Kindy race, there is no reasonable doubt. And the internal evidence (apart altogether from that supplied by the quotation from Al Bîrûni) affords the strongest pre-

¹ See *Life of Mahomet* (1st edition), vol. i. p. clxxiii et seq.

sumption that the work is what it professes to be,—namely, an Apology in defence of the Christian religion in its polemical aspect, as opposed to the dominant Faith, at the Court of the Caliph Al Mâmûn. The Preliminary Essay is designed to establish this.

Apart from its literary and historical interest, however, the Apology can well afford to stand, as a controversial work, upon its own intrinsic merits. Notwithstanding a good deal that is weak in reasoning, some things that are even questionable in fact, and abundance of censorious epithets against the Moslem, Jewish, and Magian faiths that might well have been materially softened, yet, taken as a whole, the argument is, from the Apologist's stand-point, conducted with wisdom and ability; while throughout it is characterized by a singular mastery of the Arabic language. The treatment of Islam is so trenchant that the circulation of the Apology could hardly be tolerated in any of the effete and bigoted Mahometan states of the present day. And, indeed, excepting the Motázelite Caliphs, and perhaps also the great Akbar, I suppose there has been no Mahometan government in any age which would not have considered it a duty to suppress a work so dangerous to Islam, by the severest pains and penalties.¹ But as regards our own territories, the case is different. And certainly the appearance of an Apology written and circulated at the Court

¹ I am told by Dr. Lansing that by the old law of Egypt any house in which the MS. might be found was liable to be razed to the ground with forty houses round.

of an Abbasside Caliph, could hardly be objected to in the dominions of the Defender of the Christian faith.

With the view, therefore, of facilitating the use and translation of the Apology, or of selections from it, I have compiled a very full analysis of its contents, with a copious translation of the more interesting portions. In doing this, I have indicated a few passages which, for reasons specified, should be omitted. Whether there should be any further curtailment must depend on local considerations.

As an ancient and indigenious product of Asiatic Christianity, the Apology possesses not only a deep interest for ourselves, but it has also a practical bearing on the same controversy still being prosecuted in the East. The Christian Advocate there has it often thrown in his teeth that he is introducing a Christ whose features and teaching have been moulded after a European type; and whose religion, consequently, though suited to the Western, is alien from the Asiatic, mind and habit. This, at any rate, cannot be said of our Apologist. An Arab of the Arabs, born and bred a thousand years ago in the plains of Chaldæa, Al Kindy presents himself and his faith in a purely Asiatic dress and language. The objectors will find that the Gospel changes not with time or clime; and that neither in form nor substance, nor in the reasoning by which it is supported, does the Christianity of Al Kindy materially differ (excepting perhaps in the more

fervid temperament and livelier fancy of the Asiatic disputant) from that which is put forth by the Missionary of the present day.

I have not sought to transfuse the eloquence of Al Kindy into these pages, but have confined myself to the substance and tenour of the argument. The discourse throughout is much abridged, and even where a passage is marked as a translation, the gist of the same is for the most part given in brief, and without the cumulation of epithets, and exuberance of verbiage, in which our Author delights. Even if I had the ability for the task, the differing genius of our language would have interfered with any attempt of mine at imitation. To form an adequate conception of the rushing flood of Al Kindy's rhetoric, the original must be read. Into Oriental languages, however, such as Persian and Urduo, there should be little difficulty in transfusing both the style and the spirit of our Author.

It is now six-and-thirty years since, at the request of Dr. Pfander, I wrote an account of his three excellent Treatises on the Mahometan Controversy, in the *Calcutta Review*.¹ The effect produced by these, both in India and Turkey, has been not inconsiderable. But it is no disparagement of them to say that Al Kindy's Apology may be expected to cause a sensation incomparably more profound. That the champion of Christianity was himself a

¹ *Calcutta Review*, vol. viii. Art. VI.

native of the East, of noble Arab birth, and yet a Christian by descent, a philosopher, and an honoured attendant at the Court of the Caliph Al Mámûn, must add prodigiously to the weight already attaching, from its intrinsic merits, to our Author's argument. Between this and Pfander's works, there is just the difference between perusing an essay, and hearing the warm and impassioned eloquence of the advocate in his own defence; between reading the description of a battle, and witnessing with your own eyes the hotly-contested field of the battle itself.

Grateful acknowledgment is due to the *Turkish Mission Aid Society*, for their ready appreciation of the value of the Apology, and the care taken in presenting us, notwithstanding the imperfection of the manuscripts, with a text so intelligently and carefully edited.

W. M.

1 December, 1881.