Twitter Thread by Salam Rassi | ■■■■ ■■■■

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A very interesting perspective from @jbralston. While I understand and respect Dr Ralston's experience, I feel that it requires redress. I'm usually loath to making these kinds of interventions, but this is a subject close to me both personally & intellectually. 1/

> I'm still a Christian but also am sure that the classical Muslim mutakallimun pretty much win every argument about the logic of the incarnation and Trinity
>
> — Joshua Ralston (@jbralston) December 14, 2020

I hope this thread is taken in the spirit decorum, respect, & admiration with which it is intended. Disclosure: My forthcoming monograph is an intellectual-historical study of the Syriac & Christian Arabic apologetic tradition, focusing on the Trinity, Incarnation, and cult. 2/

Now, Dr Ralston has said that although he is a Christian, the arguments of classical Muslim theologians against the Trinity & Incarnation win every time (though he allows that some medieval Christian Arabic thinkers had their moments). 3/

A solution, he proposes, is to write more theology in dialogue with Islam. I wholeheartedly agree. 4/

But I also think that this assessment (no doubt limited by this platform) rather diminishes the contributions of Middle Eastern Christians who have been theologising in the context of Islam for centuries (though I'm certain that was not Dr Ralston's intention). 5/

As I will argue in my forthcoming book, it was (partly) the ability of medieval Christian thinkers to intelligently & creatively articulate a kind of Islamicate Christianity that has kept the religion afloat in the Middle East. 6/

My aim here is not to adjudicate on whether Christians living in the medieval Islamic world made sound, logical arguments for their doctrines. I respect Dr Ralston opinion and Christian experience, but I think there's a much bigger picture (again, easily missed b/c Twitter!). 7/

And here's what it is: As is the case in many areas of Islamic studies, the corpus of Arabic & Syriac theology produced in the first 7 or so Islamic centuries is vast—I mean truly vast—and precious little of it has been studied in any meaningful way... 8/

compared to adjacent fields. Now, there was some positive mention by Dr Ralston of the Christian Arabic theologian ■Amm■r al-Ba■r■ (fl. 9th ce.). But in actuality, al-Ba■r■ is rather marginal to the Christian Arabic tradition itself, ... 9/

much like Ibn Taymiyya was in the Islamicate world until the modern period. Though an Iraqi member of the Church of the East, al-Ba■r■ played little to no role in the later theological heritage of this community. 10/

A more impactful theologian of whom I know Dr Ralston is aware is Ya■y■ ibn ■Ad■ (d. 974), whose ideas about the Trinity & Incarnation would resonate among Arab Christian thinkers of all confessions for centuries to come (as I discuss in my forthcoming book). 11/

Again, I don't wish to litigate individual arguments. But I will say that the problem wasn't that their arguments lacked logical rigour. One would be hard pressed to say that Ibn ■Ad■, a foundational Baghdad Aristotelian, lacked the logical chops to debate the Trinity. 12/

Rather, the problem was that neither side was out to be convinced by the other. Al-Kind■'s Islamic taw■■d committed him to reject the Trinity. Ibn ■Ad■'s Christian taw■■d committed him to defend it. Nevertheless, there's a great deal to learn from both sides, ... 13/

both historically & for the purposes of Christian-Muslim dialogue (as I'm sure Dr Ralston would agree). 14/

But just as importantly, although Ibn ■Ad■'s arguments would not gain acceptance among Muslims (no matter how sophisticated the philosophical common ground), they were nevertheless meaningful to subsequent generations of Arab Christian scholars. 15/

In fact, many doctrines elaborated by Ibn ■Ad■—e.g. his theory of Trinity from divine self-intellection & the Incarnation based on a Neo-Platonist system of noetics (not only God's economy of salvation)—would find their way into several popular handbooks of Ar. theology. 16/

This tradition was in many ways central to the theological identity of the Arabic-speaking ecclesial communities that thrived under Muslim rule for centuries. In short, what began as apologetics became a kind of catechesis—a process I chart in my book. 17/

And that's just Ibn ■Ad■. There are countless others I could mention who are only beginning to be examined in detail such as Israel of Kashkar, Elias of Nisibis (as a theologian rather than historian), ■Abdall■h ibn Fa■l, Ab■ Na■r Ya■y■ ibn Jar■r, ... 18/

al-■af■ & al-Mu■taman ibn al-■Ass■l, ■Abd■sh■■ bar Br■kh■, Daniel al-Mard■n■—& I haven't even touched on such Syriac luminaries as Barhebraeus. When I started out, a lot of these authors scarcely had editions. We are still far from realising the full extent of the canon. 19/

My feeling is that a lot of scholars invested in Christian-Muslim dialogue favour comparative studies between medieval Islamic thinkers & modern European theologians (or indeed medieval ones like Aquinas). I see the value in this approach & have greatly benefited from it. 20/

But I also feel that many medieval Christian thinkers, whose ideas were forged in the same Arabic-speaking, Islamicate environment as their Muslim counterparts, are all too often left out of the equation. 21/

In sum, I'd like us to think of the Christian Arabic theological tradition as an important subject in its own right—to be approached with the same scholarly reverence (as well as criticality) as European Christian and Islamic theological currents. 22/

As I said at the beginning, I mean this thread with nothing but the greatest respect and admiration for Dr Ralston and his work. I am sure we can agree on a lot, and I am of course open to dialogue. 23/