

A comparison of the polemics against astrology of the early Christian apologists and contemporary Salafis

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Early Christian apologists argued against astrology as part of a strategy to make Christianity more acceptable to Roman society. Contemporary Salafi scholars, in emphasising the principles of early Islam, oppose astrology on strict doctrinal grounds. Despite very different contexts, early Christian apologists and contemporary Salafis have adduced similar lines of arguments against astrology: as incompatible with God's omnipotence; as idolatry; as magic; and as a social ill. The similarity of the arguments raises the possibility that contemporary Salafis are transmitting echoes of the early Christian apologists' arguments.

This paper considers two polemical traditions against astrology: the early Christian apologists, and contemporary Salafi scholars. In the Roman empire, where Christians were persecuted on religious grounds, it was the objective of the early Christian apologists (in the second and third centuries AD) to convince the Roman ruling class that Christianity was amenable to Roman society and that persecution should cease.⁷⁵ The apology (*apologia*), originally a legal defence, was far more expansive in the form employed by the early Christians, and the apologists also used other literary genres to make their arguments.⁷⁶ By a thorough exposition of the Christian religion, the apologists sought to dispel misunderstandings and false accusations; to demonstrate Christianity's harmonious relationship to core elements of the predominant Hellenist (or

⁷⁵ Massey Hamilton Shepherd, Jr., 'The early Christian apologists and Christian worship', *The Journal of Religion*, 18.1 (1938), 60-79, pp. 60-61.

⁷⁶ Robert D. Sider (ed.), *Christian and pagan in the Roman empire: the witness of Tertullian* (Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001), p. 6.

pagan) tradition, thereby dismissing any concerns that it threatened Roman social order; and to display Christianity's virtues, in order to win converts.⁷⁷

Astrology was a target of the apologists' ire. Among Roman officials (who were the apologists' chief audience), concerns that astrology could be used against the state, and against the emperor in particular, meant the state had (after initially using astrology as a tool of legitimisation) turned on astrologers, expelling them sporadically from Rome and the empire, and banning the practice of astrology altogether. Such official prohibitions were only partially successful in achieving their goal, and astrology remained popular among all classes of Roman society.⁷⁸ The apologists, employing various arguments considered below, were thus able to present Christianity on the side of the Roman state, in joint opposition to astrology.

In Islam, the doctrine of the primacy of God's omnipotence and omniscience – most concisely represented in the Koranic verse, 'Say: "No one on in the heavens or on earth has knowledge of what is hidden except God"' – threatens the legitimacy of astrology.⁷⁹ As Nicholas Campion noted: 'The single fact of God's omnipotence leads to similar debates [in Islam] concerning determinism to those we find in Judaism and Christianity'.⁸⁰ Such debates did not, however, prevent the emergence of an Islamic tradition of astrology.⁸¹ In the contemporary Islamic world, a strict view against astrology prevails officially, although astrology remains popular with the public. In Egypt, for example, Al-Azhar and Dar Al-Ifthā', two institutions of the Islamic religious

⁷⁷ Leslie William Barnard, 'Introduction', in Leslie William Barnard, *St. Justin Martyr: the first and second apologies* (New York and Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1997), p. 2.

⁷⁸ Nicholas Campion, *The history of western astrology* (London: Continuum, 2008), volume 1, pp. 228-243.

⁷⁹ The Koran, 27.65, translated by N. J. Dawood, *The Koran* (London: Penguin, 2003 [1956]), p. 269.

⁸⁰ Nicholas Campion, *Astrology and cosmology in the world's religions* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2012), p. 175

⁸¹ C. S. F. Burnett, 'Astrology and medicine in the Middle Ages', *Bulletin of the Society for the Social History of Medicine*, 37 (1985), 16-18; C. S. F. Burnett, 'The certitude of astrology: the scientific methodology of Al-Qabīsi and Abū Ma'shar', *Early Science and Medicine*, 7.3 (2002), 198-213; Campion, *Astrology and cosmology*, pp. 178-180.

establishment, formally oppose astrology, even while astrology items are published in most Egyptian newspapers, and books by the popular Egyptian astrologer, Nevine Al-Shala, are available in book-shops.⁸²

⁸² Abdul-Nasr Abdul-Moneim, 'Al-Azhar: reading horoscopes is unlawful (*haram*) in Islamic law', *Al-Sharq* (8 September 2015), <http://www.al-sharq.com/news/details/367790> (accessed 29 April 2016); 'Dar Al-Ifta' stuns with shocking surprise regarding "The astrologers have lied even if they have told the truth"', *Yahdoth fe masr* (29 December 2014), <http://www.mbc.net/ar/programs/yahdoth-fe-masr/articles/%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%81%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%AC%D8%B1-%D9%85%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%A3%D8%A9-%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D8%AE%D8%B5%D9%88%D8%B5--%D9%83%D8%B0%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%86%D8%AC%D9%85%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%88%D9%84%D9%88-%D8%B5%D8%AF%D9%82%D9%88%D8%A7-.html> (accessed 29 April 2016). On the popularity of astrology in Egypt, see, for example, astrology columns in the Egyptian daily newspapers *Youm7* (<http://www.youm7.com/story/2016/4/29/%D8%AD%D8%B8%D9%83-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%85-%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%82%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AC-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%A9-29-%D8%A5%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%84/2696238>, accessed 29 April 2016) and *Al-Masry Al-Youm* (<http://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/890483>, accessed 29 April 2016), and Nevine Al-Shala, *Rihlat al-abraaj al-mumta'a ila al-i'maaq*, available at Diwan Bookstore (<https://www.diwanegypt.com/1184-129170/Self-help/%d8%b1%d8%ad%d9%84%d8%a9-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%a7%d8%a8%d8%b1%d8%a7%d8%ac-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%85%d9%85%d8%aa%d8%b9%d8%a9-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%89-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%a7%d8%b9%d9%85%d8%a7%d9%82.aspx>, accessed 29 April 2016). See also Kamal El Menoufi, 'Occupational status and mass media in rural Egypt', *International journal of Middle East studies*, 13.3 (1981), 257-269, p. 263.

The Salafi movement of contemporary Islam – described by Jonathan Brown as ‘a trend in Islamic thought that places particular emphasis on a return to the piety and principles of the Salaf [the first generations of Muslims] as the only correct understanding of Islam’, and defined broadly for the purposes of this paper as encompassing Wahhabism, a related movement inspired by the teachings of Mohammed ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792) – condemns astrology by reference to scriptural interdictions against divination, including the Koranic verse above.⁸³

There is, however, no universally accepted definition of Salafism, and the three prominent scholars whose *fatwas* (or religious decrees) and other writings are considered in this paper – Abdul Aziz bin Abdullah bin Baz (called Ibn Baz, died 1999), grand mufti of Saudi Arabia from 1993 until his death; Muhammed Salih Al-Munajjid (born 1960), a Syrian scholar; and Yusuf Al-Qaradawi (born 1926), an Egyptian scholar living in Qatar, described by Roxanne Euben and Muhammad Qasim Zaman as ‘by far the most prominent scholar and preacher in Sunni Islam at the beginning of the twenty-first century’ – do not fall neatly into a particular category.⁸⁴ Thus, while Al-Munajjid’s *fatwas* are considered by Richard Gauvain to be in the ‘normative Saudi-Arabian Salafi’ tradition; Al-Qaradawi is variously described as a Salafi and a non-Salafi, ‘a scholar from a “Salafi reformist background”’, and ‘as a Salafi from his views on a particular issue’; and Ibn Baz is described by Gilles Kepel as ‘a figurehead for institutional Wahhabism’.⁸⁵ This paper will show that all three are in consensus on the issue of astrology, as indicative of a general Salafi position on astrology.

⁸³ Johnathan A. C. Brown, *Salafism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 3; Kecia Ali, *The lives of Mohammed* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 81; Roxanne L. Euben and Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *Princeton readings in Islamist thought: texts and contexts from Al-Banna to bin Laden* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 21; Mohamed Bin Ali, *The roots of religious extremism: understanding the Salafi doctrine of Al-Wala’ wal Bara’* (London: Imperial College Press, 2016), pp. 57-58.

⁸⁴ Euben and Zaman, *Princeton readings*, p. 224.

⁸⁵ Richard Gauvain, *Salafi ritual purity: in the presence of God* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 335; Jonas Otterbeck, ‘The Sunni discourse on music’, in *Islam and popular culture*, edited by Karin van Nieuwkerk, Mark LeVine and Martin Stokes (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2016), p. 163; Euben and Zaman, *Princeton*

Within these contexts, this paper compares the arguments levelled by both polemical traditions – the early Christian and the Salafi – against astrology. In particular, it considers the arguments against astrology as incompatible with divine omnipotence; as idolatry; as magic; and as a social ill. By pointing to the similarities between the polemical traditions, a hypothesis for the transmission of the early Christian position on astrology to the Islamic tradition can be proposed.

Astrology as incompatible with divine omnipotence

Both the early Christian apologists and the Salafists argued that only God has the power to know, and to determine, the future; astrology, insofar as it constitutes divination of a predestined future, not determined by God, must therefore be rejected.

Tatian (c. AD 120-180), an Assyrian and one of the first Christian apologists, attacked astrology as incompatible with divine omnipotence in *Oratio ad Graecos* (Oration to the Greeks), his major work, generally dated to within the second half of the second century: ‘the power of the Logos [God], having in itself a faculty to foresee future events, not as fated, but as taking place by the choice of free agents, foretold from time to time the issues of things to come’.⁸⁶ For Tatian, only God, not fate, determines the future. Later, reiterating the argument, Tatian rebuked those who follow astrology as divination: ‘having shown them a plan of the position of the stars, like dice-players, they introduced Fate, a flagrant injustice’ – for Tatian, the very concept of fate as a human construct is unconscionable.⁸⁷

readings, p. 19; Bin Ali, *The roots of religious extremism*, p. 201; Gilles Kepel, *The war for Muslim minds: Islam and the west* (Harvard: Belknap Press, 2006), p. 186.

⁸⁶ Gerald F. Hawthorne, ‘Tatian and his *Discourse to the Greeks*’, *The Harvard Theological Review*, 57.3 (1964), 161-188, p. 161-162; Antonia Tripolitis, review of *Tatian: Oratio ad Graecos and fragments*, ed. Molly Whittaker, *The Classical World*, 77.2 (1983), 133-134, p. 133; Robert Grant, ‘The date of Tatian’s *Oration*’, *The Harvard Theological Review*, 46.2 (1953), 99-101, p. 99; G. W. Clarke, ‘The date of the *Oration* of Tatian’, *The Harvard Theological Review*, 60.1 (1967), 123-126, p. 126; Champion, *A history of western astrology*, volume 1, p. 268; Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos*, 7, trans. J. E. Ryland, in Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and Arthur Cleveland Coxe (eds.), *The Anti-Nicene Fathers* (New York: Cosimo, 2007 [1885]), volume 2, 65-83.

⁸⁷ Tatian, *Oratio*, 8.

Justin Martyr (AD 100-165), Tatian's teacher, a convert to Christianity who was ultimately beheaded, is generally considered the first major apologist: Leslie Barnard called him a 'pioneer type of Greek Apologist', and Campion considered him the 'earliest major Christian polemicist to declare astrology incompatible with Christianity'.⁸⁸ Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho* (its date and place of origin are uncertain), although not an 'apology', as such, was written, on its face, as a rhetorical discourse with one Trypho, a Jew, addressing Christian and Jewish relations – although its scope is much broader, and includes Justin's attack on astrology.⁸⁹ Like Tatian, Justin considered that the concept of astrology as a means of divination undermined the power of foresight granted by God to the prophets:

There existed, long before this time, certain men [...] who spoke by the Divine Spirit, and foretold events which would take place, and which are now taking place. They are called prophets. These alone both saw and announced the truth to men.⁹⁰

For Justin, the prophets' power of foresight was unique and granted by God; astrology, *qua* divination, was incompatible with the Christian belief in the omnipotence of God.

The Salafi prohibition of astrology is similarly premised on the belief that only God has the power to know, and to determine, the future. The Koranic verse, 'Say: "No one in the heavens or on earth has knowledge of what is hidden except God"', is cited by each of Ibn Baz, Al-Munajjid and Al-Qaradawi as the scriptural basis for their opposition to astrology.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Campion, *The history of western astrology*, volume 1, p. 267; Barnard, 'Introduction', p. 3.

⁸⁹ Thomas P. Halton, 'Introduction', in Michael Slusser (ed.), *St. Justin Martyr: Dialogue with Trypho* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003), xi-xiv, pp. xi-xii.

⁹⁰ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 7, trans. in Roberts *et al.*, *The Anti-Nicene Fathers*, volume 1, 194-270.

⁹¹ The Koran, 27.65, translated by N. J. Dawood, *The Koran* (London: Penguin, 2003 [1956]), p. 269; T. Fahd, 'Kihana', in P. Bearman, T. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W. P. Heinrichs (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, second edition, http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0515; 'Believing in horoscopes, astrology and fortune telling', *Majmu'a fatawa Shaykh Ibn Baz*, volume 2,

Al-Munajjid has a *fatwa* (or ruling) on the issue of ‘Astrology vs. astronomy’, that is built on the Koranic verse above. Al-Munajjid’s *fatwa* is published on the website ‘Islam: question and answer’ (*islamqa.info*), which he founded and runs. The website is, according to Richard Gauvain, a ‘well-known’ website and, for Egyptians at least, ‘the most common source of reference’; it was blocked in Saudi Arabia in 2010 on the basis that it was issuing *fatwas* without the authority of the state.⁹² Al-Munajjid’s *fatwa* explains that a person ‘taking knowledge of the stars as a means to claim that he has knowledge of the unseen, and claiming to have knowledge of the unseen is *kufur* (disbelief) which puts one beyond the pale of Islam’.⁹³ For Al-Munajjid, believing that astrology is a tool of divination renders the believer un-Muslim. Al-Qaradawi similarly condemns astrology (and belief in astrology) as *kufur*: ‘anyone who claims to know what pertains to the Unseen utters a falsehood against Allah and the truth’.⁹⁴ From the evidence above, the Salafis argue that it is simply inconceivable that a person could divine the future yet to be determined by God.

The similarity of the arguments is striking – Tatian’s ‘flagrant injustice’ echoes in the Salafists’ *kufur* – but these arguments are predicated on the belief in the omnipotence of God, and the belief that omnipotence is exclusively divine and unassailable by mankind. This is a belief in God’s nature that, at least for

123-125,

<http://www.alifta.net/Fatawa/FatawaChapters.aspx?language=en&View=Page&PageID=103&PageNo=1&BookID=14> (accessed 29 July 2016), p. 123; Mohammed

Al-Munajjid, ‘Astrology vs. astronomy’, 22445, <https://islamqa.info/en/22445> (accessed 30 July 2016); Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, *The lawful and prohibited in Islam*, trans. Kamal El-Helbawy, M. Moinuddin Siddiqui and Syed Shukry (Plainfield, Indiana: American Trust Publications, 1999 [1994]), p. 239.

⁹² Richard Gauvain, *Salafi ritual purity: in the presence of God* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 335; Jonas Otterbeck, ‘The Sunni discourse on music’, in *Islam and popular culture*, edited by Karin van Nieuwkerk, Mark LeVine and Martin Stokes (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2016), p. 163; Abdullah Al-Ayadh, ‘Saudi Arabia blocks Sheikh Al-Munajjid’s “Islam: question and answer” site’, *Al-Arabiya* (3 September 2010), <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2010/09/03/118350.html> (accessed 29 July 2016).

⁹³ Al-Munajjid, ‘Astrology vs. astronomy’.

⁹⁴ Al-Qaradawi, *The lawful and prohibited*, p. 239.

the Christian apologists addressing pagan Romans, could not assume in their audiences – indeed, an argument based on such an assumption could be dismissed out of hand. Both the Christian polemicists and the Salafis therefore adduce further lines of argument to support their case.

Astrology as idolatry

Both the Christian apologists and the Salafis conflate astrology with star-worship, and in so doing to set up an easy target; in modern parlance, a straw-man argument. Tertullian (c. AD 155-225 or later), was a Carthaginian who lived slightly later than Justin and Tatian but can be considered a successor to both, and particularly Justin: in Champion's words, he continued 'the Pauline project – to move Christianity away from Judaism, appealing to Hellenistic culture by reconciling faith with reason and presenting the new religion as an acceptable part of the Roman world'.⁹⁵ Kocku von Stuckrad considered him to be one of 'centrist Christianity's most famous apologetics'.⁹⁶ In *On idolatry*, an expansive work of uncertain date described by J. H. Waszink and J. C. M. van Winden as 'a dialogue in disguise' and 'a treatise on the practice of Christian life in relation to the (often hidden) religious elements in the heathen world', including astrology, Tertullian stated (with apophasis):

I allege not that he [an astrologer] honours idols, whose names he has inscribed on the heaven, to whom he has attributed all God's power; because men, presuming that we are disposed of by the immutable arbitrament of the stars, think on that account that God is not to be sought after.⁹⁷

Similarly, Clement of Alexandria (c. AD 150-215), a towering figure of the early church, argued the same point in his *Exhortation to the Heathen*, described by John Ferguson as Clement's "great sermon":

⁹⁵ Champion, *A history of western astrology*, volume 1, pp. 267-268.

⁹⁶ Champion, *A history of western astrology*, volume 1, p. 268; Kocku von Stuckrad, 'Jewish and Christian astrology in late Antiquity: a new approach', *Numen*, 47.1 (2000), 1-40, p. 7.

⁹⁷ J. H. Waszink and J. C. M. van Winden, *Tertullianus: De Idolatoria* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1987), pp. 9-10; Tertullian, *On idolatry*, 9, trans. by S. Thelwall, in Roberts *et al.*, *The Anti-Nicene Fathers*, volume 3, 61-78.

Why, I beseech you, fill up life with idolatrous images [...]; and, prating loftily of the heavenly bodies in this much vaunted science of astrology, not astronomy, to those men who have truly wandered, talk of the wandering stars as gods?⁹⁸

Both Tertullian and Clement present astrology as star-worship, a species of idolatry. The Salafis, less rhetorically ornate, make the same point more bluntly, categorising astrology as *shirk* (commonly translated as ‘idolatry’ but, more technically, a polytheistic concept of ‘associating’ things with God, making things divine). Thus, Ibn Baz stated: ‘They [astrology, horoscopes and fortune-telling] fall under *shirk* (associating others in worship with Allah), for they include adhering to other than Allah and believing in the existence of a support of other than Him’.⁹⁹ Al-Munajjid is more judicious, distinguishing between the *kufr* of claiming to have knowledge of the unseen (that is, divination), and the *shirk* of believing that events are influenced by the stars, that is, that the stars have the power to determine events: ‘the belief that these stars have a real influence in the sense that they create events and evil’.¹⁰⁰ (A lesser *shirk* arises when someone believes that a past event was caused by the stars.) Thus, Al-Munajjid:

whoever claims that there is another creator alongside Allaah is a mushrik [committer of *shirk*] in the sense of major *shirk*, for he is regarding a created thing that is subjugated as a creator which subjugates.¹⁰¹

Again, this is noticeable in its similarity to the early Christians. Thus, Clement juxtaposes the false worship of God’s works – ‘created things’ (in Al-Munajjid’s words), such as the stars, – with the true worship of God:

⁹⁸ Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Heathen*, 6, trans. in Roberts *et al.*, *The Anti-Nicene Fathers*, volume 2, 171-206, p. 191; John Ferguson, *Clement of Alexandria* (New York: Twayne, 1974), p. 45..

⁹⁹ Ibn Baz, ‘Believing in horoscopes’, p. 123.

¹⁰⁰ Al-Munajjid, ‘Astrology vs astronomy’; D. Gimaret, ‘Shirk’, in Bearman *et al.*, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_6965.

¹⁰¹ Al-Munajjid, ‘Astrology vs astronomy’.

It is the Lord of the spirits, the Lord of the fire, the Maker of the universe, Him who lighted up the sun, that I long for. I seek after God, not the works of God.¹⁰²

The polemicists – early Christian and Salafi – therefore cast astrology as star-worship, because the scriptural force against idolatry was stronger, and a compelling argument against it could be more easily constructed. According to Gimaret, in Islam, *shirk* is the worst form of disbelief, and by associating astrology with *shirk*, the Salafi argument is strengthened.¹⁰³ Likewise, the passages from the Christian apologists above – conflating astrology with star-worship – are examples of what Massey H. Shepherd considered a tactic to knowingly ignore the complexity of Roman paganism and to portray it as idolatry: ‘Christian apologists knew very well that thoughtful pagans did not worship images as gods, but only as representations of gods’.¹⁰⁴ Put simply, in portraying astrology as idolatry, the apologists were acting duplicitously. As von Stuckrad noted, writing about Christianity and Judaism:

Monotheism’s criticism [of astrology] focused either on deterministic worldviews, not compatible with ethical propositions, or on the adoration of astral deities which is not in agreement with Jewish and Christian cult tradition. But to call this astrology means to neglect the refined standard of ancient discourses about the relation between both zodiac, stars, and earth as well as volition, fate and ethics.¹⁰⁵

As well as more persuasive, it was also more convenient for the Christian apologists to argue against astrology as star-worship; as Champion noted, ‘all the scriptural citations used to back the modern catechism are from Old Testament injunctions against star worship, rather than astrology as an interpretative system’.¹⁰⁶ Star-worship was also significantly less popular in Rome than astrology *qua* divination. Overall, the comparative passages above have shown how both the early Christian apologists and the Salafi clerics have ignored the nuances of astrology to find a convenient target for their attacks.

¹⁰² Clement, *Exhortation*, 6.

¹⁰³ Gimaret, ‘Shirk’.

¹⁰⁴ Shepherd, ‘The early Christian apologists’, p. 61.

¹⁰⁵ Von Stuckrad, ‘Jewish and Christian astrology’, p. 33.

¹⁰⁶ Champion, *The history of western astrology*, volume 1, p. 256.

Astrology as magic

The argument against astrology as idolatrous star-worship flowed into an argument against astrology as magic (for the Salafis, *sihr*, sorcery). Thus, Al-Qaradawi and Ibn Baz cite a *hadith* that states: ‘Whoever acquires any knowledge of astrology has acquired [knowledge of] a branch of sorcery [*sihr*]’.¹⁰⁷ For the Salafis, this was one of the most damning lines of argument, after attacking astrology as *shirk*. *Sihr* comprises bewitching, the mastery of demons, knot-magic, the use of amulets, talismans, and so on. *Sihr* is a grave sin in Islam, and particularly in Salafism, but the strength of this argument lies in the threat of punishment for sorcerers – not in the afterlife, but in the present.¹⁰⁸ In modern-day Saudi Arabia, *sihr* is a crime punishable by death: the government has established an Anti-Witchcraft Unit for enforcement of the law against *sihr*, has provided practical training to the Unit, and has executed sorcerers in 2011, 2012 and 2014.¹⁰⁹ While, in principle, *shirk* is punishable by

¹⁰⁷ Ibn Baz, ‘Believing in horoscopes’, p. 123; Uthman Uthman and Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, ‘‘Alam al-ghayb’ (‘The hidden world’), *Al Jazeera* (n.d.),

<http://www.aljazeera.net/programs/religionandlife/2009/4/28/%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8E%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%BA%D9%8A%D8%A8#L3>

(accessed 31 July 2016).

¹⁰⁸ T. Fahd, ‘Sihr’, in Bearman *et al.*, *Encyclopedia of Islam*,

http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_7023.

¹⁰⁹ David E. Miller, ‘Saudi Arabia’s “anti-witchcraft unit” breaks another spell’, *The Jerusalem Post* (20 July 2011), <http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Saudi-Arabias-Anti-Witchcraft-Unit-breaks-another-spell> (accessed 25 July 2016); ‘Saudi Arabia begins

defence against the dark arts classes’, *The Daily Telegraph* (18 February 2016),

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/saudi-arabia/12163519/Saudi-Arabia-begins-defence-against-the-dark-arts-classes.html> (accessed 29 July 2016);

‘Saudi Arabia execution of “sorcery” woman condemned’, *The Daily Telegraph* (13 December 2011),

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/saudi-arabia/8952641/Saudi-Arabia-execution-of-sorcery-woman-condemned.html> (accessed 25 July 2016); ‘Saudi

man executed for “witchcraft and sorcery”’, *BBC News* (19 June 2012),

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-18503550> (accessed 25 July 2016);

Natasha Culzac, ‘Saudi Arabia executes 19 in one half of August in “disturbing surge of beheadings”’, *The Independent* (22 August 2014),

death, it is a more spiritual crime, a crime of belief; by contrast, and as demonstrated by Saudi Arabia's prosecution of the crime, *sihr* is more practical.¹¹⁰ The great medieval philosopher Ibn Khaldun's wrote of *sihr*: 'It is definite that sorcery is true, although it is forbidden' – Islam considers *sihr* a phenomenon of the temporal world, not just a transgression in the spiritual realm.¹¹¹

Tertullian took a similar approach to the Salafis in portraying astrology as a criminal act of magic. Having noted the grisly executions of Simon Magus and another magician ('mulcted with loss of eyes'), Tertullian noted: 'The same fate, I believe, would astrologers, too, have met, if any had fallen in the way of the apostles. But yet, when magic is punished, of which astrology is a species, of course the species is condemned by the genus'.¹¹² While Tertullian was explicit about the risks of astrology, the Salafis leave that the threat implicit. The effect is the same: it is a warning to the curious.

Astrology as a social ill

For even the most sceptical audience, unmoved by the denial of God's omnipotence, the heinous sin of idolatry, or the criminal practice of magic, the polemicists – early Christian and Salafi – have introduced arguments against astrology as a social ill. One important argument concerns the seditious nature of astrology. Thus, Tertullian, in *Apology for the Christians*:

They likewise pay the same observances who are so officious in consulting astrologers, and soothsayers, and augurs, and magicians about the life of the emperors [...]. For what business has a man to be

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-executes-19-during-half-of-august-in-disturbing-surge-of-beheadings-9686063.html> (accessed 25 July 2016).

¹¹⁰ Fahd, 'Shirk'.

¹¹¹ Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimah*, 6.28, trans. Franz Rosenthal, in Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: an introduction to history* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980 [1958]), volume 3, p. 179.

¹¹² Tertullian, *On idolatry*, 9.

so curious about Caesar's life, who has no design against it, or expectations from it?¹¹³

From the perspective of the early Christian apologists, such an argument was carefully constructed to convince the audience – the Roman governing class – of Christianity's virtue as a weapon against astrology, perfectly allied to the empire's interests of protecting the emperor (whose legitimacy could be threatened by astrology). Such views were common also among medieval Islamic writers. Thus, Ibn Khaldun, in the fourteenth century AD, argued against astrology on the grounds that it:

often produces the expectation that signs of crisis will appear in a dynasty. This encourages the enemies and rivals of the dynasty to attack it. [...] It is, therefore, necessary that astrology be forbidden to all civilized people, because it may cause harm to religion and dynasty.¹¹⁴

The Salafis do not make similar arguments. This may reflect the occasionally precarious relationship between the prominent Salafi clerics and the states of the Arab world (Ibn Baz is an exception, and was closely affiliated to the Saudi government). They do, however, echo another of Ibn Khaldun's arguments, namely, that astrology is a social ill insofar as it misleads people. Thus, Ibn Khaldun:

astrology does harm to human civilization. [...] Ignorant people are taken in by that and suppose that all the other (astrological) judgments must be true, which is not the case.¹¹⁵

By the same token, Ibn Baz condemned the way in which astrologers 'manipulate the minds of inexperienced and naive people to embezzle their money'.¹¹⁶ Al-Munajjid (following Ibn Baz as precedent) similarly held that diviners (including astrologers) 'falsely claim to have knowledge of the unseen in order to cheat people of their money'; and presumably for this reason states

¹¹³ Tertullian, *Apology for the Christians*, 35, trans. W. Reeve, in *The apology of Tertullian and the meditations of the emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus* (London and Sydney: Griffith, Farran, Okeden and Welsh), p. 102.

¹¹⁴ Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimah*, 6.31.

¹¹⁵ Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimah*, 6.31.

¹¹⁶ Ibn Baz, 'Believing in horoscopes', p. 123.

(following the thirteenth-century scholar, Imam Nawawi): ‘it is haram [unlawful] to pay them [astrologers] money’.¹¹⁷ Put simply, the Salafis argue that money spent on astrologers is money wasted. In this, Tertullian made a similar argument, listing those undesirable segments of society whose lives were adversely affected by Christians:

first they are your panders, and pimps, and filthy pliers about your baths; next, your cut-throats, poisoners, and magicians; lastly, your soothsayers, wizards, and astrologers.¹¹⁸

Tertullian’s point – that Christians should shun astrologers (among others), and in doing so benefit society as a whole – echoes the Salafis’ arguments against giving money to astrologers. Whether as a threat to the state, or a waste of money, the early Christian and Salafi polemicists argue against astrology as a social ill.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that there are a number of lines of argument against astrology in common to the early Christian apologists and contemporary Salafi clerics. Making use of the scriptural arsenal available, both sets of writers attack astrology: as incompatible with God’s omnipotence; as idolatry; as magic; and as a social ill. In doing so, they are trying to convince their audiences in different ways: by shock, by disgust, by concern for their wellbeing. These points in common raise the question of whether the strict Islamic position against astrology was influenced by the arguments of the early Christian apologists; further study may be able to reveal any connections.

¹¹⁷ Mohammed Al-Munajjid, ‘Ruling on horoscopes’, 2538, <https://islamqa.info/en/2538> (accessed 29 July 2016); Mohammed Al-Munajjid, ‘Ruling on going to astrologers and believing them’, 8291, <https://islamqa.info/en/8291> (accessed 29 July 2016).

¹¹⁸ Tertullian, *Apology for the Christians*, 43.

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