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Interreligious Scholarly Collaboration in Ibn al-Nadīm's *Fihrist*

Rémy Gareil*

This paper explores Ibn al-Nadīm's *Fihrist*, a major primary source for Abbasid intellectual history. Although its importance for the field has been acknowledged since its first edition at the end of the nineteenth century, the studies dealing with this encyclopedic work as a whole are remarkably rare, since its material has mostly been used by researchers looking for biographic details regarding specific scholars of the Islamic Middle Ages. Our research aims to examine how Ibn al-Nadīm depicts the religious affiliation of scholars and cases of interaction between Jewish, Christian, and Muslim intellectuals. It focuses on the seventh section (*maqāla*) of the work, which deals with the rational sciences, a field well known for involving scholars from different religious backgrounds in Abbasid centers of knowledge, especially in the context of translation activities.

After some methodological remarks, two main lines of inquiry guide our study. First, we analyze whether Ibn al-Nadīm explicitly acknowledges the religious identity of the scholars he mentions, with what vocabulary, and in which circumstances. Second, we investigate the cases of »interreligious scholarly collaboration«, when Ibn al-Nadīm depicts scholars from different religious backgrounds working together, in order to determine his conception of the knowledge produced by the Abbasid intellectual milieu. We will argue that the way he deals with interreligious relations results in emphasizing the existence of a common knowledge, in Arabic, that is shared beyond communal boundaries. By focusing on the inner structure of this work, we aim to shed new light on the question of interreligious collaboration in Abbasid society, as well as to lay the groundwork for a better understanding of the relationship between the *Fihrist* and its social and cultural context.

Keywords: Ibn al-Nadīm, Abbasid intellectual history, rational sciences, Islamic sciences, religious affiliation, biographical dictionary

The *Fihrist* (Catalogue) of Ibn al-Nadīm (d. c. 380 AH / 990 CE), a Baghdadi bookseller, is an invaluable source for the intellectual history of early Islam. Completed in 377 / 987, it is conceived as an encyclopedic attempt to gather in a single place an account of all the books ever written in Arabic or translated into Arabic, and of the lives of their authors, both pre-Islamic and Islamic. It is divided in ten thematic sections (*maqāla*, pl. *maqālāt*) covering all kinds of knowledge, from religious sciences to rational and occult sciences.¹

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1 For a good overview of Ibn al-Nadīm's *Fihrist*, and incidentally of the scholarship about it, see Stewart, *Editing the Fihrist*, 160-173.

The purpose of this study is to examine what position Ibn al-Nadīm adopts regarding the religious affiliation of all these scholars, and more specifically how he deals with cases of interreligious scientific collaboration. It focuses on the seventh section of his work, devoted to the philosophers (*falāsifa*) and to the »ancient sciences« (*al-‘ulūm al-qadīma*),² because it was particularly common at the time to see non-Muslims involved specifically in this field of knowledge, which maximizes the opportunity to observe scholarly interactions that crossed religious boundaries.³

By grounding our analysis in this very well-known monument embodying the striving for universal knowledge at the heart of Abbasid society,⁴ we intend to demonstrate that in spite of its fame, there is still much work left to do with this text. The *Fihrist* has been abundantly used as a mere repository of biographical and bibliographical information, the most common use consisting in choosing small pieces of information on specific scholars and comparing or combining them with accounts of the same characters in other sources. However, there is a striking lack of studies that focus on Ibn al-Nadīm’s work itself and that take into account its overall structure.⁵ By analyzing it at a larger scale – either at the level of one of its sections, as is done here, or at the level of the whole work – it is possible to shed new light on the book-seller’s conception of knowledge and inscription in the Baghdadi social and cultural context.

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- 2 Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. Sayyid, II, 131. This section is divided into three subsections (*fann*). The first focuses on philosophers (ed. Sayyid, II, 131-206); the second mostly on specialists of mathematics, geometry, and astronomy (ed. Sayyid, II, 207-266); and the third on physicians (ed. Sayyid, II, 267-317).
 - 3 There is no doubt about the multi-confessional dimension of the scholarly milieu that specialized in rational sciences in the medieval Middle East for the period we are studying here. The opposition Thomas A. Carlson sees between, on the one hand, the ‘*ulamā*’ and the Islamic rulers, and on the other, the physicians – whose religious affiliation was far less constrained – can also be extended to the practitioners of rational sciences other than medicine (Carlson, *Garden of the reasonable*, 99-100; I thank Nathan Gibson for bringing this article to my attention). However, there is a debate regarding later periods. In the field of medicine for example, Max Meyerhof’s assumption that the medical personnel was becoming predominantly Muslim starting from the fifth/eleventh century has been very influential until recently. Its traces can be found in the work of Mohammad Hannan Hassan, who chooses to stop his study of Jewish scholars in the medieval Middle East in the fifth/eleventh century, stating that the scientific contribution of Jews begins afterwards, and mainly in the Islamic West; Hassan, *Where were the Jews*, 105-106. Carlson very convincingly highlights the shortcomings of such an approach and demonstrates the necessity of taking into account the biases of the bio-bibliographical dictionaries we use as well as the regional variations behind the statistical data we extract from them; Carlson, *Garden of the reasonable*, 100, 104.
 - 4 The *Fihrist* was edited for the first time at the end of the nineteenth century (Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. Flügel) and was the object of several more editions during the following century (see in particular Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. Tajaddud, and Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. al-Shuwaymī). The most recent edition (Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. Sayyid) provides us now with a much better and more reliable version of this text (see Ayman Fu’ād Sayyid’s detailed account of the history of the *Fihrist*’s manuscripts and of the method he followed for establishing the text; Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. Sayyid, III, 69-220). Although it still suffers from some shortcomings (see Stewart, *Editing the Fihrist*, esp. 160-162, 178-181), these are nevertheless far less serious than the deficiencies of Gustav Flügel’s edition. Unless mentioned otherwise, we will quote Sayyid’s edition throughout this study.
 - 5 The only study that tackles this work as a whole is a short one written in Russian: Polosin, *Fixrist Ibn an-Nadima*. A general reflection about the structure can be found in Preissler, *Ordnungsprinzipien im Fihrist*. Some important work has also been done focusing on specific *maqālāt*, in particular Stewart, *Structure of the Fihrist*, and Toorawa, *Proximity, resemblance, sidebars and clusters*.

Religious Affiliation, Interreligious Collaboration, and Methodological Issues

The question of interreligious collaboration in scholarly contexts is often approached either through the lenses of tolerance and coexistence,⁶ or on the contrary by focusing on how faith can challenge intellectual activities.⁷ In this paper, we approach the issue of the religious affiliation of these scholars first and foremost from the point of view of scholarly identities and intellectual production, of the various ways of labeling affiliation, and of its varying importance in characterizing specific individuals. We take advantage of the perfect observation point offered by Ibn al-Nadīm's *Fihrist*. By gathering in one place all kinds of scholars, representing all periods from antiquity to early Islam, all fields of knowledge, and all religious affiliations, it allows us insight into a scholarly microcosm where we can observe the way the bookseller uses labels and depicts interactions within this small world.⁸

As we suggested above, the question we are taking under consideration here is twofold. One aspect consists in exploring whether Ibn al-Nadīm explicitly acknowledges the religious identity of the scholars he mentions and, where he does, what vocabulary, textual patterns, and logic stand behind this. When this kind of explicit characterization occurs, it also prompts us to reflect upon what this »religious affiliation« really means and what it implies in this context, since describing somebody as a »Christian«, a »Jew«, or a »Muslim«, or using more precise labels such as »Jacobite«, »Shi'ite«, or »Zoroastrian« can cover a wide range of relationships to religion, from the strict observance of all ritual practices implied by a religion to merely belonging to a community culturally influenced by a religion. Conversely, where explicit labels are lacking, one has to scrutinize the clues we deem relevant with a reasonable degree of reliability in order to assess the religion a given character.

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- 6 See for example the work of Emilie Savage-Smith, who shows that some scientific fields were accepted by all confessional communities, and that they were neutral enough to involve scientists from different religions working together; Savage-Smith, *Universality and neutrality of science*, 171-179. In his recent article, Thomas A. Carlson highlights the misunderstandings that can derive from the description of certain sciences, like medicine, as »secular«, and prefers the expression »religiously positive«, in the sense that these are not fields where religion is absent, but are characterized by their multireligious dimension; Carlson, *Garden of the reasonable*, 112-115.
- 7 Following Ignác Goldziher's study of the attitude of the »old Islamic orthodoxy« towards secular science (Goldziher, *Stellung der alten islamischen Orthodoxie*), there is a whole tradition focusing on the alleged – mostly Sunni – opposition faced by these sciences in medieval Islamic society and on the role played by non-Muslim scholars in the development of this field of knowledge. In a famous and groundbreaking article, Sabra showed how this misrepresentation of Islamic society contributed to the popularization of what he calls the »marginality thesis«; Sabra, *Appropriation and subsequent naturalization*, 229-236. For more recent and insightful reflections on the shortcomings of an approach focusing on the opposition between »secular sciences« and »Islam«, and a critical reflection about the historiography of Islamic secular sciences, see Sonja Brentjes's work; e.g., Brentjes, *Prison of categories*.
- 8 Among the features of biographical dictionaries, Wadad al-Qadi outlines »their casting the net very wide indeed to include in their ranks wide ranging and diverse groups of scholars, religious and secular, Arab and non-Arab, Muslim and non-Muslim, orthodox and sectarian, free and slave, rich and poor, pious and impious, old and young, men and women, people of sound health and people with physical defects, and much more« (al-Qadi, *Scholars' alternative history*, 43). This perfectly fits the diversity of scholars, especially from the point of view of their religious belonging, that we find in Ibn al-Nadīm's *Fihrist*.

The other aspect deals with specific cases of what we refer to as »interreligious scholarly collaboration«, that is to say, situations in which scholars sharing different religious backgrounds are depicted as working together on a given subject. In that respect, we are trying here to identify such situations, to study their context, the Baghdadi bookseller's attitude towards them, and whether he uses specific categories to describe them or does not explicitly outline their existence. Both aspects can shed light on the way Ibn al-Nadīm envisions interreligious interactions, but also on his attitude towards Islamic intellectual activity as a whole and its place in the Abbasid context.

Before getting to these two aspects of our inquiry, some clarifications are necessary regarding the method of building the data underlying this study. In order to identify religious affiliations and interreligious collaborations, one could be tempted to rely on the very rich and very detailed indices provided in Ayman Fu'ād Sayyid's edition.⁹ Unfortunately, though undoubtedly useful, they prove seriously insufficient in that regard. It is not surprising to see that there is no specific entry for cases of interreligious collaboration, and we would rarely find indices taking into account this kind of phenomenon. What is more remarkable is that religious affiliations are not really accounted for either: there is no way to easily spot characters explicitly described as »Christian«, »Jew«, or »Zoroastrian«, for example, since the corresponding entries *al-naṣrānī*, *al-yahūdī*, and *al-majūsī* do not exist.¹⁰ The only relevant entries are those referring to faith-based categories applied collectively, such as »Christians« (*naṣārā*), »Jews« (*yahūd*), and »Zoroastrians« (*majūs*), or in combination with the term »group« or »doctrine« (*madhhab*), such as »the group of the Jacobite Christians« (*madhhab al-naṣārā al-ya'qūbiyya*). Even in those cases, we found several instances belonging to such categories that do not appear in these indices where they would be expected. For example, considering just the seventh section of the work, the indices allow us to spot six mentions of collective religious labels, where there are in reality six more that should have been mentioned, and we find an additional 18 cases where Ibn al-Nadīm directly indicates the religious affiliation of scholars. As is always the case, only a close and continuous reading of the *Fihrist* can help us grasp the religious affiliations and the interreligious collaborations mentioned in this work.¹¹

9 See in particular the *Kashshāf al-muṣṭalahāt wa-l-wazā'if wa-l-alqāb* (ed. Sayyid, IV, 438-448) and the *Kashshāf al-firaq wa-l-qabā'il wa-l-ṭawā'if wa-l-jamā'āt* (ed. Sayyid, IV, 449-458).

10 One could object that such entries are frequently discarded from indices since they would return too many results and would therefore prove useless for the reader. In the present case, this is not true, since, as we will see, these explicit religious affiliations, although present, are not widely used by Ibn al-Nadīm anywhere in his work.

11 One could think of additional tools for spotting explicit religious affiliations. These include the indices to Bayard Dodge's translation, but these are too general, consisting of a biographical index (Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, trans. Dodge, II, 931-1135), which gathers the most relevant details regarding the characters but does not really take into account the religious dimension, and a general index (Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, trans. Dodge, II, 1136-1149), which mentions religious affiliations only when they are used as collective labels (e.g., »Jacobites«). A useful resource to turn to is the ongoing »Onomasticon Arabicum« project, hosted by the Institut de recherche et d'histoire des textes in Paris (onomasticon.irht.cnrs.fr/, accessed on 30 October 2022). Although the *Fihrist* is not one of the sources currently included in its searchable online database, it can help identify the religious affiliation of scholars appearing in later biographical dictionaries, sometimes with more detail than is mentioned by Ibn al-Nadīm; however, for the kind of research we are dealing with here, it cannot be more than an occasional help. When working specifically on Islamic scholars dealing with rational sciences, a highly valuable resource is to be found on the Islamic Scientific Manuscripts Initiative website (ismi.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/search-persons, accessed on 30 October 2022), which contains very rich and reliable biographical information.

To some extent, our approach shares certain features with the methodology that Mohammad Hannan Hassan developed when trying to identify Jewish scholars in Ibn al-Nadīm's *Fihrist* and in Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a's (d. 668/1269) *Uyūn al-anbā' fī ṭabaqāt al-aṭibbā'*, and we are facing similar challenges in some ways, especially when it comes to evaluating the religious affiliation of scholars about which the sources give no explicit information. We also agree with him about the necessity of combining the quantitative analysis of the bio-bibliographical sources with a qualitative analysis.¹² However, we should also take into account certain limitations of this kind of source, namely potential discrepancies between the scholarly milieu we are studying – and in this case, its religious diversity in particular – and the picture drawn by the authors of our dictionaries, which is shaped both by their biases and by the information that they selected from among the sources that were available at the time they were writing. Thomas A. Carlson has shown how these medieval authors' representations of the Islamic society could influence their choices about the inclusion in their work of scholars belonging to a specific religious community.¹³ In the present line of inquiry, our aim is not to assess the multireligious dimension of a specific scholarly milieu, but on the contrary to understand how Ibn al-Nadīm's depiction of a milieu that is famous for involving scholars of various religious affiliations sheds some light on his own conception of rational sciences and of the social status of their practitioners.

Ibn al-Nadīm's Apparent Disinterest in Religious Affiliations

Ibn al-Nadīm is all the more interesting for our inquiry in that – according to the biographical information we have about him, which derives almost exclusively from his own work – he himself was in close contact during his whole life with scholars belonging to religious communities other than his own. An Imāmī Shi'i, he was very close to prominent members of the Ismā'īli movement during the first stage of his life, when he was still in Mosul; Devin Stewart has demonstrated that he was closely associated with at least three members of that community, including al-Ḥasanābādī, who was his teacher.¹⁴ Equally, Valeriy Polosin had earlier shown Ibn al-Nadīm's close connection with the Baghdadi Christian community: the philosopher Yaḥyā b. 'Adī is the most famous of the many Christian scholars he knew personally.¹⁵

The material gathered in the *Fihrist*, and the way it is presented, reflects the openness of the bookseller towards other religious confessions, and accounts for what Devin Stewart calls »a fairly ecumenical approach to matters of faith«. ¹⁶ His catalogue is indeed characterized by Ibn al-Nadīm's desire for objectivity,¹⁷ his intellectual curiosity, and his effort to gather precise and reliable information, be it oral or written, when it comes to minority groups, and especially when these groups are defined by their religion.¹⁸

12 Hassan, *Where were the Jews*, 123.

13 Carlson, *Garden of the reasonable*, 100-101.

14 Stewart, *Ibn al-Nadīm's Ismā'īli contacts*, 39-40.

15 Polosin, *Fixrist Ibn an-Nadima*, 94, quoted by Stewart, *Ibn al-Nadīm's Ismā'īli contacts*, 40; Stewart, *Abū'l-Faraj*, 134.

16 Stewart, *Ibn al-Nadīm's Ismā'īli contacts*, 40. In the same vein, see also Stewart, *Abū'l-Faraj*, 140.

17 Stewart, *Ibn al-Nadīm's Ismā'īli contacts*, 40.

18 Stewart, *Abū'l-Faraj*, 140.

We are thus dealing with a bookseller that is also a real scholar, who is undoubtedly aware of the religious diversity of the Baghdadi scientific milieu of his time, and we could expect his work to reflect explicitly this multireligious dimension in general, and even more clearly in the particular section of it that is devoted to rational sciences.

Going through Ibn al-Nadīm's depiction of the Islamic scholarly world, it is therefore striking to see that, when it comes to describing scholars, he does not highlight their religious affiliation, and shows a much stronger interest in their geographical origin, their rank among other specialists of the same field, the language(s) they mastered, and above all, of course, the works they composed.¹⁹

However, the Baghdadi bookseller does give us some hints about scholars' religion. In the most obvious cases, he mentions *nisbas* that point directly towards a specific faith. In the seventh section alone, 15 individuals – all except one belonging to the Islamic era – are associated with unambiguous terms of this type (see Table 1).²⁰ For example, Ibrāhīm b. 'Abd Allāh is described as the »Christian translator« (*al-nāqil al-naṣrānī*);²¹ the famous astronomer al-Battānī appears as a Sabian coming from Ḥarrān (*wa-kāna aṣluhu min Ḥarrān ṣābi'an*).²² Sometimes, the qualifications are more precise, for example in the case of Ḥunayn b. Isḥāq, a member of the 'Ibād (*al-'ibādī*), the famous Christian community of al-Ḥīra. The physician Sinān b. Thābit is the only scholar explicitly described as Muslim, in two different places, both times in the context of his conversion, leaving the Sabian faith in order to become a Muslim.²³ The first time, Ibn al-Nadīm simply states that he »died as a Muslim« (*wa-māta musliman*), without giving more details.²⁴ The second time, in the last part of the seventh section, in his review of physicians, he gives a fuller account of his life and tells the story of his conversion, in relation to the caliph al-Qāhir (r. 320-322 / 932-934).²⁵ Ibn al-Nadīm also mentions Sanad b. 'Alī's conversion from Judaism to Islam using the verb »to convert« (*aslama*) but not the adjective »Muslim« (*muslim*) to describe him.²⁶

19 Discussing Ibn al-Nadīm's and Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a's works, Mohammad Hannan Hassan notes the tendency of these two authors to »provide minimal information that does not go beyond the names and the science these individuals were involved in«; Hassan, *Where were the Jews*, 109.

20 Table 1 contains 18 entries, but three scholars – Sanad b. 'Alī, Sinān b. Thābit, and Sahl b. Bishr – appear twice.

21 Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. Sayyid, II, 174.

22 Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. Sayyid, II, 249.

23 The only other mention of a person being a Muslim in Ibn al-Nadīm's whole work is to be found at the beginning of the ninth *maqāla*, when the author mentions the Sabians of Ḥarrān (*ḥarnāniyya*), and says that after al-Ma'mūn forced most of them to convert, some of them pretended to have converted to Islam but continued marrying *ḥarnāniyya* women and made their sons embrace the Muslim faith while making their girls embrace the *ḥarnāni* faith (Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. Sayyid, II, 363-364). Apart from the aforementioned instances, a specific person is never described as a »*muslim*«, and »*muslimūn*« appear exclusively as a collective category.

24 Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. Sayyid, II, 229.

25 Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. Sayyid, II, 313.

26 Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. Sayyid, II, 236.

Table 1: Explicit religious affiliations in the seventh section of Ibn al-Nadīm's *Fihrist*

Name of scholar	Faith-based <i>nisba</i> or adjective	Page reference (ed. Sayyid)	<i>Maqāla</i>	<i>Fann</i>
Ibrāhīm b. 'Abd Allāh	<i>al-naṣrānī</i>	II, 174	7	1
Diqlaṭyānūs	<i>al-qibṭī</i>	II, 180	7	1
'Isā b. Usayd	<i>al-naṣrānī</i>	II, 229	7	2
Sinān b. Thābit	<i>muslim</i>	II, 229	7	2
Māshā'allāh b. Athrī	<i>yahūdī</i>	II, 233	7	2
Sahl b. Bishr	<i>al-yahūdī</i>	II, 234	7	2
Sanad b. 'Alī	<i>al-yahūdī</i>	II, 236	7	2
Sanad b. 'Alī	<i>yahūdī</i>	II, 236	7	2
Sahl b. Bishr	<i>al-yahūdī</i>	II, 239	7	2
'Abdallāh b. Masrūr	<i>al-naṣrānī</i>	II, 244	7	2
Ibn Saymūyah	<i>yahūdī</i>	II, 246	7	2
al-Battānī	<i>ṣābi'</i>	II, 249	7	2
al-Dandānī	<i>al-naṣrānī</i>	II, 251	7	2
Ibn Rawḥ	<i>al-ṣābi'</i>	II, 257	7	2
Ḥunayn b. Ishāq	<i>al-'ibādī</i>	II, 289	7	3
Sābūr b. Sahl	<i>naṣrānī</i>	II, 300	7	3
Sīs al-Mannānī	<i>al-mannānī</i>	II, 308	7	3
Sinān b. Thābit	<i>muslim</i>	II, 313	7	3

Aside from these straightforward *nisbas* and adjectives, it is sometimes possible to deduce with some confidence the religion of certain scholars on the basis of other clues, such as titles or names of professions (e.g., »the priest«, *al-Qass*, in the case of Yūḥannā al-Qass),²⁷ their native city or region (e.g., people coming from Ḥarrān are more likely to be Sabian, people from Jundishābūr are more likely to be Christian), or even particular names (Greek- and Syriac-sounding names possibly indicating current or former Christians, and Persian-sounding names possibly indicating current or former Zoroastrians). It should be stressed, however, that these elements have to be treated with extreme caution, since they can be entirely misleading, and can never be used independently to assert a scholar's religion with certainty.²⁸

27 Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. Sayyid, II, 257.

28 An example of the unreliability of such clues is that of al-Biṭrīq and his son Yaḥyā b. al-Biṭrīq, who worked for the Abbasid caliphs, the first for al-Manṣūr and the second for al-Ma'mūn. Whereas the title »al-Biṭrīq« is sometimes interpreted as meaning »patriarch«, it should instead be understood as »patrician«, and points toward the social status of al-Biṭrīq's family rather than his religious affiliation; see, e.g., Dunlop, *Translations of al-Biṭrīq*. Mohammad Hannan Hassan makes similar remarks on the dangers of identifying a scholar's religious affiliation on the sole basis of his name; Hassan, *Where were the Jews*, 109-110.

This first overview of religious affiliations scattered through the seventh section seems to indicate that Ibn al-Nadīm does not see religion as a criterion that is crucial when it comes to selecting the scholars to whom he devotes an entry or for arranging their order in a given section. To him, it clearly is not as meaningful a characteristic as, for example, their skills or their native region. One of the reasons for him not to highlight this element might be that it is largely obvious for him and for his readership. He keeps count of books and epistles written by leading scholars of all fields of human knowledge and has a strong Baghdadi focus when it comes to scholars from the Abbasid period, so their respective religious affiliations might have been common knowledge in his circles, and he would therefore not have felt the need to express it as systematically as other features.²⁹ It seems that religious *nisbas* are used rather as a means of disambiguation when the person is not otherwise identifiable.

However, it would be an exaggeration to say that religion has no effect on the field of knowledge according to Ibn al-Nadīm, or that it does not play a role in the architecture of his work. Religious affiliation can be an important criterion for him when it defines not scholars but sciences and the political and social environment where those sciences develop. At the beginning of this seventh section, he presents several stories that can be seen as a kind of introduction to the biographical and bibliographical entries that follow, and which deal with the alleged origins of the »ancient sciences« and of their introduction into Islamic culture. The first and second of these focus on the origin of astrology and are borrowed from Abū Sahl al-Faḍl b. Nawbakht³⁰ and the astrologer Abū Ma'shar, respectively; the third emphasizes the hostility of the Byzantines towards *falsafa* (Greek philosophy), and the fourth is devoted to translation activities.³¹ One of the most important features of these narratives is the apparently strong anti-Christian bias they reveal. In reality, it is not Christianity as such that is targeted, and we have just seen that Ibn al-Nadīm's close association with Baghdadi Christian scholars was well established. Rather, because Christianity was the official religion of Byzantium, it appears throughout the accounts he quotes as profoundly hostile to the rational sciences he is going to explore in this section. The Baghdadi bookseller thus conveys the idea that the rational sciences that he deals with in this section of his encyclopedia should

29 This familiarity of the Baghdadi bookseller with the Abbasid scholarly milieu would also account for his well-known tendency to refer to some scholars in a very allusive and almost informal way, which sometimes makes it difficult for the reader to know whom exactly he has in mind. See, for example, his mention of »Abū 'Alī«, a very common *kunya* that could indicate many different scholars, where only the context can help the reader guess that he probably has in mind Ibn Zur'a; Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. Sayyid, II, 209.

30 Kevin van Bladel has studied the sources and proposed a new translation of this first text, which is an excerpt of the earliest extant history of science in Arabic literature. It gives an insight into scientific teaching in the Zoroastrian context at the end of the second / eighth century (Van Bladel, *Arabic history of science*, 41-42, 62). By contrast with the narratives that follow, it depicts the positive influence of a pre-Islamic religion on the preservation of scientific knowledge.

31 For a general analysis of these introductory narratives, see Saliba, *Islamic Science*, 29-49.

be flourishing among the Byzantines who see themselves as the natural heirs of the ancient Greeks, but they are now rejected by the Christian polities, implying that their new home is the Islamic society of scholars. We see here a trace of the philhellenism combined with anti-Byzantine ideology described by Dimitri Gutas.³² A Christian religious, political, and social context therefore appears as a dangerous environment for this kind of knowledge, which would have been threatened by destruction if it had not been saved by Islamic scholars, as recounted in the well-known narrative.³³

Physical and Virtual Loci of Interreligious Collaboration

Now that we have a better grasp of the *Fihrist's* content as far as religious affiliation is concerned, what can we say about scholarly activities that go beyond religious boundaries? Two facts are clear. First, Ibn al-Nadīm does not specifically emphasize situations that can be described as »interreligious scholarly collaborations«. He never draws the reader's attention to these occasions, nor does he resort to a specific term or a specific category to report them. They might therefore remain completely unnoticed. The use of explicit *nisbas* is too rare and too scattered to reveal this and it is never done in such a way as to immediately make visible where a given academic activity crosses religious boundaries.

Second, in spite of their relative invisibility, the *Fihrist* contains a significant number of situations that can be labeled as »interreligious scholarly collaborations«, and their analysis can help us better understand the bookseller's intellectual and encyclopedic project. If we understand these »collaborations« as activities involving at least two characters having different religious backgrounds, including rulers or officials commissioning works – which is all the more relevant since some Barmakids and the caliph al-Ma'mūn were extremely invested in the scientific and intellectual endeavors appearing in this section – we count 27 such cases throughout the *Fihrist's* seventh section. Collaborations among scholars, strictly defined, result in 14 cases, to which we should add four cases where scholars fund or oversee the work of another scholar (see Table 2). Such occurrences, therefore, cannot be described as pervasive, but they nonetheless have an indisputable statistical significance.

32 Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*, 83-95.

33 This should also be linked to the famous narratives around the transfer of philosophical teaching from Alexandria to Baghdad. For a very thorough analysis of the different versions of this theme, including its connection with medical knowledge, see Gutas, *Alexandria to Baghdad*.

Table 2: Interreligious collaborations in the seventh section of Ibn al-Nadīm's Fihrist

Scholar or patron (A)	Scholar(s) (B) involved with A	Type of collaboration (A → B)	Intellectual field	Religions involved	Page reference (ed. Sayyid)	Maqāla	Fann
Banū al-Munajjim	Ḥunayn b. Ishāq, Ḥubaysh b. al-Ḥasan, Thābit b. Qurra	funds	translation (<i>falsafa</i>)	Christianity, Islam	II, 143	7	1
Khālīd b. Yazīd b. Mu'awiya	Iṣṭifān al-Qadīm	funds	translation (<i>falsafa</i>)	Christianity, Islam	II, 144	7	1
al-Manṣūr	al-Biṭriq	funds	translation (<i>falsafa</i>)	Christianity, Islam	II, 144	7	1
al-Ḥasan b. Sahl	Yaḥyā b. al-Biṭriq	collaborates with	translation (<i>falsafa</i>)	Christianity, Islam	II, 144	7	1
al-Ma'mūn	Ḥabīb b. Bahrīz (bishop of al-Mawṣil)	funds	commentary (<i>falsafa</i>)	Christianity, Islam	II, 146	7	1
Marlāḥī	'Alī b. Ibrāhīm al-Dahlī	collaborates with	translation (<i>falsafa</i>)	Christianity, Islam	II, 149	7	1
Ishāq b. Sulaymān b. 'Alī al-Ḥāshimī	Dādīshū'	funds	commentary/translation (<i>falsafa</i>)	Christianity, Islam	II, 149	7	1
al-Kindī	Ḥasnawayh, Naftawayh, Salmawayh, Aḥmad b. al- Ṭayyīb al-Sarakhsī	teaches	<i>falsafa</i>	Christianity (+ Zoroastrian and Sabian back- ground)	II, 195	7	1
Ibn Kurnayb	Abū Bishr Mattā b. Yūnus	teaches	<i>falsafa</i>	Christianity, Islam	II, 201	7	1
al-Fārābī	Yaḥyā b. 'Adī	teaches	<i>falsafa</i>	Christianity (Jacobite), Islam	II, 202	7	1
Muḥammad b. Mūsā	Thābit b. Qurra	teaches, collaborates with	astronomy	Islam, Sabianism	II, 227	7	2
al-Mu'taḍid	Thābit b. Qurra	funds	astronomy	Islam, Sabianism	II, 227	7	2

Scholar or patron (A)	Scholar(s) (B) involved with A	Type of collaboration (A → B)	Intellectual field	Religions involved	Page reference (ed. Sayyid)	<i>Maqāla</i>	<i>Fann</i>
Thābit b. Qurra	ʿIsā b. Usayd	teaches, collaborates with	translation, rational sciences	Christianity, Sabianism	II, 229	7	2
Thābit b. Qurra	Sinān b. Thābit	teaches	unspecified	Islam, Sabianism	II, 229	7	2
Thābit b. Qurra	Ibn Kurnayb and his brother Abū al-ʿAlāʾ	teaches	unspecified	Islam, Sabianism	II, 229	7	2
Thābit b. Qurra	al-Ḥasan b. ʿUbayd Allāh b. Sulaymān b. Wahb	teaches	unspecified	Islam, Sabianism	II, 231	7	2
Yahyā b. al-Bitriq	ʿUmar b. al-Farrukhān	funds	translation (astronomy)	Christianity, Islam	II, 232	7	2
al-Ḥasan b. Sahl	Sahl b. Bishr	funds	unspecified	Judaism, Islam	II, 234	7	2
al-Maʾmūn	Sanad b. ʿAlī	funds	astronomy	Islam, Judaism (+ conversion to Islam)	II, 236	7	2
Sahl b. Bishr	Khurzād̄h b. Dārshād al-Ḥāsib	teaches	astronomy	Judaism, Islam (?)	II, 239	7	2
Māshāʾallah b. Athrī	Yahyā b. Ghālīb al-Khayyāṭ	teaches	astronomy	Judaism, Islam (?)	II, 240	7	2
Abū Maʾshar	ʿAbdallāh b. Masrūr	teaches	astronomy	Christianity, Islam	II, 244	7	2
(Series of makers of astronomical devices)	(Apprentices of the aforementioned makers)	teaches	astronomical devices	Christianity, Islam, Sabianism	II, 265	7	2
Muḥammad b. Mūsā	Ḥunayn b. Ishāq	funds	translation (medicine)	Christianity, Islam	II, 273	7	3
Banū Mūsā	Ḥunayn b. Ishāq	funds	translation (medicine)	Christianity, Islam	II, 290	7	3
Qusṭā b. Lūqā	Aḥmad b. ʿAlī b. Yahyā al-Munajjim	argues with	theology	Christianity, Islam	II, 293	7	3
Several Abbasid caliphs	Bakhtishūʿ b. Jūrjis	funds	medicine	Christianity, Islam	II, 298	7	3

Behind these numbers lie a diversity of situations. The two main modalities of such collaborations are teaching on the one hand and collective labor on a given work on the other, whether in order to translate the work (or correct a preexisting translation) or to comment on it. The disciplines most prone to such collaborations are *falsafa* and astronomy, with translation playing an important role in both cases. To illustrate this kind of collegial intellectual activity, we can consider the example of the polymath Thābit b. Qurra. After sketching the outlines of his life – his full name, his date of birth (221 AH) and death (288 AH), his alleged profession as a money changer in Ḥarrān, his association with the Banū Mūsā and then al-Muʿtaḍid, and his Sabian faith – Ibn al-Nadīm gives a list of his works.³⁴ Immediately afterward, he enumerates his students, naming among others the Christian ʿĪsā b. Usayd and his own son Sinān b. Thābit, a physician who converted to Islam, as mentioned earlier, but he does not stress the interreligious dimension of these teaching relationships.³⁵ When he can, he gives us more details about the scientific collaboration that resulted from their master-student relationship: ʿĪsā b. Usayd is said to have translated from Syriac to Arabic, in Thābit's presence, a »book of Thābit's answers to the questions asked by ʿĪsā b. Usayd« (*Kitāb jawābāt Thābit li-masāʾil ʿĪsā b. Usayd*).³⁶ In the other instances where we notice such a collaboration between scholars from different religious backgrounds, we find the same lack of emphasis on the specific setting, and the same kind of information combining the nature of the link between them and the scientific outcome of their collective work involving one or several books or epistles.

Furthermore, it could be argued that interreligious collaborations also happened in settings other than where contemporary scholars worked together as they physically taught, translated, and commented. It is striking to see how, in Ibn al-Nadīm's depiction, the collective work produced across generations of scholars sharing different cultural and religious backgrounds and involving the scientific legacy of some of the greatest pre-Islamic and Islamic scientific authorities can also appear metaphorically as a place of interreligious collaboration.

One of the most illuminating cases involves Euclid's *Elements*. Ibn al-Nadīm reports all the successive translations and commentaries of this fundamental work for the science of geometry: he describes the translation made by al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf b. Maṭar (fl. end of the second/eighth century and beginning of the third/ninth century) and then that by Ishāq b. Ḥunayn (d. 298/910), corrected by Thābit b. Qurra (d. 288/901); and the partial translation by Abū ʿUthmān al-Dimashqī (fl. end of the third/ninth century), seen by Ibn al-Nadīm himself in ʿAlī b. Aḥmad al-ʿImrānī's library.³⁷ Leaving the domain of translations for the domain of commentaries, we find similarly intense and cross-cultural activity: Irun, al-Nayrīzī (d. 309/921), al-Karābīsī (fl. end of the third/ninth century), al-Jawharī (fl. c. 214/830), and al-Māhānī (d. 256/870) all wrote complete or partial commentaries on Euclid's *Elements*.³⁸ A couple of lines further on, we see other renowned scholars involved in this collective work,

34 Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. Sayyid, II, 227-228.

35 Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. Sayyid, II, 229.

36 Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. Sayyid, II, 229.

37 Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. Sayyid, II, 208.

38 Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. Sayyid, II, 208.

such as Abū Ja'far al-Khāzin al-Khurāsānī (d. c. 350-360/961-971), Abū al-Wafā' al-Būzjānī (d. 387/997), Ibn Rāhawayh al-Arrajānī (d. 237/852), Abū al-Qāsim al-Anṭākī (d. 376/987), Sanad b. 'Alī (d. c. 249/864), and Abū Yūsuf al-Rāzī (fl. end of the third/ninth century).³⁹ Here, we cannot speak of actual collaboration, since these characters did not actually all work together, and not all of them were contemporaries. It is the work of Euclid that constitutes the common ground of these intellectual efforts, rather than direct exchanges between contemporary scholars, and it can be seen as a »metaphorical collaboration«. This kind of collaboration covers both the fact that some of the scholars mentioned commented on the works of their predecessors or amended them, especially in the case of translations, and the fact that they all took part in commenting on and analyzing Euclid's production. This accumulation of scholars working on the same original ancient texts, without necessarily quoting each other, does produce a shared body of literature and happens to have a strong interreligious dimension. The account of this collective scientific endeavor therefore appears to materialize an uninterrupted and asynchronous conversation with its roots in the work of a Greek mathematician from the fourth and third century BC that continues all the way to tenth-century Baghdad, and crosses linguistic, cultural, and – of relevance for our present topic – religious boundaries.⁴⁰

Similar interpretations could be made from the comments on the works of Hippocrates,⁴¹ or, in a different context, from the construction of astronomical instruments,⁴² or the tradition of the books constituting the curriculum of the *mutaṭabbibūn* (physicians).⁴³ They work as virtual *loci* of collaboration, symbolic places where scholars meet, comment, and argue with each other throughout centuries. Their continuous exchanges are built on a sense of common methods and common authorities and in the end they produce a cultural and scientific blending that is at the heart of the Abbasid scholarly identity.⁴⁴

Seeing several scholars working on the same text or on the same body of literature does not at first sight appear unusual. It is, on the contrary, the very foundation of a scholar's work, and can therefore be considered a fundamental and obvious dimension of any biographical dictionary dealing with figures famous for their contribution to the intellectual field. It is indeed very common to mention among a scholar's works the translations, commentaries, or refutations of previous works that they authored. What strikes us here as remarkable is the fact that Ibn al-Nadīm, instead of spreading these interactions with a specific work through

39 Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. Sayyid, II, 209.

40 Thomas A. Carlson's analysis follows a similar line when he states that »the book culture of medieval Middle Eastern medicine also fostered contacts across religious lines« (Carlson, *Garden of the reasonable*, 109) and illustrates that with the fact that the works of Ḥunayn b. Isḥāq, a Christian physician of the third / ninth century, have been commented on by at least nine Muslim physicians, some of them, like Ibn Riḍwān (d. 453 / 1061), belonging to much later periods.

41 Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. Sayyid, II, 273.

42 Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. Sayyid, II, 265.

43 Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. Sayyid, II, 277.

44 This idea of a continuous scholarly conversation that spreads across centuries and boundaries, and of this conversation as a virtual »place«, has been very convincingly argued by Muhsin J. al-Musawi with his concept of a »Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters«; Musawi, *Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters*. On the fruitful conceptualization of texts as *loci*, see also Christian Jacob's concept of »places of knowledge« (*lieux de savoir*); Jacob, *Des mondes lettrés*.

the relevant entries of each scholar involved in this process, takes as his starting point the work or the body of knowledge that triggered this scholarly activity and lists all those who engaged in it. When he does this, the work and its subsequent translations and commentaries become the structuring element of that passage. He presents the reader with a body of literature consisting both of juxtaposed works related to a single text or group of texts and of the collective work resulting from different scholars engaging with their predecessors' work on this original text.

Scholars have known for a long time how much the inner structure of a biographical dictionary is influenced by its context of production and more specifically by its author's own conception of the field to which they dedicate their work.⁴⁵ More recently, in their study of the representations of Asclepius, Hippocrates, and Galen in Islamic biographical dictionaries from the tenth to the thirteenth century, Keren Abbou Hershkovits and Zohar Hadromi-Allouche have shown that the entries in these works give us less information about the life of the three famous physicians than about the attitude of the Islamic authors and the society of their times towards medical science.⁴⁶ To a certain extent, the same is true here for Ibn al-Nadīm, whose description of the developments around certain works tells us less about the works themselves than the way he sees the structure of the scholarly activity around them. Although it is difficult to determine with certainty why Ibn al-Nadīm chose this structure, it seems very clear that the way he shapes these specific accounts has to do with the way he conceives the intellectual fields to which they refer. Wadad al-Qadi demonstrated that one of the major assumptions underlying the composition of biographical dictionaries is that »knowledge resides in individual scholars«⁴⁷ rather than in institutions, and that dictionaries had to compensate for the resulting lack of continuity by adopting a series of features, some of them involving the structure of these works. One can argue here that this perspective means the micro-structure of the entries should also be taken into account. By making Euclid's *Elements* the focal point of this segment, Ibn al-Nadīm chose an alternative way of highlighting the continuity of scholarly activity. The result is that this metaphorical collaboration across all boundaries is the main feature associated with this specific body of knowledge.

The Construction of »Arabic« and »Islamic« Knowledge

How can we account for Ibn al-Nadīm's position regarding both religious affiliation and interreligious collaborations? If we step back and look at the results of our inquiry so far, we see that we are dealing with a bookseller who has an excellent knowledge of the scholarly milieu and its production, who seems perfectly aware of the impact of religious factors on the development of scientific works and generally knows the religious affiliations of the scholars he mentions but does not emphasize them, and who depicts several cases of interreligious collaboration without labeling them under a specific category of note. While he pays careful attention to geographical and »ethnic« origins – both the origins of various kinds of science

45 See for example Wadad al-Qadi's famous and important analysis regarding this matter; al-Qadi, *Biographical dictionaries: Inner structure*.

46 Abbou Hershkovits and Hadromi-Allouche, *Divine doctors*, 57-58.

47 Al-Qadi, *Scholars' alternative history*, 72.

and of scholars themselves – he does not depict the scholarly milieu as divided along faith-based lines. A partial explanation could be found in what Devin Stewart identified as Ibn al-Nadīm's »objectivity«, as discussed above, and in his desire to meet the demands of his Baghdadi contemporaries. In a multi-confessional society, the religious affiliation of scholars of the past might have been seen as irrelevant most of the time, and only worthy of mention in a limited number of cases, for example when it helped identify an individual or when it was crucial information for understanding an event involving a scholar or a feature of his career. However, this explanation seems to work only in a small number of situations.

If we compare Ibn al-Nadīm's writing with the much later work of Ibn al-Qiftī, who uses Ibn al-Nadīm as one of his main sources of information but adds many details and especially anecdotes involving cultural and religious differences among scholars, we see that we are dealing with a completely different perspective.⁴⁸ This, of course, has to do with the different nature of each author's project: one an Egyptian encyclopedist aiming to redact a »history« (*tārīkh*) with a larger role for narratives, the other a Baghdadi bookseller wanting to establish a »catalogue« (*fihrist*) focusing mainly on the written production and secondarily on the biography of scholars. But this alone does not account for the divergent treatment of their material. To do that, we need a recontextualization of Ibn al-Nadīm's work, an approach often neglected because of the manner in which his catalogue is usually regarded, but one which is nevertheless essential.⁴⁹

Ibn al-Nadīm is writing at the end of the fourth / tenth century, in the aftermath of vivid debates that mobilized grammarians, philologists, and poets. Broadly, the debates in this intellectual milieu involved the meaning of »Arabic identity« and of the cultural features defining »Arabness«.⁵⁰ He has inherited the outcome of a discussion that was still ongoing, especially when it came to the status of *'arabiyya*.⁵¹ By focusing explicitly on the Arabic language as a decisive criterion for selecting and ordering his encyclopedic compilation, we suggest he might in fact engage in this debate indirectly. He depicts a community of scholars who share a link with the Arabic language, either because their work was ultimately translated into Arabic, or because it was written in Arabic from the outset. At the same time, he seems to promote an Islamic culture that combines features and material coming from the Islamic period itself with the legacy of pre-Islamic knowledge. There is therefore a dialectic between the unifying and prevailing status of the Arabic language and the diversity of intellectual production and its pre-Islamic and Islamic roots. By describing the physical and the virtual *loci* of collaborations and by including but not emphasizing interreligious collaborations, he shapes

48 See for example Ibn al-Qiftī's account of the relationship between Ḥunayn b. Ishāq and Yuḥannā b. Māsawayh, both Christian but from different communities – the first from al-Ḥīra and the second from Jundīshābūr – and his commentary regarding the Christian religion; Ibn al-Qiftī, *Tārīkh al-ḥukamā'*, ed. Lippert, 173-174.

49 In her study of the structure of the biographical dictionaries of the first nine centuries of Islam, Wadad al-Qadi outlines the lack of studies dealing with the relationship between this genre and its social and cultural context; al-Qadi, *Biographical dictionaries: Inner structure*, 94. This is especially true when it comes to Ibn al-Nadīm's *Fihrist*, whose global structure and content need to be analyzed in light of the deep intellectual and cultural transformations at work in Abbasid society during the second half of the fourth / tenth century.

50 See Webb, *Imagining the Arabs*, especially chapters 5 and 6.

51 Peter Webb shows for example how one of Ibn al-Nadīm's contemporaries, the philologist Ibn Fāris (d. 395 / 1004), strongly stresses the link between Arabic language and Arabic identity; Webb, *Imagining the Arabs*, 312-319.

the representation of an Islamic intellectual world defined by its common features – shared language, shared authorities, shared references, and shared methods – rather than divided along religious boundaries. This brings us to the concept of »communities of knowledge« and to its meaning: what we see here is precisely the description of a community of knowledge, a vision of a scholarly realm not polarized by religious boundaries, and where scholars would strive for the construction of a culture that is not Muslim, nor Jewish, nor Christian – in the sense that it is not defined within the ideological frame of a specific community – but Arabic and Islamic. The evidence points strongly in this direction, but this line of inquiry has to be pursued: Can this hypothesis be more firmly established? Can it be accurately applied to other sections of the *Fihrist*? And can it more precisely assess the connections between this work's structure and the cultural and social context to which it belongs?

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List of Tables

- Table 1: Explicit religious affiliations in the seventh section of Ibn al-Nadīm's *Fihrist*
- Table 2: Interreligious collaborations in the seventh section of Ibn al-Nadīm's *Fihrist*