



Jan Dominik Bogataj

Byzantine Theology and Islam: Paul of Antioch's Irenic Approach

Bizantinska teologija in islam: irenični pristop Pavla iz Antiohije

Abstract: *For the West, Islam has generally been seen as a typical example of exotic, dangerous and unknown culture, whereas for the Byzantines, Islam was much better known, since they had to live together with Muslims for centuries and therefore their attitude could not have been uniformly hostile but consisted of manifold attempts to hold a (theological) dialogue. The paper presents some key features of the heterogeneous Byzantine theology of Islam within the corpus of the theological polemical works which have been produced from 7th to the 13th century. After examining John Damascene (app. 676–749), the first Byzantine theologian who wrote on Islam and gained knowledge of Islam at first hand as a civil servant in the court of the Umayyad Caliph in Damascus, the present study examines a relatively unknown work, Paul of Antioch's Letter to a Muslim Friend (MS Sinai Arabic 448; 531). The text of this Melkite bishop of Sidon was written in Arabic somewhere around 1200 and is one of the most authentic contributions to the Byzantine-Islam polemics about Paul's irenic approach and his interpretation of Qur'an. Although it still applies a clear apologetic approach, Paul's Letter may be viewed from the perspective of the theological dialogue between Christians and Muslims.*

Key words: *Christian-Muslim dialogue, John Damascene, interpretation of Quran, polemics, apologetics*

Povzetek: Na splošno so Zahodnjaki islam stereotipno videli kot primer eksotične, grozeče in neznane kulture, medtem ko ga je bizantinska civilizacija poznala veliko bolje, saj so morali stoletja živeti skupaj z muslimani. Njihov odnos je bil zato veliko bolj kompleksen in ni mogel biti zgolj enostransko sovražen, temveč najdemo tudi številne in raznolike poskuse teološkega dialoga. Razprava tematizira nekaj ključnih značilnosti heterogene bizantinske teologije islama znotraj korpusa teoloških polemičnih del, ki so nastajala od 7. do 13. stoletja. Po predstavitvi nauka Janeza Damaščana (ok. 676–749), prvega bizantinskega teologa, ki je pisal o islamu, saj je bil visoki uradnik na dvoru umajjadskega kalifa v Damasku in se je tako lahko spoznal z novo religijo iz prve roke, članek analizira delo Pavla iz Antiohije *Pismo muslimanskemu prijatelju* (MS Sinai Arabic 448/531). Delo melkitskega škofa iz Sidona je bilo napisano okoli leta 1200 in je eden najbolj izvirnih prispevkov znotraj bizantinske polemike z islamom zaradi Pavlovega ireničnega pristopa in njegove interpretacije Korana. Čeprav

kot otrok svojega časa uvaja jasen apologetičen pristop, lahko Pavlovo *Pismo* razumemo v perspektivi teološkega dialoga med krščanstvom in islamom.

Ključne besede: krščansko-islamski dialog, Janez Damaščan, razlaga Korana, polemika, apologetika

Introduction

The debate about St. Francis' encounter with the sultan al-Kāmil has gained fresh prominence in the recent period with many emphasizing the uniqueness of this event and its irreplaceable significance as one of the foundational symbols of Christian-Muslim dialogue. However, the research on this subject has been mostly restricted to the Latin or Western tradition and very little attention has been paid to the many previous centuries of the cohabitation between Byzantine Christians and Muslims which has started already in the 7th century.

The first section of this paper examines the main protagonists and theological ideas of the early Byzantine thought of Islam. Particular interest is paid to St. John of Damascus, one of the founders of Byzantine doctrine of Islam, with a special attention to the proper understanding of stabilizing identity through engaging with other religion. The second part of this study analyses one of the most interesting chapters in the history of Christian-Muslim dialogue, the short *Letter to a Muslim Friend*, written by a Melkite bishop Paul of Antioch (Ar. Bulus al-Rahib al-Antaki). Despite the fact that the exact date of this document is unknown, it is certain that it dates from approximately the same period as the encounter between St. Francis and al-Kāmil. Paul's work can be regarded as one of the most irenic approaches in the otherwise strongly polemical and apologetical Byzantine theological tradition of responses to Islam. The final part presents the findings of this research and discusses them in the light of the actualization of Paul's ingenious hermeneutical method with a reference to the contemporary dialogue.

Before proceeding to the main part of this paper I would like to add another side reason for investigating the issue of Byzantine theology and just delicately mention the misunderstanding of Benedict XVI, pope emeritus, and his lecture on »Faith, Reason and the University« in Regensburg on September 12, 2006. He quoted the opinion of Byzantine Emperor



Manuel II. Palaiologos which was part of a broad theological arguing against the concept of a holy war, what quickly became considered offensive to a great part of the Muslim world. Without pursuing this sensitive issue any further, it is clear that good knowledge of Byzantine theology of Islam is very important also for contemporary dialogue.

1 Byzantine Theology and Islam

In order to understand how Byzantines viewed Islam, a broad spectrum of documents and writings needs to be examined. This includes not only polemics and histories but also less well-known genres such as hagiography, martyrology, diplomatic correspondence, homilies, liturgical texts and poetry. It is beyond the scope of the present study to examine all these sources, as the intention of this paper is to present some key features of the heterogeneous Byzantine theology of Islam within the corpus of the theological polemical works which have been produced in the East from the 7th to the 13th century.

Despite the common belief that – given the constant battles between the Byzantine Empire and the Arab armies, Seljuk and Ottoman Turks, forming the long process of subjugation to Islam by the Byzantine Empire – the Christians in the East generally had a uniformly hostile attitude toward the Muslims, Byzantine relations with the religion of the Prophet and his followers were much more complex – not so much politically but in the field of theological encounter. The Byzantines displayed a much more accurate understanding of Islam than Muslims had of Christianity or the Latin West had of Islam at the time.

Inheriting a long tradition of polemics from the early Christianity, when theologians were faced first with the challenges of Judaism and Paganism and later with all sorts of heresies, Byzantine theology developed a predominantly apologetic and polemic attitude towards Islam (Gardet 1947).¹

1 Among the polemical works until the 13th century, we can state the most important ones: John of Damascus, *On Heresies*; Theodore Abu Quarrah, *Various Works*; Niketas of Byzantium, *Response and Refutation and Refutation of the Quran*; Eutychius of Alexandria, *The Book of the Demonstration (Kitab al-Burhan)*; Euthymius Zigabenus, *Dogmatic Panoply and Disputation on the Faith with a Saracen Philosopher*; Bartholomew of Edessa, *Against the Hagarenes* and *Anonymous Tract*



Especially from the beginning, theologians refused to see it as a separate religion, but saw Islam through the lens of previous heresies; hence, for example, the Islamic denial of the divinity of Christ was termed »Arianism« and the abstinence from pork as »Judaism«.

Namely, the field of Christology was at the heart of Byzantine polemics as the divinity of Jesus loomed large in Orthodox Christology after the Arian disputes of the fourth century. Muslim denial of the Trinity, status of Mary, denial of the crucifixion; those were all crucial problematic points in the Christological disputes where Greek theologians developed a very precise terminology of the doctrines and could not agree on any simplifications or misunderstandings.

Regarding the interpretation of Qur'an, what will later become very important for Paul of Antioch, there had been many Byzantine convictions about its worldly origins in the centuries before him. For Byzantine theologians the disjointed and seemingly random nature of the Qur'an, so different from the traditional genres of Biblical literature, was a proof against its divine inspiration. The fact that the main proof text of each religion – the Bible and the Qur'an – was not accepted completely by each side caused this to be a singularly important point in any religious dispute as they were scripturally based religions.²

Against Muhammad; Paul of Antioch, *Letter to a Muslim Friend* and *Letter from the People of Cyprus*. Among later ones are: Demetrios Kydones/Ricoldo da Monte Croce, *Refutation of the Koran*; John Kantakuzenos, *Four Orations Against Muhammad* and *Four Apologies Against the Muslim (Muhammedan) Sect*; Gregory Palamas, *Letter on his Captivity*; Manuel II Palaeologos, *Dialogue with a Persian*. (Khoury 1969a; 1969b) See also Güterbock, Carl. 1912. *Der Islam im Lichte der Byzantinischen Polemik*. Berlin: Guttentag; Eichner, W. 1936. Die Nachrichten über den Islam bei den Byzantinern. *Der Islam* 23: 133–162; 197–244.

2 Greek was the second language, after Persian, to which Qur'an was translated and we know that a Constantinople scholar Nicetas Byantius used the translation in his *Refutation of Qur'an* written between 855 and 870. See Høgel, Christian. 2010. An early anonymous Greek translation of the Qur'an. The fragments from Niketas Byzantios' Refutatio and the anonymous Abjuratio. *Collectanea Christiana Orientalia* 7: 65–119; Versteegh, Kees. 1991. Greek translations of the Quran in Christian polemics (9th century). *Zeitschrift der Deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 141: 55–68; Argyriou, Astérios. 2005. Perception de l'Islam et traductions du Coran dans le monde byzantin grec. *Byzantion* 75: 25–69.



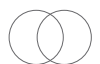
1.1 John Damascene and his Heresiology

The first Byzantine theologian who wrote on Islam was St. John Damascene (app. 676–749) who gained knowledge of Islam at first hand, as a civil servant in the court of the Umayyad Caliph in Damascus. John demonstrated an excellent summary of Islamic belief filtered through the eyes of Christian theology in Greek and had an enormous influence on later Christian theological positions against Islam. There are two accounts of Islam ascribed to Damascene; one is his account of Islam in the last chapter of his work in a hundred chapters *On Heresies* (*Liber de haeresibus* 100; Kotter 1981, 60–67), the other is what looks like a collection of notes for a disputation between a Christian and a Muslim (*Disputatio Christiani et Saraceni*; Kotter 1981, 427–438), which in its present form is probably not his own writing but might represent a record of his oral teaching, compiled by another person. John Damascene gives us the first informed account of Islam, earlier in fact than any Muslim accounts, except for the traditions represented in the Qur'an, and that is why studying his work is so important.

Extensive research has been done on John's critique of Islam (Sahas 2006, 88, note 6), either emphasizing his lack of precise knowledge of the Qur'an and some misunderstandings of Muslim practices (Sahas 1972; Louth 2002, 80–81) or arguing for his more thorough knowledge of Islam (Schadler 2017). Nevertheless, Damascene's presentation of Islam, that sounds very harsh to our ears today, needs a proper contextualization in order to understand it in its own historical, cultural and theological background.

The style of John's presentation of the religion of the Ishmaelites, as he calls them,³ is strictly polemical and apologetic. He denotes Islam as a Christian sect, a heresy (*αἵρεσις*), a religious practice (*θηρησκεία*) (Kotter 1981, 60). John sees Islam as a religion fashioned by Muhammad for the idolaters – worshippers of the morning star and Aphrodite; he knows of Muhammad's claims to have received revelations from heaven, which

3 John names Muslims »the Ishmaelites (or Hagarenes), the forerunners of the Antichrist [*τῶν Ἰσμαηλιτῶν πρόδρομος οὗσα τοῦ ἀντιχρίστου*]*»* (Kotter 1981, 60), since Ishmael was born to Abraham from Hagar or Saracenes because they have been sent away by Sarah empty (e.g. 1 Mz 16). Arabs are first identified as Ishmaelites in the Book of Jubilees 20,11–13.



he dismisses as »laughable«. Damascene presents Muhammad's view on Christ, the Word of God: he was created and was a slave. He mentions also that he knows Muslim's »scriptures (*γραφαί*)« and discusses four of them: The women, The camel of God, The table, The cow; they are mainly suras from the Qur'an. Citing those suras John introduces a critique of polygamy and divorce and afterwards ends his account of Islam with a short list of Muslim customs without commenting on them: circumcision, rejection of the Sabbath and baptism, their dietary laws, and absolute prohibition of alcohol. (Louth 2018, 64–65)

One important remark that relates John of Damascus to the wider Byzantine tradition is his assertion that Muhammad was supposedly thought of by an Arian monk: »ὁμοίως ἀρειανῶ προσομιλήσας δῆθεν μοναχῶ« (Kotter 1981, 60). This idea was present in the Middle East in the eighth and ninth century among Christians as well as Muslims. For Christians, the monk in this narrative represented either a heretic, a member of one of the competing Christian traditions in the Levant (for example Jacobite, Nestorian, Melkite), or was seen as an orthodox monk whom Muhammad later ignored; whereas in Muslim sources, this monk was used to support Muhammad's prophetic role (Schadler 2017, 197). Anyhow, the emergence of Islam was closely connected with the Byzantine tradition, and on the other hand and even more important, John Damascene regarded the new religion, the Ishmaelites, as closely related to the Christianity despite being its opposition.

John writes that Muslims call Christians »the Associators [*ἑταιριασταί*]« (Kotter 1981, 63) because they introduce an associate (i.d. Christ) to God. This is the first appearance of the word *ἑταιριαστιῆς* in Greek which makes John the coiner of this neologism, stressing the Muslim accusations of polytheism (*πολυθεία*) and idolatry (*εἰδωλολατρεία*). This term could be a calque on the Arabic term *mushrikun* – *shirk* is contrasted with monotheism – which could demonstrate John's familiarity with Arabic terminology (Schadler 2017, 107–108).

The characterization of Islam as a »Christian heresy« in John's theology has been agitating scholars for centuries. As Schadler demonstrated, Damascene's categorization of Ishmaelites as heretics was strongly based on *Anacephalaeosis* in Epiphanius' *Panarion* where John got this idea



of linear progression of Christian victory over different ideologies (2017, 213). In addition to that, today we can assert that John's expression needs to be contextualized in a broader discourse of the sectarian milieu with a special attention for particular identities, competing ideologies, religious faiths, etc. (Schadler 2017, 209–210; Louth 2002, 85–86, 179–189). The Melkites of Syria and Palestine, the church to which John belonged, were in a great need of a firm and clear self-identity due to the constant confronting with different Christian »heretics« and in John's time with the Muslims, as well. »By labelling the Ishmaelites as partakers of 'heresy', a whole body of church law could potentially be applied to them.« (Schadler 2017, 211) The Arab conquest also only enhanced the need for a solid Christian identity so Damascene's attitude towards Islam has to be regarded this way. However, John had quite solid knowledge of different Islamic traditions and his work is unparalleled because due to its importance for understanding the early development of Islam, his texts can also be read as evidence for the early Byzantine Christian view of Islam, and even more, of their own community. The rising new religion forced them to reflect more firmly on their own identity, to re-think what is Christian and what can be regarded as »heretic«, to deepen their interest of their own Christological, Trinitarian, Biblical doctrine.

2 Paul of Antioch's *Letter to a Muslim Friend*

Having discussed one of the most important chapters in early Byzantine response to Islam, the following section on Paul of Antioch's *Letter to a Muslim Friend*, despite being not so well-known, presents another important example in Muslim-Christian relations in the Middle East. Paul's approach can be regarded as one of the most irenic examples of Christian-Muslim dialogue in the context of Byzantine polemics with Islam.

There are not many biographic data known about Paul's life. From his extant works we can conclude that he originated from Antioch, entered the monastic life and eventually became the Melkite bishop of Sidon (Ar. Sayda'; in today's Lebanon). The exact dates of his works are unclear, but evidence from existing manuscripts and internal references place his activity between 1140 and 1200. While a total of 24 works is associated with Paul, only five are generally accepted as his own; all were composed



in Arabic. (Graf 1906, 56–57; Khoury 1964, 8–18; Samir 1993, 180–190; Thomas 2001, 203–204; 2012, 78–79)

Among all Paul's works *Letter to a Muslim Friend* (*Risala ila Ahad al-Muslimin*)⁴ is one of the most disconcerting and controversial texts from the history of Christian-Muslim relations. The actual letter is rather brief, comprising 64 short paragraphs. The main body of the *Letter* lays out a series of arguments which are found in the Qur'an itself in favor of Christian doctrines and against any requirement to abandon them: Muhammad and his message were sent only for the Arabs, and yet the Qur'an endorses Christian beliefs in Christ, the Apostles, the Gospels, Christian monotheism and religious services.

The date of Paul's *Letter* remains uncertain even after some serious attempts of offering a more precise date (Khoury 1964; Samir 1993; Thomas 2001). *Terminus post quam* is certainly the death of Elias of Nisibis in 1046, whereas *terminus ante quam* is stabilized based on a date of the earlier manuscript from 1232 containing the *Letter* (MS Sinai Arabic 531). Authors agree that we can assume a date of writing to be around the year 1200 or in the beginning of the 13th century (Thomas 2001, 204; 2012, 78).

As irenic as Paul's approach was, it was still subversive enough that it resulted in a massive refutation by a leading Muslim scholar Shihāb al-Dīn Ahmad b. Idris al-Qarāfi (written before 1285) (Michel 1984). The letter circulated widely and was considered a serious threat despite its brevity. Ibn Taymiyya's refutation was many times longer than the letter, but it seems that Ibn Taymiyya wanted to crush Paul's arguments by the mere weight of the words. Sometime in the early 14th century a certain Christian scholar in Cyprus became aware of Paul's letter, and after he revised it thoroughly – s.c. *Letter from the People of Cyprus* – (Ebied in Thomas 2005; Michel 1984) he sent it to the two Muslim scholars in Damascus, Tāqī al-Dīn Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya in 1316 and Shams al-Dīn Muhammad Ibn Abī Tālib al-Ansāri al-Dimashqī in 1321. This letter provoked two of the longest

4 The *Letter* is edited and translated in French (Khoury 1964, 169–187). The quotes used in this paper are taken from English translation made by Dr. Nafisa Abdelsadek, published online in 2003 (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/268216125_Paul's_Letter_to_the_Muslims_English_Translation_from_Arabic_and_French_source_documents).



surviving refutations by Muslims against Christianity (Ebied and Thomas 2005). Due to the limits of the present study, only Paul's original letter will be taken into consideration.

2.1 The *Letter* and its Context

The circumstances of his writing are made clear by Paul himself at the very outset of the *Letter*. He describes his journey through the Byzantine empire and to Constantinople, to Amalfi, through »Frankish« territory and to Rome. In Paul's time, Sidon was controlled by the Crusaders, thus he was able to have contacts with different Byzantine and European leaders. On his way he met important people, leaders and experts, and therefore his intention in the *Letter* is to pass on to a Muslim friend their views about Muhammad. It is not clear whether he really wrote down their opinions – Khoury proposed a hypothesis that Paul could have been referencing to the Third Lateran Council in 1179 (1964, 15) – or he used this structure of dialogue only as a rhetorical function.

Paul's *Letter to a Muslim Friend* adopts a tactic that is much less combative and polemical than typical Byzantine works against Islam, but the friendly tone does not hide the underlying message that salvation depends upon the proper use of one's understanding. The rest of the *Letter* is an explanation of how the friend might apply his perceptiveness more acutely in interpreting the Qur'an properly and so see the truth of Christian teaching. Paul's main point is that there is nothing in Islam which can challenge, teach or save Christians; this is not to say that Islam is a fraud as a revealed religion, that Muhammad was not a prophet or that the Qur'an is not revealed Scripture. He does not accuse Islam of being false, but of being irrelevant and superfluous to Christianity.

In the *Letter* Paul addresses common objections to Christianity by Muslims at that time – mainly their rejection of the authenticity of the Bible and the doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation – combining Biblical proof texts, rational arguments and Qur'anic quotations. Paul demonstrates a 'prodigious' knowledge of the Quran using all the pro-Christian Qur'anic suras that he can muster. He reveals striking knowledge of the Qur'an but interprets it in a completely Christian fashion.



2.2 Central Apologetic Arguments in the *Letter*

First, Paul states that Muhammad was only sent to the Arabs with a revelation in Arabic and that therefore Islam is not a universal religion (Kattan 2019). »We knew that he would not be sent to us, but towards the Arabs who were in ignorance (*jahiliyyah*), of whom he said that there had not come to them a ‘warner’ before him; and that there was not an obligation for us to follow him, for messengers had been sent to us before him, who addressed us in our own languages, warned us and gave to us the Torah and the New Testament in our languages.« (*Letter to a Muslim Friend* 7)

The second apologetic argument in the *Letter* presents the Qur’an praising Christ and his Mother, giving preference to Christian monasteries and churches over the mosques and giving witness that the name of God is often invoked there, so Paul draws a conclusion that Christians need not convert to Islam: »These texts and others make it a duty upon us to hold to our religion, not to abandon our way, nor to reject that which we have, nor to follow any other than the Lord Christ, Word of God and his Apostles which He sent to us to warn us.« (*Letter to a Muslim Friend* 12)

Moreover, the bishop of Sidon asserts that the prophecies of the Old Testament confirm Christian doctrines like the Trinity and the Incarnation. Regarding the Trinitarian discourse, Paul tries to minimize the differences between Islamic and Christian belief affirming the unity of God and interpreting the Trinity in accordance with Muslim sensibility; he does not use the Christian term hypostasis (*’uqnum*), but employs the more neutral term of name (*ism*) (Michel 1984, 91): »These three names signify the one God, who has not ceased nor will cease to be a living speaking being. And then for us the essence is the Father, the Son the spoken Word, and the Life the Holy Spirit. Now it is said in the Book: ‘God! There is no God but He, the Living, the Self-subsisting.’⁵ (*Letter to a Muslim Friend* 29)

All the names and attributes of God come from the three substantial attributes (*al-sifat al-jawahariyya*): of existence (*shay’*), speech (*natiq*) and life (*hayy*). The second one demonstrates the incarnation of the Word and the

5 Qur’an 2.255.



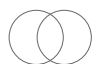
divinity of Christ, Son of God which Paul uses typical Arab analogies for: »God will send His Word, that is to say His spoken Word, without it being separated from the Father, its creator, nor distanced from Him, exactly as the light is sent from the sun to the earth without it being separated from its generating disc and as the word of man is addressed to who may hear it, without it being separated from the intellect of its creator.« (*Letter to a Muslim Friend* 33)

Paul of Antioch, using Aristotelian concepts of substance and accident, tries to demonstrate that Christian doctrines can be proved by reason. His main claim is that the problem lies in Muslim misunderstanding of the Trinity: »I said: The Muslims disapprove of us in that we say Father, Son and Holy Spirit. – They (i.e. the European intellectuals) said: If they knew that by these words we only mean to make a clearer assertion that God on high is something living and speaking they would not disapprove of us for that.« (*Letter to a Muslim Friend* 25)

The author of the *Letter* asserts that Qur'anic terms support the Christian concept of God. Regarding the Christological problem of the hypostatical union, Paul elucidates the Melkite, i.e. Orthodox position about the Christ's dual nature in his unique person. If miracles were done through his divine nature, crucifixion is an example of his human nature: »According to this analogy we say that Christ was crucified, this meaning that he was crucified as to his humanity, but that he was not crucified as to his divinity. Then it is said in the Book: 'They didn't kill him or crucify him; only a likeness of that was shown to them.'«⁶ (*Letter to a Muslim Friend* 38)

Another important point in Paul's argumentation is his answer to Muslim misunderstanding of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Islam views God's three hypostases as tritheism and therefore does not acknowledge the Christian insistence on the unity of God. Parallel to that, Paul attacks Islamic anthropomorphic expressions – that God has two eyes, two hands, a face, that he moves spatially from place to place, etc.; one who did not know Islamic belief might suppose these Qur'anic expressions must be taken literally. Rather, the bishop of Sidon proposes a more irenic

6 Qur'an 42:51.



assertion, emphasizing the mutual inadequacy to accurately describe the God: »Their (i.e. Islamic) belief about the Creator, exalted be His mightiness! – being that He is incorporeal, that He has neither limbs nor organs, and that He is not confined to any place.« (*Letter to a Muslim Friend* 38)

In the final section of the *Letter* Paul's intention is to form an argumentation of the superfluity of Islam in the divine plan of salvation. The revealed religions are two: Judaism as a religion of justice and Christianity as a religion of grace. Since the law of grace is the most perfect form it is necessary that Christianity is coming from God, the most perfect among perfects: »As only the most perfect of the perfects could possibly institute the perfection, which is the law of grace, it is necessary that it be He – hallowed be His names, and highly praised His kindnesses! – who institutes it, because there is nothing more perfect than Him.« (*Letter to a Muslim Friend* 60) According to Paul, any new revelation was unnecessary and therefore Christians need to look to Islam for nothing.

2.3 Evaluating Paul's Approach: Irenic or Cunning?

If we try to offer an honest evaluation of Paul's approach, without discussing the *Letter's* polemic *Nachleben*, we must admit that his argumentation can be read in two rather widely opposite ways: on the one hand, the *Letter* appears to accept and acknowledge Muhammad and the Qur'an as from God and thus signify a gesture towards reconciliation with Islam, but in the same time it can also be read as the Christianization of the Qur'an, a degradation of the Prophet to a local preacher that was sent only for Arabs, and the *Letter* can therefore be regarded also as cunningly subversive.

In fact, David Thomas stressed Paul's harsh polemic function: »Its tone is not on the surface polemical but fair and reasonable, though as its argument unfolds this approach proves more provocative than any direct attack.« (2001, 205) »Although it has the appearance of being friendly and reasonable, beneath its irenic surface it reveals a logic that threatens to subvert the whole basis of Islam.« (2012, 79) Thomas Michel, on the other hand, sees Paul's writings as »primarily controversialist«, but he regards his approach relatively neutral, underlining the bishop's effort to minimize the differences between Christian and Muslim views. (1984, 87–98)



The evaluation of Paul's approach might be more persuasive if we perceive the *Letter* in the broader context of the Byzantine theological tradition of polemical literature with Islam (Lamoreaux 2000, 3–25; Meyendorff 1982, 89–114), and even wider, if it is compared to the Western relations with Islam up to the 12th century. Paul of Antioch's claims, e.g. that Muhammad was an authentic messenger, even though he may have only come to his own people, and likewise his accepting of the authority of the Qur'an in some form or his presenting the Muslim convictions as a misunderstanding rather than dismissing them as completely false, would have been impossible for authors like John of Damascus couple of centuries before and even for many later Byzantine polemicists strongly influenced by him. It can therefore be assumed that the *Letter to a Muslim Friend* is unique among Byzantine polemics for Paul's irenic approach and its copious use of quotes from the Qur'an (Nikolaou 2019).

This assertion can also be demonstrated by Paul's affable conclusion of the *Letter*:

If that which they (i.e. European scholars) have put forward proves to be true, to God be given praise and gratitude, as agreement will thus be made between the different points of view and bring an end to the disputes between His servants, Christians and Muslims – may God protect them all! If, on the other hand, it is otherwise, that the honoured brother and the friend worthy of the greatest praises – God protect him always and extend the limits of his life! – shows it to me so that I inform them of it and see what they think of it; because they have asked that of me and made me as an envoy. Praise be to God, the Lord of the World! (*Letter to a Muslim Friend* 64)

Conclusion

If the Qur'an appealed to a holy war against »those who ascribe partners to God«,⁷ i.e. Christians, s.c. polytheists, who believe in the Trinity, and this appeal was sometimes executed literally, e.g. Twenty martyrs of the

7 Qur'an 9,5.



monastery Mar Saba in Palestine (Sahner 2018), the Byzantine writers retaliated, following the example of John Damascene, by considering Islam as a »forerunner of Antichrist«. But, however abrupt these statements of mutual intolerance were, however fanatical the appeals to a holy war, eventually the necessity of coexistence in the occupied areas, the requirements of diplomacy and many examples of simple people as well as the intellectuals, opened for a dialogue – like Paul of Antioch – gradually lead towards better mutual appreciation. (Meyendorff 1984, 90)

Although there was little development in the polemical disputes between the Byzantine Christians and Muslims over centuries, there was a constant need for any kind of cohabitation that influenced a progression of more sophisticated arguments, better knowledge of the Qur'an and Hadiths and greater mutual comprehension.⁸ For Byzantine theologians it was necessary to investigate Islamic traditions, despite the fact that they wanted to refute them. Any form of dialogue, even polemical, stimulates mutual understanding.

In this effort to understand Islam, Byzantines were ahead of their Western contemporaries. The language barrier was less significant as numerous Orthodox lived under Islamic rule and spoke Arabic. It was not until the crusades that the Latin West began to turn its eye towards Islam, while the Byzantines had been doing so for hundreds of years previously. As Andrew Louth stated: »Whereas for the Western crusaders the Muslims were simply the infidel, to be destroyed, or driven from the Holy Land, by force of arms, for the Byzantines they were political neighbours, to be negotiated with.« (2018, 61)

One of the less known, but not less important examples of this more irenic attempts of dialogue, which surpassed merely political or diplomatic tolerance, is the *Letter to a Muslim Friend*, written by a Melkite monk Paul, bishop Sidon. Even if his hermeneutics of the Qur'an are not an ideal example of correct and objective interpretation by today's standards – does this kind of pure interpretation really exist? – his effort to dialogue

8 Muslim speculative theology, *kalam*, also developed in its early stage mainly from a defense or apologetic intentions against Christians, Manicheans and believers of other religions.



with his friend can present an inspiration for the struggle towards a better mutual understanding. Paul's example, as well as the whole early Christian apologetics, demonstrate that apologetics are legitimate. Nobody can force the other to abandon his own tradition and identity. On the contrary, dialoguing with his Muslim friend enabled Paul to know his own tradition and belief better (*Letter to a Muslim Friend* 52).

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