

# Dialogue and Mission at the Intersection of Three Continents The Case of Arabic Theology

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## Introducing the Topic

Our setting is the geographical area where the three old-world Continents meet<sup>1</sup>; our starting point is what has been considered in historiography the end of the (Long) Late Antiquity<sup>2</sup>, after the emergence and advance of Islam in the 7th Century CE. In this setting, it is often the idea of conflict between Arabs and Byzantines that prevails in political History<sup>3</sup>. This predominant idea of conflict often overshadows the multiplicity of relations, not only between two main protagonists, but rather among many

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\* Ἡ Εὐὴ Βουλγαράκη-Πισίνα εἶναι διδάκτωρ Θεολογίας καὶ μέλος ΕΔΙΠ τοῦ Τμήματος Κοινωνικῆς Θεολογίας καὶ Θρησκευολογίας τοῦ Ἐθνικοῦ καὶ Καποδιστριακοῦ Πανεπιστημίου Ἀθηνῶν.

1. We consciously avoid using the terms “Middle” or “Near East”, not only because of their heavy burden of colonial connotations and their clear link to a purely Western viewpoint, but also because we wish to keep in mind throughout this article the tight relation between the predominantly Arabic countries and the Greco-Roman world, as do the historians of late antiquity, who accommodate Islam within the frame of *romanitas*. E.g. A. Neuwirth, „Eine europäische Lektüre des Koran: Koranwissenschaft in der Tradition der Wissenschaft des Judentums“ in *Europa im Nahen Osten – Der Nahe Osten in Europa*, eds. A. Neuwirth and G. Stock, Akademie Verlag, Berlin 2010.

2. See A. Cameron, “The ‘Long’ Late Antiquity: A Twentieth-Century model?” in *Classics in Progress: Essays on Ancient Greece and Rome*, ed. T.P. Wiseman, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006, 165-191.

3. E.g. the classic work of A.A. Vasiliev, *History of the Byzantine Empire 324-1453*, vol. 1. The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison <sup>2</sup>1980, <sup>1</sup>1952, 235-237. Among more recent works, see H. Kennedy’s, *The Great Arab Conquests: How the Spread of Islam changed the World we live in*, Da Capo Press, Philadelphia 2007. Idem, *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East*, Routledge, Oxon <sup>2</sup>2017, Variorum Ashgate, Farnham <sup>1</sup>2004.

different factors, as well as the multilayered character of these relations. When one takes into consideration a cultural or intellectual History, which is actually a current preoccupation of academic research, a variety of exchanges comes to light<sup>4</sup>, not mainly hostility, but including also admiration, imitation, emulation, multilateral influence, communion in many different aspects of thought and life. This is apparent in the history of translation and interpretation, in book and manuscript circulation<sup>5</sup>, in adoption of customs and protocols, etc.<sup>6</sup>. Religion plays also an important role in these exchanges, becoming at times a factor of differentiation, of shaping collective identity, but not least a field of discussion and common interest, of building plausible argumentation accepted across religions, of contributing to the shaping of each other's identity<sup>7</sup>. Within the frame of these developments in research it is not only that theologians or religious

4. E.g. M. Mundell Mango, ed., *Byzantine Trade, 4th-12th Centuries: Papers of the Thirty-eighth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, St John's College, University of Oxford, March 2004*, Ashgate, Farnham 2009. R. Macrides, ed., *Travel in the Byzantine World: Papers from the Thirty-fourth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, Birmingham, April 2000*, Ashgate, Farnham 2002.

5. P. Adamson and R. C. Taylor, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2005. D. Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Greco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early 'Abbāsid Society (2nd-4th/8th-10th Centuries)*, Routledge, London and New York 1999, 1998. A. Ziaka, "The sources and Paths of Dissemination of Aristotelian Thought in Arab-Islamic Civilization," in *Patriarch Ignatius IV of Antioch: A Great Spiritual Leader of Peace, Dialogue and Reconciliation: Festschrift in the Honor of his Beatitude Ignatius IV (Hazim), Patriarch of Antioch and All East*, Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East, Archdiocese of Germany and Central Europe, and University of Balamand, Cologne 2015, 287-300.

6. N. M. El Cheikh, *Byzantium Viewed by the Arabs*, Harvard Middle Eastern Monographs, Cambridge MA 2004. A. Shboul, "Byzantium and the Arabs: The Image of the Byzantines as mirrored in Arabic Literature," in *Arab-Byzantine Relations in Early Islamic Times*, ed. M. Bonner, Formation of the Classical Islamic World Series, vol. 8, Ashgate, New York 2004, 43-68.

7. E.g. the research work of J. B. V. Tannous, *Syria between Byzantium and Islam: Making Incommensurables Speak*, (Ph.D. Dissertation), Princeton 2010. As Tannous has already contributed a lot to a different reading of the formative period of Islam, considering Christianity a much more important factor for its shaping than is usually recognised in conventional academic scholarship, one can only await with eagerness the forthcoming (November 2018) Idem, *The Making of the Medieval Middle East: Religion, Society, and Simple Believers* Princeton University Press, Princeton 2018). I thank Averil Cameron for bringing this to my notice.

scholars study history with an increased understanding of historical methodology (-ies), but also that historians have lately come to see the need for a much deeper insight into literary texts, where theology and religious studies play an important role<sup>8</sup>.

In this article<sup>9</sup> we shall try to give an overview of these cross-religious relations from a viewpoint of Missiology and Inter-Faith Dialogue. In particular we shall examine the specific features and the overall character of Arabic theology as it developed *vis à vis* Islam. The political understanding of identity is no longer primary in this approach. Had our priority been political, we would have distinguished between Byzantines and Arabs, in the first place. Religious identity is here prioritised, leading to a classification of people as Muslims or Christians. Other religious groups, e.g. the Jews, are understandably also present in the region, but for the sake of simplification we do not focus on them in particular in what follows. Among the Christians, Arab Christianity is our main (but not exclusive) focus. In terms of chronological delimitation, we shall try to cover the topic taking as a *terminus post quem* the emergence of Islam and also following its later consequences, but in a paradigmatic and not a linear and scholastically exhaustive research model.

In what follows, we shall try to establish that beyond appearances and despite hardship in history, mission and dialogue were possible in the region, and friendly relations were built at all times, allowing for coexistence among people of different faiths. Even more, the factor of coexistence is formative for the character and theology in the East, particularly that of Arabic Christianity.

It is obvious that our perspective is not from a ‘neutral’ observation point. Neither is Missiology in general<sup>10</sup>. Yet it is much preferable to

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8. Av. Cameron, “Culture Wars: Late Antiquity and Literature” in *Mélanges d’histoire romaine et d’Antiquité tardive offerts à Jean-Michel Carrié*, ed. Chr. Freu, S. Janniard and A. Ripoli, Bibliothèque de l’Antiquité Tardive 31 Brepols, Turnhout 2016, 307-316.

9. This article and our overall study owe a lot to S. H. Griffith for his monumental work, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford 2008, which has changed our views and set out new paths for research in the field.

10. Cf. D. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Twentieth Anniversary Edition, Maryknoll, Orbis Books, New York 2011, 1991, 9: “Missiology, as a

keep a critical eye on one's own identity and activities, looking at it from within<sup>11</sup>, than to be insincere or unaware of one's own presuppositions and restrictions<sup>12</sup>: that might possibly lead to an essentialist rather than constructivist reading or even an actual 'theft' of history<sup>13</sup>. If one wishes to meet, and even to cross academic borders, self awareness is of paramount importance.

## The Christians: Who's Who?

The Christians of the East are the ones who met Islam and interacted with it from the very beginning, as it was still emerging, shaping and forming its own self-consciousness. They represented a variety of languages and cultures even at the time<sup>14</sup>. Greek as *lingua franca*, Latin to some extent, and a plethora of local languages: Arabic, Syriac, Aramaic, Coptic, Armenian, Ge'ez (Ethiopic), and many more. They were organised in different denominations and Churches, at the core and at the fringe of the Eastern Roman Empire. Firstly, there were the Chalcedonians, those who recognised all the Councils and especially the Council of Chalcedon in 451

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branch of the discipline of Christian theology, is not a disinterested or neutral enterprise; rather, it seeks to look at the world from the perspective of commitment to the Christian faith”.

11. “Such an approach does not suggest an absence of critical examination; as a matter of fact, precisely for the sake of the Christian mission, it will be necessary to subject every definition and every manifestation of the Christian mission to rigorous analysis and appraisal.” *Ibid.*

12. “It is more important now than ever to be aware of the relations, and the tension, between confessional and non-confessional scholarship,” says Av. Cameron, “The Cost of Orthodoxy,” *Church History and Religious Culture* 93, 3 (2013), 339 [339-361], (DOI: 10.1163/18712428-13930302). In this paper among others the author addresses very important epistemological issues in the scientific fields spanning History and Theology, Early Christian Studies and Patristics.

13. On this vast subject cf. J. Goody, *The Theft of History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2006.

14. On a detailed description of the Christians in the eve of the Arab conquest, see Ph. Wood, *'We have no king but Christ: Christian political thought in greater Syria on the eve of the Arab conquest (c. 400–585)*, Oxford Studies in Byzantium, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2010.

CE on Christological dogma (i.e., two natures, unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably united in the one person of Incarnate Logos). They were also called Greek Orthodox, and in the Arabic milieu they were known as the Melkites<sup>15</sup>, from the word *malik* which means the king — the Byzantine king. The other group of Churches is the so-called non-Chalcedonians or anti-Chalcedonians, or even pre-Chalcedonians — those who rejected the Fourth Ecumenical Council so that the first major schism of the Church was created. The questionable term ‘monophysites’ was used to characterise their great emphasis on the unity of God and man in Christ and a different understanding of the Greek terminology of nature and person<sup>16</sup>. They comprise the Copts of Egypt, the Syrojacobites

15. Since the Antiochian schism in 1724, the term “Melkites” characterises the uniats, the Greek Catholics: N. Abou Mrad, “The Witness of the Church in a Pluralistic World,” in *Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, ed. M. B. Cunningham and El. Theokritoff, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008, 246 [246-260]. On the origin of the term “Melkite”, see Al. Treiger, “Unpublished Texts from the Arab Orthodox Tradition (1), On the Origin of the Term ‘Melkite’ and on the Destruction of the Maryamiyya Cathedral in Damascus,” *Chronos: Revue d’Histoire de l’Université de Balamand* 29 (2014), 7-9 [7-37] and S. Griffith, “The Church of Jerusalem and the ‘Melkites’: The Making of an ‘Arab Orthodox’ Christian Identity in the World of Islam, 750-1050 CE,” in *Christians and Christianity in the Holy Land: From the Origins to the Latin Kingdoms*, ed. O. Limor and G. G. Stroumsa, Brepols, Turnhout 2006), 173-202.

16. The recently introduced neologism “miaphysites”, proposed as an alternative to the historically loaded term “monophysites”, does not offer something radically new, despite the best of intentions: it means just the same, coming from the feminine form of the Greek cardinal number “one” (ἓνας, μία), but it sounds very awkward to the Greek ear, as a grammatical strangulation of the language. In the Greek original what is one is also single and only. “Μονός” is the multiplicative adjective of the number “one” and means at the same time “unity” and “oneness”. Cf. Ἰω. Σταματάκος, *Λεξικὸν τῆς Ἀρχαίας Ἑλληνικῆς Γλώσσης* (I. Stamatakos, *Lexicon of the Ancient Greek Language*), Φοίνιξ (Phenix), Athens 1972), s. v. “εἷς, μία, ἓν, (pp. 309-310) and “μόνος”, III, connected to *unus*, pp. 634-635. Cf. also Ἀ. Τζαρτζάνος, *Γραμματικὴ τῆς Ἀρχαίας Ἑλληνικῆς Γλώσσης* (A. Tzartzanos, *Grammar of the Ancient Greek Language*) Organismos Ekdoseon Didaktikon Biblion, Athens 1981, 82 (on Numeric Adjectives). Thus there can be no room for a concept that might signify *one* and at the same time wink at the possibility that there might be *more* to *one*. “Μονός” is the single, the one, the only one; oneness and uniqueness are its attributes. It is to this day the common first element in numerous compound words, where it has the meaning of “one”. The choice of this term was based on the self-definition of the non-Chalcedonians, following their understanding of what terminology was theologically accurate in their opinion, rather than intending any derogatory sense. “Μία” is simply the feminine form, containing and conveying

in Syria, the Ethiopians and the Eritreans, the Armenians and beyond our geographical space of interest, but not irrelevant to it, the Syrian Orthodox Church in India. Today there is an ongoing official dialogue between the Chalcedonian (Eastern or Byzantine Orthodox in some ecumenical environments) and the non-Chalcedonian (Oriental Orthodox) Churches, which brings a new insight to old misconceptions, and progress in mutual understanding is notable<sup>17</sup>. There was also the so-called Nestorian Church or ‘Church of the East’, now often known as ‘Assyrian’. From a theological point of view, these were the main variations, western churches being added to the mosaic in later times<sup>18</sup>. Yet everyone has multiple identities, and from the angle of cultural adherence, other links, networks and groupings may have occurred, too.

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the fullness of meanings that apply to the masculine form. What remains from this neologism is the wish to use a new word that signifies a new, more positive mutual understanding, also *vis à vis* today’s ecumenical dialogue. Yet, the final outcome of the well-meant effort is not adequate. Almost by chance and in the last moment before submission of this article I came across the characterisation of the term “miaphysites” by Andrew Louth as “fashionable, but barbarous.” A. Louth, “[Book review of] *We have no king but Christ. Christian political thought in greater Syria on the eve of the Arab conquest (c. 400-585)*. By Ph. Wood. (Oxford Studies in Byzantium.) [...] Oxford University Press, Oxford”, *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 63, 1 (2012). I felt really relieved that someone of much greater authority than me took up this issue, even if only in passing.

17. Alongside the theological dialogue, cooperation of a practical nature, a common quest for peace and justice, a solidarity movement is emerging, bringing churches and religions closer together in the face of religious fundamentalism and terrorism. E.g., after the bombing of the Church of St Mark in Alexandria on Palm Sunday 2017, Patriarch Bartholomew and Pope Francis were invited to Egypt by the Grand Imam of the Al Azhar Mosque, Sheikh Ahmed Mohamed el-Tayyib, to join the International Conference on Peace at the University of Al Azhar on April 28 2017 and give a common public address to the audience. This initiative was conceived of as a sign of unity and solidarity with the Pope of the Coptic Church Tawadros, whose Christian community was targeted by the attacks: A. Torielli, “Patriarch Bartholomew will be in Egypt with Pope Francis: The primate of the Orthodox Church was invited by the Grand Imam of the Al Azhar Mosque, Sheikh Ahmed Mohamed el-Tayyib: A strong sign of unity among Christians,” *La Stampa* April 18 2017, <http://www.lastampa.it/2017/04/18/vaticaninsider/eng/the-vatican/patriarch-bartholomew-will-be-in-egypt-with-pope-francis-DaZcz1SuEsk5iaFVT4aAMI/pagina.html>.

18. On the ecumenical mosaic under a historical perspective and on issues of coexistence in the late 20th Century see, D. A. Kerr, “Mission and Proselytism,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 20 (1996), 12-15 [12-22].

## The Arab Advance

The split and the schisms of the Church have been noted as an important factor in the easy Arab advance in the region, for it was the Arab element that was most obvious at first, along with some religious ideas of those people from the desert. In fact, the Arab and Bedouin raids, though more frequent, were not considered a proper conquest even after the second caliph, ‘Umar Ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, conquered Jerusalem in 637 or 638 CE. This first conquest was depicted in a Christian chronicle written shortly thereafter, around 640 CE, as a “battle”<sup>19</sup>. In this same chronicle the name of Muḥammad is mentioned for the first time in Christian sources. It was not until Abd al-Malīk, the most important caliph among the Umayyad, built the magnificent Dome of the Rock (Qubbat as-Sakhra) on the Temple Mount, between 685 and 691/2 CE, that Christians realised the nature of the conquest and the change of ruler. Abd al-Malīk was the same caliph who introduced Arabic instead of Greek as the official administrative language of the caliphate as well as a new coinage, aniconic and depicting the *ṣahādah*, the phrase constituting the first pillar of Islam<sup>20</sup>. He also initiated the building of many mosques in Aleppo, Damascus and other major cities<sup>21</sup>.

The Dome of the Rock, magnificent and beautiful as it is, is equipped with explicitly anti-Christian inscriptions, selected from the verses of the Qur’ān that insist on God not having a Son. In addition, there was a policy against Christian symbols, and an explicit wish and effort to erase them from the landscape, especially the sign of the cross. Many reported

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19. R. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam*, Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam, 13, Darwin Press, Princeton, NJ 1997, 120. For more on the chronicle: A. Palmer, ed., *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles*, Translated Texts for Historians, vol. 15, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool 1993, 5-24.

20. لا إله إلا الله محمد رسول الله (lā ‘ilāha ‘illā-llāh, muḥammadu r-rasūlu-llāh). There is no [other] god but God, Muhammad is the messenger of God.

21. F. Braudel characterises Islam as an urban civilization. His narration of the expansion of Islam is very interesting indeed. F. Braudel, *A History of Civilizations*, trans. by R. Mayne, Allen Lane/The Penguin Press, New York 1994, 41-68.

troubles of this sort, e.g. Anastasios of Sinai<sup>22</sup> or Patriarch Sophronius himself<sup>23</sup>.

The new religion was introduced and inscribed in the landscape, creating thus a new formative narrative and excluding the old one. All these changes could not remain unnoticed, and it was mostly the change in the landscape that signified a change in the mindscape. From a missiological point of view, creating an architectural and spatial mark signifies stability, which balances and reduces religious fluidity in times of transition<sup>24</sup>. In this case it was in favor of Islam. Still, again, though seemingly a one-way victory, things were more complex. Recent scholarship points out that Islamic marks in the landscape actually contain the Christian culture in their architectural style and emphasise the dialogical character of cultural exchange<sup>25</sup>.

22. *Sermon 3, PG 89, 1154C*. Anastasios attributes the “rise of Amalek”, as he calls the Arabs, to Christian divisions and heresies, in particular the favourable attitude of the emperor Heraklios to Monotheletism. Cf. S. H. Griffith, “Anastasios of Sinai, the *Hodēgos* and the Muslims,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 32 (1987), 345-346 [341–358]. J. Haldon, “The Works of Anastasius of Sinai: A Key Source for the History of Seventh-Century East Mediterranean Society and Belief,” in *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East, I. Problems in the Literary Source Material*, ed. Av. Cameron and L. I. Conrad, Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam, 1, The Darwin Press, Princeton, N.J.: 1992, 131, 136-137 [107-147].

23. Sophronius, *Christmas Sermon*, 506 | Ed. H. Usener, *Rheinisches Museum* NF 41, 1886: 500-16; reprinted in *Religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen* 1, Max Cohen, Bonn 1889, 326-30. Cf. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 70. The atmosphere, the ambiguities, as well as Sophronius’s perceptiveness and diplomatic capability is outlined by D. J. Sahas, “The Face to Face Encounter between Patriarch Sophronius of Jerusalem and the Caliph ‘Umar Ibn al-Khattāb: Friends or Foes?” in *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam*, ed. Em. Grypeou, Mark Swanson and David Thomas, *The History of Christian-Muslim Relations*, vol. 5, Brill, Leiden and Boston 2006, 33-44.

24. Cf. A. Papaconstantinou, “Introduction,” in *Conversion in Late Antique Christianity, Islam and Beyond: Papers from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Sawyer Seminar, University of Oxford, 2009-2010*, ed. A. Papaconstantinou, N. McLynn and D. L. Schwartz, Ashgate, Farnham 2015, xxxv [xv-xxxvii]. “This was – to saturation – the case of Jerusalem. Every new religious identity was inscribed into the landscape through the spatialization of their respective formative narratives, which were then integrated into the religious life of the city through ritual.” Also see in the same volume, R. Schick, “A Christian City with a Major Muslim Shrine: Jerusalem in the Umayyad Period,” 299-318.

25. Quite memorable in this regard is the title (in its reversal of the title of Sidney Griffith’s major work, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*) and the work of M.



The Chalcedonian Church took the unfavorable turn of events of the fall of the Holy City in Arabic hands very much to heart from the start, as expressed in the sermons of Patriarch Sophronius in Jerusalem and also from an unanswered plea he addressed to the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius<sup>26</sup>; but the alienation among the different Christian Churches was also depicted in the differing approaches to the Arab conquests. Some considered them simply a change of ruler, and were even relieved, in the hope of ending the burden of taxation imposed on them by the Romans or Persians. The more positive attitude is represented by the patriarch of the Church of the East (in Babylon) Isho'yabh III (d. 659 CE) who receives the Arabs enthusiastically and praises them<sup>27</sup>. Yet even amidst more optimistic descriptions and more positive constructions, perhaps merely used as rhetorical tropes to evoke or secure good will (*captatio benevolentiae*) from the new ruler, an uneasiness and anxiety lurks between the lines<sup>28</sup>. This uneasiness is more than apparent in the literature of the time, particularly in the apocalyptic nature of the first responses to the new situation from the Christian side<sup>29</sup>.

A lack of unity exists among the various Christian groups, a factor that much influences not only the first reactions, but also attitudes in centuries to come. As Sidney Griffith suggests: "already at the time of the Arab conquest the theme of intra-Christian rivalry and intercommunal polemic found its way into the discourse of the Christian response to Islam"<sup>30</sup>.

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Guidetti, *In the Shadow of the Church: The Building of Mosques in Early Medieval Syria*, Koninklijke Brill, Leiden 2016).

26. D. J. Sahas, "Why did Heraclius not defend Jerusalem, and fight the Arabs?" *Parole de l'Orient* 24 (1999), 79-97.

27. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 181.

28. S. H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 20-28.

29. A very good example is the Syriac *Apocalypse of pseudo-Methodius*, in G. J. Reinink, trans., *Die syrische Apokalypse des Pseudo-Methodios*, CSCO, vol. 540, Peeters, Louvain, Belgium 1993. Cf. A. Kraft, "On the Eschatological Elucidation of the 'Ishmaelite' Phenomenon," chap. 5 in Oxford University Research Archive [unpublished], 2010, ora: 5255, 67-82. Idem, "The Last Roman Emperor Topos in the Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition," *Byzantion* 82 (2012), 213-257. Fr. J. Martinez, *Eastern Christian Apocalyptic in the Early Muslim Period: Pseudo-Methodius and Pseudo-Athanasius*, Ph.D., Washington, DC 1985, particularly 28-32. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 33-35.

30. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 28. Cf. 129-155. This issue is of great relevance still today. The strengthening of ecumenical relationships is considered a *sine*

With the exception of the Melkites, the other Churches brought to maturity their idiosyncratic characteristics, their hierarchical structures and their theology mostly under the rule and shadow of Islam. At the same time, all Churches tried to articulate their own identity in contradistinction to the other Churches, to develop a theology adequate to respond to Islam, and seldom did they succeed in forming some sort of ecumenical alliance with the other Christians in the face of the ‘common enemy’.

### Bridge between Neighbors

The fact that the Christians in the East were already present at the emergence and formation of Islam is of major significance. Given also that one Christian Community after the other moved gradually to the use of the now predominant Arabic language<sup>31</sup>, one can note that there is a factor of ‘growing together’ in terms of the development of philosophical and theological terminology that allows to a certain extent for reflecting relationships and many mutual influences. The other major factor is the need to coexist, leading to a constant search for a *modus vivendi*. We shall try to elaborate more on this<sup>32</sup>.

The first Christian writers addressed Islam for the most part as a Christian heresy. This may have led them to the use of the harsh anti-heretical rhetorical armory that they were familiar with from previous situations, and to a polemical tone in many a case, yet it also mirrors

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*qua non* for Christian mission and witness in the region. Cf. D. A. Kerr, “Mission and Proselytism,” 12-22.

31. S. H. Griffith, *The Beginnings of Christian Theology in Arabic: Muslim-Christian Encounters in the Early Islamic Period*, Routledge, London 2002. From a broader historical perspective, see A. Papaconstantinou, “Introduction,” in *The Multilingual Experience in Egypt, from the Ptolemies to the ‘Abbāsids*, ed. A. Papaconstantinou, Ashgate, Farnham 2010), 1-16.

32. For an overview, cf. also, Δ. Σαχᾶς, “Βυζάντιο, Ἰσλάμ καὶ ἀντι-ισλαμικὴ γραμματεία (7ος-15ος αἰ.)” [D. Sahas, Byzantium, Islam and anti-Islamic Literature (7th-15th centuries)], in *Βυζάντιο, Ἱστορία καὶ Πολιτισμὸς* [Byzantium, History and Culture], ed. T. K. Λουγγῆς [T. K. Louggis] and Ew. Kislinger, vol. 1, Ἡρόδοτος [Herodotos], Athens 2014, 279-324.

an open and still evolving state of affairs in regard to Muslim self-consciousness. Islam seemed still an interpretation, albeit an oblique one, of the scriptures, a preaching of repentance, a continuation and fulfillment of prophecy in the person of Muḥammad. All this, different interpretations and claims of religious sects, had happened in one way or another before. It was familiar in its peculiarity. Islam emerged in the world of Late Antiquity, and its evolution, development and maturity was at the time inconceivable in its entirety, whether from an insider's or an outsider's viewpoint, an emic or etic perspective.

Christian awareness about Islam grew in parallel and in line with the rise and gradual crystallisation of Islamic consciousness. The Christians of the East were intertwined with Islamic theology at various levels and have given us texts of a great variety and depth for the treatment of Islam<sup>33</sup>.

The history of the Eastern Churches has been recorded as a history of defeat, of inertia, of introspection, perhaps even of defeatism, a view in which the lost territories of the Byzantine East and the lack of a crusader spirit play an important role<sup>34</sup>. This would be true, if dominance is elevated to be the primary criterion. But such a stance would be unnatural and contradictory to a Christian theology that remains a theology of the cross, in fact a theology of cross-and-resurrection, and serves the implementation of God's will in daily life in the form of irenic and loving coexistence among people.

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33. Cf. D. Sahas, "The 'Oriental' Character of the Byzantine-Islamic Relations: One Essence – Various Expressions," in *Byzantium and the Arab World: Encounter of Civilizations*, ed. Ap. Kralides and A. Gkoutzioukostas, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Thessaloniki 2013, 415-438. Also see note 9.

34. On the complete rejection by the Byzantines of any notion of holy war and the philosophical, theological and also political justification of it, see G. T. Dennis, "Defenders of the Christian People: Holy War in Byzantium," in *The Crusades from the Perspective of Byzantium and the Muslim World*, ed. A. E. Laiou and R. P. Mottahedeh, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C. 2001, 31-39. J. Harris, *Byzantium and the Crusades*, Bloomsbury, London 2014, 2003, speaks of the "unwarlike nature of Byzantine religion," (p. 209) and examines the reasons for the loss of territory that also led to the final "disappearance" of Byzantium (210). Yet he acknowledges that "many aspects of Byzantine civilization survived" (211), particularly in literary culture and religion. Av. Cameron, *The Byzantines*, Blackwell, Malden MA 2006, 189-190, speaks of political and practical reasons that offer a different explanation for the lack of interest in venturesome military operations.

It should also be noted that the Christian populations may have been gradually diminishing in numbers, thanks to the policies of inequality practiced by the Muslims *vis à vis* people not belonging to the Islamic community, the *dhimmi* or protected people<sup>35</sup>, but until the Crusades Christians were still the majority in the areas we are considering, while Muslims – although masters – were a numerical minority<sup>36</sup>.

The Muslims early on faced a dilemma with regard to the acceptance of conversions, despite their great momentum, or exactly because of it<sup>37</sup>. The religious classification and segmentation of society had very important economic implications, as the treasuries of the caliphate were filled to a significant part thanks to the *jizyah*, the poll tax, a special tax levied on non-Muslims. The Muslim ambivalence towards conversions is recorded in several sources. However, from the period of the Crusades the local Christian populations were crushed between the hammer of tightening Muslim regulations towards them<sup>38</sup> and the anvil of the crusaders' aggression – which in the end proved to be an ultimate and

35. One could analyse at great length the situation of the People of the Book, or the *dhimmi*s, especially the Christians, in many regards, from the variation in attitude within the Qur'ān itself, the *jizyah*, the special poll tax (cf. Q 9:29), to the prevision of the [alleged] Covenant or Pact of 'Umar. But we shall return to this later. Cf. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 146. For a more detailed overall picture cf. Yohanan Friedmann, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam: Interfaith Relations in the Muslim Tradition* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2003, passim; M. Levy-Rubin, "Shurūṭ 'Umar and Its Alternatives: The Legal Debate on the Status of the *Dhimmi*s", *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 30 (2005), 170-206. From a 20th Century perspective see the existential perception and overall feeling about being a *dhimmi* in the renowned (fictional for the most part but also contemplative) book by Metropolitan George Khodr of Mount Lebanon, *The Ways of Childhood*, trans. N. Jurayj, Orthodox Christian Profiles Series 6, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, N.Y. 2016, 51-53.

36. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 11. Cf. Also R. W. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 1979.

37. In the late seventh and early eighth centuries, when the conversion of free non-Muslims began adversely to affect their revenues, the authorities tried to stop the inflow of new Muslims. P. Crone, "Imperial Trauma: The Case of the Arabs," *Common Knowledge*, 12, 1 (2006), 113 [105-116]. Av. Cameron, *The Byzantines*, 181, however suggests that unlike in other geographical territories conquered by the Arabs "conversion to Islam in Syria and Palestine was not encouraged."

38. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 177-178. Cf. *Ibid.*, 11.

general attack of the West on the East, as evidenced by the course of the fourth crusade which resulted in the fall of Constantinople in 1204 – and their situation was aggravated and their number diminished. The indigenous Christians, not bearing arms nor taking sides in a war that was not theirs, were for the crusaders completely insignificant, negligible and an object of contempt<sup>39</sup>.

By insisting on a historical narrative that sees the Christians of areas later conquered by the Arabs only or mainly as losers<sup>40</sup>, one disregards the magnitude of their achievements in the areas of contemplative thought, of theology and of life, but also in their greatest feat – that of living in a more or less admirable coexistence with Islam, despite all the difficulties. It is they who have managed for centuries to coexist with Islam in a more or less harmonious *conviventia*, finding a *modus vivendi*, with some dissonance and exceptions every now and then, but generally functional and sustainable.

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39. In comparison to the great amount of literature on the Crusades, relatively little has been dedicated to the local Christian population. There are also a lot of stereotypes concerning this matter. Chr. MacEvitt, *The Crusades and the Christian World of the East: Rough Tolerance*, University of Pennsylvania Press Philadelphia 2008, formulates his statement as follows: “The challenge of this [stereotypical dominant] approach is determining the extent to which local Christian experience aids the historian to understand the experience of other indigenous communities. The historiographic assumption has been that the Franks treated local Christians better than Jews or Muslims on the basis of shared faith, though they still did not treat them as equals. While such an argument has an aura of common sense to it, the underlying assumption that social groups prefer those who are similar to them and feel antagonism towards those who are most different is based largely in evolutionary psychology, and may not apply in all historical situations. In many episodes of social conflict, it is the “intimate enemy,” a term which Elaine Pagels has used in discussing Jewish and early Christian intracommunal struggles, who is perceived as the greatest challenge and threat” (pp. 12-13).

40. There is of course a tradition and a culture of grief and mourning, mostly expressed in poetic forms. E.g. the Melkite Palestinian Bishop Sulaymān al-Ghazzī (b. 940), who is considered the first Arab poet to write *dīwān* (poetry) exclusively from the emic perspective of Christian concerns. N. Edelby, ed., *Sulaymān al-Ghazzī*, Patrimoine Arabe Chretien, vols. 7-9, Librairie Saint Paul Jounieh, Lebanon and Pontificio Istituto Orientale, Rome 1984- 86.

## Dialogue in Everything

As mentioned before, Arabic theology grew up side by side with Islamic theology. Christianity and Judaism, being already there, provide among other pre-Islamic factors a fertile ground where Islamic thinking can germinate and grow. Modern scholarship is interested in examining this background, and tends to seek for Christian influences in the Qur'ānic text and in the formation of Islamic thought.<sup>41</sup> Christians at the times of formation of Islamic thinking would also naturally see the relevance of the dynamically upcoming new ideas as somewhat relevant to their own. The Qur'ānic references to the Old and the New Testament, no matter how truthful or creatively interpreted they might have seemed, support this idea. The Bahira legend, highly disputable, presenting the story of a Nestorian monk who supposedly had taught Moḥammad the 'real Qur'ān,' which was later distorted by malicious and self-interested people, speaks for this interrelation. According to Richard Gottheil, this legend was a malicious polemical construct of the Christian side, instrumentalised to establish that nothing was original in the Qur'ān, and all was bad imitation of Christian teaching<sup>42</sup>. More

41. Cf. G. S. Reynolds, *The Qur'an and Its Biblical Subtext*, Routledge Studies in the Qur'an, Routledge, London and New York 2010. Idem, *A Muslim Theologian in the Sectarian Milieu: 'Abd al-Jabbār and the Critique of Christian Origins*, Islamic History and Civilization, Brill, Leiden and Boston 2004. Idem (ed.), *The Qu'rān in its Historical Context*. Routledge, London and New York 2008. A. Neuwirth, *Studien zur Komposition der Mekkanischen Suren: Der literarische Form des Koran – ein Zeugnis seiner Historizität?*, 2., durch eine Korangeschichtliche Einführung erweiterte Auflage, Studien zur Geschichte und Kultur des Islamischen Orients, Neue Folge 10, De Gruyter, Berlin and New York 2007. Eadem, *Koranforschung – eine politische Philologie?: Bibel, Koran und Islamentstehung im Spiegel spätantiker Textpolitik und moderner Philologie*, Litterae et Theologia 4, De Gruyter, Berlin and New York 2014. A. Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai and Michael Marx, eds., *The Qu'rān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qu'rānic Milieu*, Texts and Studies on the Qur'an 6, Brill, Leiden and Boston 2010. A. Neuwirth and M. A. Sells, eds., *Qu'rānic Studies Today* Routledge, London and New York 2016). Έμμ. Γρυπαιου, *Χριστιανισμός και Κοράνι: Μία Έρευνα στα Χριστιανικά Στοιχεία του Ισλάμ* [Em. Grypeou, *Christianity and the Qur'ān: A Survey of the Christian Elements of Islam*], Μαΐστρος [Maistros], Athens 2010. See also the works of J. Tannous, note 6.

42. R. Gottheil, "A Christian Bahira Legend: Introduction [and] English Translation of the Syriac and Arabic Texts", *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 13 (1898), 189. Gottheil has

recently, Sidney Griffith however suggests that the Bahira legend could have been a reconstruction of – or an answer to – a Muslim claim that Christians acknowledged the veracity of Islam and the prophetic calling of Moḥammad, the same way that the Messiah was announced by the Old Testament prophets<sup>43</sup>. Abjar Bahkou sums up the issue as follows: “In terms of its place in the Christian literature of the Muslim/Christian dialogue in the early Islamic period, the Bahīra legend forms a body of imaginative composition which allows their Christian readers not only to fend off the challenge of Islam, but to reinforce in themselves the sense of being in the right. They have defended their faith in the very idiom, and indeed, in the instance of the Bahīra legend, in terms of the very tradition which in Islamic lore, to the contrary, suggest the Christian commendation of Islam”<sup>44</sup>.

Muslim theologians have had similar theories refuting the authenticity of Christian and Jewish scriptures. There was a Muslim criticism, along the lines of the ‘distortion of the scriptures by the Christians’, suggesting that the Christian faith was no longer scriptural but a result of Church Councils held under the auspices of the Byzantine Emperor. Though this idea may have had some relation to Christian groups and Churches that opposed the Synods, it was raised as an argument by the Muslim side<sup>45</sup>.

But when you are a native Arab Christian, you know from the very beginning that things are not only onesided; that it is the qur’ānic language which elevated the Arabic language and gave the Arab people

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published and translated Syriac and Arabic manuscripts. Ibid. 13 (1898) 189-242; 14 (1899), 203-268; 15 (1900), 56-102; 17 (1903), 125-166.

43. S. H. Griffith, “Muḥammad and the Monk Bahīrā: Reflection on a Syriac and Arabic Text from Early Abbasid Times,” *Oriens Christianus* 79 (1995), 148 [146-174]. Cf. Idem, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 38, 166. Cf. Grypaïou, *o.c.* 74-80. Idem, “The Qu’rān in Arab Christian Texts: The Development of an Apologetical Argument: Abū Qurrah in the *Maḡlis* of Al-Ma’mūn,” *Parole d’Orient* 24 (1999), 206-210 [203-233].

44. A. Bahkou, “The Monk Encounters the Prophet—The Story of the Encounter between Monk Bahīra and Muhammad as It Is Recorded in the Syriac Manuscript of Mardin 259/2”, *Cultural and Religious Studies*, 3, 6 (2015), 357 [349-357] (doi: 10.17265/2328-2177/2015.06.006).

45. S. H. Griffith, “Muslims and Church Councils: The Apology of Theodore Abū Qurrah,” in *Studia Patristica*, ed. E. A. Livingstone, 25, Peeters, Louvain, Belgium 1993, 270-299.

the tools of expression. It is the same language you use for Christian liturgy, it is the same language Arab Christians have used to express theological and dogmatic thinking, it is the same language in which they have tried to convey Greek philosophical terms and the fine notions of patristic theology, yet it is the same language that the Muslims have used to express their own faith, immersing the same technical words in their particularly Muslim connotations<sup>46</sup>. An example is the discussion of and different approaches to the word *qunūm*, of Syriac origin, first used by ‘Abdallah ibn al-Faḍl al-Anṭaki to translate the Greek words *πρόσωπο* (person), *ἄτομο* (individual), *ὑπόσταση* (hypostasis), *ὑποστατικὸ ἰδίωμα* (hypostatic property) and more, which has a broad semantic field<sup>47</sup>. In Christological discussions, things were even more complex, as Christians tried at the same time to refute Islamic “Christology” (if one may use this term) and to articulate their own Christology *vis à vis* the other Churches.

The overall agenda of the Christian apologetic addressed to Islam was set by the very questions and challenges posed by Muslims from the beginning of the Islamic era, and we can more or less follow them in the early Islamic literature, which was shaped by and at the same time contributed to the shaping of the “community of believers,” the *ummah*. This includes of course the Qur’ān itself, as well as the effort to record Muḥammad’s biography, from the time of Muḥammad ibn Ishāq (d. 768) to the key personality of ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Hishām (d. 834) who edited ibn Ishāq’s biography, so that it obtained a great authority among the Muslims, almost a canonical status. The work was widely circulated under the title *Sirat rasūli l-lāh* (The Life of the Prophet of God)<sup>48</sup>.

46. Z. Κόντρο, *Ἡ Φύση τοῦ Ἰσλάμ* [G. Khodr, Metropolitan of Mount Lebanon, *The Nature of Islam*] Μάϊστρος [Maistros], Athens 2009), 46-47 – also available in French on line: “La Nature de l’Islam”, 19-20: [http://www.saint-serge.net/IMG/pdf/La\\_nature\\_de\\_l\\_Islam.doc\\_pdf](http://www.saint-serge.net/IMG/pdf/La_nature_de_l_Islam.doc_pdf), last accessed 25 April 2017. Cf. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 19-20. Cf. also E. Voulgaraki-Pissina, “Experience and Expression: Dialogue and Witness in the Thought of Metropolitan George Khodr of Mount Lebanon”: *Ἐπιστημονικὴ Ἐπετηρὶς τῆς Θεολογικῆς Σχολῆς, Πανεπιστήμιον Ἀθηνῶν* [Epistimoniki Epetiris tis Theologikis Scholis, Panepistimion Athinon (Scientific Yearbook of the Theological School, University of Athens)], N° (2015), 587-603.

47. R. Haddad, *La trinité divine chez les théologiens arabes (750-1050)*, Beauchesne, Paris 1985, 170.

48. *Sirat* means ‘the way’, ‘the course’.



Sidney Griffith sees an analogy between the 60 years needed for the biography of Muḥammad to come to its maturity and the first shaping and expression of Christian apologetic<sup>49</sup>. Islamic theology and Christian apologetic were somehow growing together around the Islamic hermeneutic of the scriptural themes of attestation, preparation, revelation, persecution and salvation, aligned with the prophetic ideal in the contemporary discourse of both Judaism and Christianity. While systematic topics are related to the Qur'ān, a different thematic spectrum, mostly focusing on the *Sirat*, was developed to address and refute Islamic prophetology and apocalyptic in general, the Muslim understanding of the history of salvation<sup>50</sup>.

On the particular themes and the methodologies of dialogue a few words must be said, although the vast character of the topic would call for a separate study. A variety of systematic theological topics with common and prominent *loci*, such as Trinitarian theology and Christology, developed on the basis of the Qur'ān, its interpreters (*mufasssirūn*) and the systematic theologians / controversialists (*muttakallimūn*) – who were also in the first line of the dialogical controversy with Christian theologians. It is equally true that Muslim theologians tended to biblicise their argumentation, in the same way as the Christians tended to qur'ānise theirs. It is basically a search for common ground, for argumentation based on a recognised authority by the 'other' partner in the discussion. One of the earlier Christian apologies, and the first we know of in Arabic from the Sinai Arabic MS 154, the so called treatise "On the Triune Nature of God", from a now anonymous author, around 755 CE,<sup>51</sup> is

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49. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 92.

50. Cf. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 92-93 and 96-99.

51. M. Dunlop Gibson, *An Arabic Version of the Acts of the Apostles and the Seven Catholic Epistles, with a Treatise on the Triune Nature of God*, *Studia Sinaitica*, no. 7, C. J. Clay, Cambridge 1899, 1-36 (English); 74-107 (Arabic). More about the text in S. Khalil Samir, "The Earliest Arab Apology for Christianity (c. 750)," in *Christian Arabic Apologetics during the Abbasid Period (750-1258)*, ed. S. Khalil Samir and J. S. Nielsen, 57-114, Brill, Leiden 1994; M. Gallo, trans., *Palestinese anonimo: Omelia arabo-cristiana dell'VIII secolo*, Citta Nuova Editrice, Rome 1994. On chronological issues cf. M. N. Swanson, "Some Considerations for the Dating of *Fī tathlīth Allāh al wāḥid* (Sinai Ar. 154) and *Al-Jāmi' wujūh al-imān* (London British Library Or. 4950)," in *Actes du quatrieme congres international d'études arabes chrétiennes*, ed. Samir Khalil Samir, *Parole de l'Orient* 18 (1993), 117-141.

clearly referring to the Qur'ān and is trying to prove the Christian Trinitarian doctrine based on Qur'ānic references. The anonymous author does not accept the divinely inspired character of the holy Book of the Muslims, but tries to build plausible arguments on a commonly accepted basis. The development of his argumentation is also around the books of the (Old) Testament taken up by the Qur'ān: the Torah, the Prophets and the Psalms. In any case, the freedom and boldness in the way he uses the Qur'ān is quite notable, as well as a sense of familiarity, almost an intimacy with it. It is most likely that the anonymous author is not addressing Muslims directly, though he does not avoid every now and then a rhetorical “you”, referring to a hypothetical Muslim interlocutor, introducing thus into the treatise rhetorical elements of the most agreeable genre of *diatribe*. He is addressing a Christian audience, whom he catechises in the Christian doctrine, equipping them with ready arguments and answers to common Muslim questions and objections concerning Triadology and Christology, the incarnation, the importance of the Messiah in the divine economy, the sending of the apostles to all nations, etc. It is an apology, a catechesis and a dogmatic treatise, all in one, valuable for Christians who were being pressured by the Islamic element to abandon their faith and to convert to Islam.

Another example would be the case of the Melkite Patriarch Paul of Antioch (12th Century). He, too, uses argumentation to prove the veracity of Christian faith based on the Qur'ān, a tactic which elicited a strong reaction on the part of the Muslims. Despite reaction, this model has been used repeatedly thereafter. Far from exhausting the subject, I shall only refer to 'Ēnbāqom, a 16th Century abbot at the leading monastery of Debre Libanos, becoming thus the *ēčāgē*, second in rank but mostly influential leader of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, who wrote to Grān, the Muslim conqueror of Ethiopia, a letter-treatise called *Anqasha Amin* (The Gate of Faith), trying to prove Christianity out of the Qur'ānic text<sup>52</sup>.

52. The letter of 'Ēnbāqom, a saint of the Ethiopian Church, is of high diplomatic quality. It was addressed to Grān right after the capture of Ethiopia by his troops. Grān, meaning left-handed, as he was called by the Ethiopians, or otherwise Ahmad ibn Ibrahim, was called by the Muslims “sahib al-fath” (i.e. the conqueror) and “al-ghazi”

Another common ground was that of philosophy<sup>53</sup>. Most Christian theologians were also prolific writers; some belonged to the scientific and philosophical elite with close connections to Islamic intellectuals and philosophers. They also were translators of manuscripts of major importance. Christian philosophy in ‘Abbāsīd Baghdad was of great significance for the development of classical Islamic intellectual culture. In the intra-Islamic dispute between *falsafa* and ‘ilm al-kalām, philosophy and theology, especially in the heyday of the *mu’tazila* (Al-Mamūn, ‘Abbāsīd dynasty), it was Christian intellectuals that were bridging the two sides. Here we have to note a scholarly fallacy. Though the

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(i.e. the winner). He himself chose to use the title of Imam and considered it his life’s ambition to conquer Ethiopia. After the failure of the desperate efforts of the *negus* (king) of Ethiopia Lebnā Dengel to come to an agreement with the Portuguese and most importantly after his death in 1540, Grān, who already had conquered the outlying cities threatened to crush his opponent completely. It is at that time that ‘Ēnbāqom is writing his letter-treatise. Being a person of deep knowledge of Islam, a master of many languages, a scholar and the first non-Ethiopian abbot of the monastery of Dabra Libanos, he chooses to develop his argumentation based on the Qur’ān. He also makes a plea for conversion to the Muslim leader. On a second reading he is also trying to mollify the intentions of the conqueror towards the Christian population of his territory. Anyway, it was neither the letter nor diplomacy that brought the wished-for result, but the delayed arrival of the Portuguese who united with the troops of the new *negus*, Gālāwdenos, and crushed and scattered the army of Grān, who was himself killed (1543). Yet another reason for the writing of the letter of ‘Ēnbāqom, *Anqasa Amin*, was that it may be used as a tool for the encouragement and empowerment of the Christian population in their meeting with Islam, the latter being in a dominant position. ‘Ēnbāqom, *Anqasa Amin: La Porte de la foi. Apologie éthiopienne du christianisme contre l’Islam à partir du Coran*, Introduction, critical edition and translation by E.J. Van Donzel, E.J. Brill, Leiden 1969. Cf. Εύη Βουλγαράκη-Πισίνα, *Χριστιανομουσουλμανικός Διάλογος: Θέσεις, Έπιχειρήματα και Έπικοινωνιακά Στοιχεία. Η Άπολογία του Αιθίοπα Άγίου Έnbāqom († 1565) προς τον Μουσουλμάνο Ηγέτη Grān με Βάση το Κοράνιο* [E. Voulgaraki-Pissina, Christian-Muslim Dialogue: Positions, Arguments and Rudiments of Communication. The Apology of the Ethiopian Saint ‘Ēnbāqom (+ 1565) to the Muslim Leader Grān on the Basis of the Qur’ān], *Μαΐστρος* [Maistros], Athens.

53. Al. Treiger, “Origins of Kalām,” in *Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology* (2016), ed. S. Schmidtke Oxford University Press, New York, NY, (DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199696703.013.001) investigates in this interesting and solid article the formation of the Kalām within the frame of Late Antiquity and its origin in the Christological debates. It is not only the philosophy as such with its logical construction, but also the rhetoric and argumentation linked with it that provide a familiar and common ground to the Christian and Muslim sides.

translation movement in Baghdad and Early ‘Abbāsid society is accentuated and thoroughly studied by Gutas and others, and quite often the names of translators and their works are listed, their overall influence in Islamic society, as well as their significance for the Christian community and Christian theology, are to a large degree disregarded in modern scholarship. It has commonly happened that translations are isolated from the other, original works of the same persons, which scholars fail even to mention<sup>54</sup>. *Damnatio memoriae* does not apply only to the works as such, but also to the variety of interests of the translators, their vast and multidisciplinary knowledge of philosophy, theology, the sciences, history, the languages they are equipped with and their wish and eagerness to make a mark in society. One can wonder why this happens on such a scale. Some academics are highly prejudiced towards Byzantium and Christian thinking more generally, while others enter the field from the point of view of classical literature *sensu stricto* and are uninterested in the importance of the translation movement for contemporary society within the historical period they study. It would therefore be the task of unbiased historians<sup>55</sup> and of course theologians from their perspective to unite the fragments and unfold the significance of links that are indeed close.

## The Dialogical Character of Arab Theology

Orthodox Theology is to a large degree Hellenocentric, as the main lines of patristic thinking were mostly expressed in Greek<sup>56</sup> – but not

54. E.g. D. Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*, 61, note 1. Cf. the withering critique by Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 107-108.

55. The need for a restitution of Byzantium in Historical studies has been taken up by many, not least Averil Cameron, *The Byzantines*, xi and passim. See also Eadem, *Byzantine Christianity: A Very Brief History*, Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, London 2017, 104 and passim. In the book she also discusses the legacy of Byzantium, for the Christians in the Middle East, among others (101).

56. This fact is acknowledged and articulated in a fine and appropriate way by the noted Russian theologian Georges Florovsky. The notion of Christian Hellenism pervades his entire work. As for Russian theology, he says “It must pass through the austere schooling

exclusively. Other languages, notably Syriac, played an important role from the very beginning, though Greek as *lingua franca* overshadowed them. As Greek gave way to Arabic in the southeastern areas of the former Roman Empire, little by little along with the Arab conquests<sup>57</sup>, a genuine theology emerged, shaped and expressed in Arabic, impregnated with Arab culture and mentality – an Arab theology, of great richness, clarity and wisdom<sup>58</sup>. The development and definition of appropriate vocabulary and terminology in Arabic for the adequate expression of Christian doctrine is in itself a major theological achievement. It was the Syrian Melkites who first decided to move from Syriac into Arabic by the second half of the 7th century<sup>59</sup>, and while their writing reached at the time a much wider public, they had to deal with a series of problems, the greatest of which, on the theoretical level, would be the Islamisation of the terminology. Opinions as to the degree of their success in dealing with these problems may differ, or may be based very trivially on the small part of the Arabic theological production that we are familiar with, but even the effort – regardless of the amount of success – is from a missiological point of view of tremendous importance. I cannot

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of Christian Hellenism. Hellenism, so to speak, assumed a perpetual character in the Church; it has incorporated itself in the very fabric of the Church as the eternal category of Christian existence. Of course what is meant here is not that ethnical Hellenism of modern Hellas or of the Levant, nor Greek phyletism, which is obsolete and without justification”: “The Ways of Russian Theology,” in *Aspects of Church History*, vol. 4 of his collected works, Nordland, Belmont, MA 1975, 195.

Yet this Hellenocentrism, perceived by Florovsky and others as a perennial factor in universal richness, has every now and then become a factor in self-sufficiency and consequently a narrow spirit for the Greeks themselves, who tend to disregard other very valuable and precious forms and expressions of theology.

57. On this process, distinct from the process of Islamisation, see G.R. Hawting, *The First Dynasty of Islam: The Umayyad Caliphate AD 661-750*. Routledge, London – New York 2000 (<sup>1</sup>1986), 9-10.

58. One cannot help mentioning the older, but monumental work by G. Graf, *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur*, 5 vols., Studi e Testi, 118, 133, 146, 147, 172, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vatican City 1944-1953. For an overview cf. also S. Noble and Al. Treiger, eds, *The Orthodox Church in the Arab World, 700-1700: An Anthology of Sources (Orthodox Christian)*, Northern Illinois University Press, Illinois 2014. And of course S. Griffith’s *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, already noted.

59. See note 31.

help noticing, though, that sometimes systematic theologians within Greek Orthodoxy are on a different wavelength from missiologists, as they persist on their familiar terminology and are understandably very conservative and reserved towards different articulations of the faith in different paradigms<sup>60</sup>, which is nevertheless of paramount importance for mission and the acculturation of theology<sup>61</sup>. Sound theological reflection on this matter, which requires further study, is in short supply.

To make a general remark and evaluation, it is more than obvious that Arabic theology is dialogical in all its aspects, taking Islam into consideration at all times, not only in the texts that directly deal with it in one way or another, varying between ‘polemic and dialogue,’ as Angeliki Ziaka puts it in her book about Greek theology in relation to Islam<sup>62</sup>.

The main characteristic that differentiates eastern theology, and especially Arabic theology, when compared to western is that regardless of style or external form (a direct dialogue, a letter, a narration of a hypothetical dialogue, a formal treatise), regardless of the recipient of the message (whether it is primarily Christians or Muslims directly), regardless of its overall tone (how strong, affirmative, aggressive,

60. It does not come as surprise when Griffith, in *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, attests the same basic attitude among Christian writers in Arabic during the formative period of Islam, despite the fact that much of their systematic thinking was thus “unintelligible to the general reader who would come across them in their new contexts” (157).

61. On this cf. E. Βουλγαράκη-Πισίνα, «Εισαγωγή στο Άνέκδοτο έργο του Ήλία Βουλγαράκη “Σχεδιάσμα για την Άγάπη”»: Μιά έξερεύνηση στο Μεγάλο Ίεραποστολικό Ζήτημα τής Προσαρμογής» [E. Voulgaraki-Pissina, “Introduction to the Unpublished Text by Elias Voulgarakis ‘A Draft Sketch on Love’: An Exploration of the Big Missiological Question of Adaptation], in Eadem (ed.), *Άγάπη και Μαρτυρία: Άναζητήσεις Λόγου και Ήθους στο Έργο του Ήλία Βουλγαράκη. Αφιέρωμα από τους Μαθητές του* [Love and Witness: Quests for Logos and Ethos in the Work of Elias Voulgarakis. A Tribute by His Students] *Ακρίτας <Ορθόδοξη Μαρτυρία 73>* [Akritis, Orthodox Witness], Athens 2001, 33-58. (Note: The above mentioned work “Σχεδιάσμα” is now published by Maistros Publications, Athens 2004).

62. Άγ. Ζιάκα, *Μεταξύ Πολεμικής και Διαλόγου: Τò Ισλάμ στην Βυζαντινή, Μεταβυζαντινή και Νεότερη Έλληνική Γραμματεία* [A. Ziaka, *Between Polemic and Dialogue: Islam in Byzantine, post-Byzantine and Modern Greek Literature*], Πουρναράς [Pournaras], Thessaloniki 2010.

diplomatic or friendly), it always keeps the ‘other’, the Muslim in this case, before one’s eyes. It is a face to face approach; even when it is referring to Muslim people in the third person, it is not referring to ‘them’ behind their backs. The latter is quite common in Western texts, which speak of Muslims in their absence – not that it is always the case. The same may occur in some Greek texts, where Muslims are spoken of in the third person and as being far away. Yet the Greek texts have far more in common in content and style with the Arabic ones.

### More on Dialogues

Not being able within the scope of this paper to refer to dialogues in an analytical way, or one by one, I shall refer to some classifications that may hopefully give an overall picture.

Ziaka, in the above-mentioned book, speaking of the Greek approaches to dialog with Islam, identifies three main phases. The first is from the second half of the 8th century to the beginning of the 9th. The most prominent theologians of this period are John Damascene and Theodore Abū Qurra, who inspired others in Constantinople. These two are worth mentioning not only because of their unquestionable importance, but also because they belong to two different linguistic and cultural traditions, the Greek and the Arabic. This is how, in my opinion, the disagreement between Andrew Louth and Sidney Griffith on Louth’s theological observations as to John Damascene’s main references, at least, may be resolved<sup>63</sup>. But also Theodore Abū Qurra, although not writing in Greek but in Arabic (and Syriac), had through translation a great impact on the Greeks, too. Besides, they both formed a solid tradition in the Christian Arab world and created a ‘school’ with many prominent students.

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63. The point of contention is whether the Greek-speaking John Damascene was primarily a Byzantine or an Arab author and theologian: Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 138, note 25. A. Louth, *St. John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology*, Oxford University Press <Early Christian Studies>, Oxford 2002. More generally cf. also D. J. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam: The “Heresy of the Ishmaelites”*, Brill, Leiden 1972.

The second phase according to Ziaka starts from the 9<sup>th</sup> century and continues into the 14<sup>th</sup> century. What is new in this phase is the transfer of the center of literary production to Constantinople rather than Damascus. The refutation of Islam is still the main objective and polemical tones prevail. Among many memorable works of a period of prolific literary production, Ziaka singles out the work of Niketas Byzantios,<sup>64</sup> which is a refutation of the Qu'rān and the Muslim teachings, but also at the same time a quite extensive partial translation of the qu'rānic text.<sup>65</sup>

The short third phase begins only in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and lasts up to the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453. This is considered from a dialogical point of view the most important, characterised by a genuine interest to get to know, and possibly come to terms with, the opponent; the phase that the most objective, mild and least prejudiced works come from. Some of the major works were written by Byzantine emperors, such as John VI Kantankouzinou or Michael II Palaeologos, yet another token of the close link between theology and diplomacy, religion and affairs of state.<sup>66</sup>

A different classification is given by Rachid Haddad.<sup>67</sup> He divides Christian Arabic Literature into two different periods, which he calls: "patristic arabic" and "scholastic arabic". The first, until around 900, is characterised by an incomplete assimilation of Greek philosophy. And the second, initiated by the syro-jacobite Yaḥyā Ibn 'Adī, a distinguished expert in Aristotelian logic, is characterised by a complete assimilation of Greek philosophy, especially Aristotelian logic, and Islamic thought as well. What is interesting in this classification is the emphasis on the use of philosophical tools, a factor we also discussed earlier.

64. Ziaka, *ibid.*, 477-478. Cf. Eadem, *La Recherche grecque contemporaine et l'islam* (dissertation), Universite Marc Bloch, Strasbourg (reproduction 2004, Lille: ARNT)] 31-33.

65. On a recent critical edition, including a translation in German, see, K. Förstel (ed.), *Niketas von Byzanz, Schriften zum Islam, I.*, Corpus Islamo-Christianum, Series Graeca, 5, Echter, Würzburg 2000, 1-198. All three treatises, in Greek and Latin, also in PG 105, 669-842.

66. Ziaka, *Μεταξὺ Πολεμικῆς καὶ Διαλόγου [Between Polemic and Dialogue]*. For a short overview, 475-485.

67. R. Haddad, *La Trinité divine chez les théologiens arabes (750-1050)*, Beauchesne, Paris 1985.



Let us try to classify dialogues from some other angles, too. From a more rhetorical and formalistic point of view one notices that dialogues may take the form of an actual direct dialogue, equipped with more or fewer external details on time, setting, particular cause, etc. More details of the sort would signify that the dialog might in fact be closer to a kind of report of an actual dialogue. A dialogue lacking in concrete background details would be a fictional construction (or distant, abstract reconstruction) of a dialogical situation, that may or may not have some connection to a specific historical reality, for the purposes of instruction and with a paradigmatic and normative function and scope. It may be an indirect dialogue, contained in a narration of some sort; it may take the form of a letter or of a more formal treatise. It may take the form of *ἑρωταποκρίσεις* (erotapokriseis: Questions and answers), well known also from Byzantine rhetorical tropes and allowing for quite a systematic approach to various issues. But as we said earlier, even when there is no evidence of any dialogical element, dialogue and especially dialogue with Islam is implicit in all forms of Arabic theological literature.

Among the different classifications Sidney Griffith uses, I would select two types of dialogues: the “Monk in the Emir’s *majlis*” (courtyard), and the “Master and Disciple” type, to which the majority of the texts belong. Despite the fact that such dialogues do not simply serve a documentary purpose, and that their significance lies in their exemplary character, this does not mean that such dialogues did not actually take place in a physical and organised form. Evidence that they did take place is provided by, among others, Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Ḥumaydī, who reports on the reaction of a more conservative Muslim, Abū ‘Umar Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Sagdī, coming from Spain to the ‘Abāssid *majlis*. His reaction was one of great surprise and disapproval of the fact that such dialogues were not uncommon; on the contrary, they were celebrated as public events and, most appalling of all, they were held on equal terms<sup>68</sup>.

These dialogues did not reflect unbiased common searches for the truth. The participants had a strong position of their own from the beginning. Among diplomatic issues raised or smoldering, concerning the well-

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68. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 64, where further reference, note 66.

being of the Christian community, they wished to prove their views and at the same time devalue the standpoint of the opponent. Speaking of Christian theology, the proof of the validity and correctness of Christian faith in the dialogue is far from being of merely academic interest. It is also of social and existential interest. Besides, the loser of the debate should submit to the winner, according to a certain procedure, almost theatrical, where both parties pretend to take for granted that they both are ‘genuine truth seekers.’ This is the point where an agnostic element is introduced, to be annulled almost immediately. Because the unpreconditioned and impartial view, the supposed unbiased foundation of the argumentation on common logic or common ground more generally, including commonly recognised authorities such as Greek philosophy or the ‘other’s’ scriptures, is rather theatrical scenery for the dialogue.

Does the loser in fact recognise the superiority of the winner? Do such dialogues conclude with a tangible missionary success? Does the end of the dialogue signify a conversion? The answer is no. This is not the case. They may end up with an open question. And here another form of agnosticism is once more introduced, along with an inner, secret and unspoken hope.

In an account of such a dialogue between the monk of Bêth Hâlê and a Muslim notable<sup>69</sup>, the discussion is free of background details. It is a model, an exemplary, typological debate where all standard theological topics, repeated again and again and further developed in the dialogues to come through the years and the centuries, are already present<sup>70</sup>. The Muslim interlocutor is of course persuaded, and he would have become a Christian, if not for the social pressure. Similarly in previous centuries, Theodore bar Kônî (fl. ca. 792) proves in the tenth chapter of his *Scholion*<sup>71</sup> the veracity of the Christian faith to a Muslim interlocutor.

69. See Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 465–72. Cf. Griffith, “Disputing with Islam in Syriac,” *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 3.1 (2000), 29–54.

70. On the exemplary character of this dialog see Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 78.

71. Theodore bar Kônî, *Liber Scholiorum*, *Scriptores Syri*, Series Secunda LXV, ed. A. Scher, Typographie Reipublicae, Paris, Harrassowitz, Lipsiae 1910, 231–284. Cf. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 43. Also, Idem, “Chapter Ten of the *Scholion*: Theodore bar Kônî’s Apology for Christianity,” *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 47 (1981), 158–188.

This is admitted by the Muslim party, who yet cannot take the step of conversion because of social restrictions. The social milieu, not to be understood simply as mentality but also as authority and legislation, is the only argument for a Muslim remaining a Muslim. This is partly a reflection of social reality and partly a plausible justification for the failure of Christian mission in the specific circumstances. Furthermore, it presents an indirect answer to the ‘victory argument’ of the Muslim side.

The ‘victory argument’ was not originally Muslim. And it was not just an argument. It was an overall feeling, among the Christians, after Constantine. The Victory of the Cross, said Christian writers many a time, is an incontestable sign of the veracity of Christianity, as simple fishermen cannot ‘win’ the whole world for the Christian faith. The expansion of Christianity is therefore the work of the Holy Spirit, which proves that the Christian God is the true God. Within the limits of this paper we cannot go into the historical roots of this line of argumentation, which was attested also in the Old Testament (e.g. the story of the Prophet Elijah, etc.) and was commonly recognised as a criterion for validity and veracity in many contests, both in the Jewish and gentile worlds. But soon after the rapid expansion of Islam it was used as an argument by the Islamic side, a fact that took Christians by surprise and puzzled them enormously. “Where is our God?” a Christian might have thought. And alongside the ‘spiritual’ argument that this major trial and time of testing happened because of their sins<sup>72</sup>, they also gave more plausible reasons to explain and meet the situation, like the legal restrictions as mentioned above.

Yet, there is still a Christian variation of the ‘victory argument’ in Sinai Arabic MS 154, f. 110v., previously mentioned, in the so called treatise “On the Triune Nature of God”, one of the earliest Christian apologies – and perhaps exactly because it is one of the earliest. It says: “If this religion were not truly from God, it would not have stood so unshakably for seven hundred and forty-six years”<sup>73</sup>.

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72. Already Patriarch Sophronius of Jerusalem gives this explanation in his *Christmas Sermon*, 506. Cf. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 69.

73. This excerpt is included in the manuscript and referred to by Sidney Griffith, *ibid.* 54, who also reports that Gibson, unaccountably, omitted this leaf from her edition of

## Mission

The invitation to conversion is present in most dialogues, as previously mentioned. This leads us naturally to the notion of mission, and particularly an active, inviting type of mission. Mission is tightly linked to the notion of dialogue. This is the height of contemporary missiological scholarship<sup>74</sup>. Dialogue in different forms and styles is by all means present in the process and methodology of mission. An inner, existential dialogue and self-questioning meets with the message conveyed through mission. Thus a dialogical process develops through questions and answers, arguments and counter arguments, different points made by different parts that dialectically and synthetically would build a convincing (or not) logical construction. The objective is to convince the other. The other is convinced through persuasion, presupposing dialogue. These notions are interwoven with a possibility of conversion out of free choice, unless one speaks of violence. Violence is not accepted ideally and in principle by either side. Christ's saying: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me"<sup>75</sup> is constitutive for Christian discipleship. Discipleship is a question of choice, of free will; it is linked with apostolicity. It is a true call, where no one is obliged. Being Christ's disciple and witness

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the text in 1899. M. Dunlop Gibson, *An Arabic Version of the Acts of the Apostles and the Seven Catholic Epistles*.

74. P. Vassiliadis, "Introductory Remarks," in *Orthodox Perspectives on Mission*, P. Vassiliadis (ed.) Regnum, Oxford 2013, 8 [1-13]. Idem, "Mission, Proselytism and the Ecumenical Movement," in *Go Ye: Volume offered in gratitude to Archbishop of Albania*, ed. Elias Voulgarakis et al. Harnos, Athens 1997, 77-97. N. Dimitriadis, "Integral Ecology: Mission of God, Mission with the 'Other', and Mission Towards Nature in a Multi-Religious World," *Antonionum* XCI (2016), 1080 [1077-1089]. Ath. N. Papathanasiou, "Reconciliation: The Major Conflict in Post-Modernity. An Orthodox Contribution to a Missiological Dialogue," in *Come Holy Spirit, heal and reconcile! Report of the WCC Conference on World Mission and Evangelism, Athens, Greece May 2005*, J. Matthey, ed., WCC Publications, Geneva 2008, 178-186. Cf. E. Βουλγαράκη-Πισίνα, «Τὸ Παρὸν καὶ τὸ Μέλλον τῶν Ἱεραποστολικῶν Σπουδῶν» [E. Voulgaraki-Pissina, To Paron ke to Mellon ton Ierapostolikon Spoudon (Present and Future of Missiological Studies)], *Ἁγίος Σπυρίδων [Hagios Spyridon, Nicosia, Cyprus]* 6,2 (1918), 30-46.

75. *Mark* 8, 34.

is tightly connected with the voluntary acceptance of the cross, with martyrdom.

But also the Qur'ān says:

“There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion. The right course has become clear from the wrong. So whoever disbelieves in Taghut and believes in Allah has grasped the most trustworthy handhold with no break in it. And Allah is Hearing and Knowing”.<sup>76</sup>

According to the above verse, a medianan one, there is free choice of religion. The negative particle لا (lā), signifying an absolute negation in present and future, normally taking a jussive structure, is being translated in simple present, simple future or in a structure that would express wish or promise in different translations – in all cases combined with a positive and definite faith in the superiority of Islam. Many modern interpreters interpret the verse as a declaration for religious freedom<sup>77</sup>, also in the light of the dramatic need to refute Islamic extremism<sup>78</sup>. The verse is also widely used in Islamic education, especially in the Western world<sup>79</sup>. In Islamic *tafsīr* (exegesis) this has traditionally been a highly

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76. Q 2: 256. The Ṣaḥīḥ International version of quran.com is being used for this article.

77. E.g. “This principle finds endorsement in several other verses of the Quran, which manifestly tolerate, though they disapprove of, divergences from the Straight Path. The highest value is attached to the condition of the mind and heart of a person as compared to lip service to the ideals of good life and the test of right-mindedness is to be manifested in deeds and not mere words. Man is free to choose between truth and falsehood and the Prophet’s function is to convey the message, exemplify it in his own life and to leave the rest to God – he is no warder over men to compel them to adopt particular beliefs. Liberty of conscience is thus a value of the good life itself and must be kept in view when studying the incidents and effect of ahādīth, the practice during the Rightly-Guided Caliphate or the opinions of Doctors of Law which must not depart from the letter or the spirit of God’s word.” S.A. Rahman (Former Chief Justice of Pakistan), *Punishment of Apostasy in Islam*. The Other Press, Kuala Lumpur 2007 132.

78. Kh. M. A. El Fadl, *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists*, Harper Collins, New York 2009 159. El Fadl also combines this discussion with the qu’rānic idea that the prophet is not a warden but a reminder (Q 88:21-22). *Ibid.* 158. It must however be said that El Fadl has received criticism for rather ignoring the traditional division between Sunni and Shia, and choosing to opt for a distinction between ‘puritans’ and ‘moderates’.

79. E. Moustafaoglou, “Thoughts on the Joint Training of Theologians and Muslim Religious Education Teachers (Ierodidaskaloi),” in *Intercultural Religious Education and Islamic Studies: Challenges and Prospects in Greece, Europe, USA: Bilingual Edition*, ed. A.

debatable issue<sup>80</sup>. The discussion is also linked with other qu'rānic verses (e.g. Q 5:49), with the theme of apostasy, and of salvation in general, with regard to the adherence to the *ummah*<sup>81</sup>. It is unavoidably linked with the development of the concept of Islamic *da'wah*, meaning 'invitation', 'calling', standing for the concept of mission, a very dynamic concept, within Islamic Theology<sup>82</sup>; or even the classical understanding of jihad as "missionary warfare"<sup>83</sup>.

Nevertheless, even if we accept these two excerpts without further questioning as the emblematic texts of both sides, we cannot but note that there is a basic historical difference in the expansion of the two religions. Christianity, in the beginning, spread in contradiction to both Judaic and Roman authorities. Islam, on the contrary, besides the short initial Meccan period before the *Hijra* (622 CE), was in alignment with authority. In fact, it helped build the unity among different Arabic tribes that were to shape a strong and dynamic Arab nation, holding authority and dynamically expanding. The factor of controlling political power is one that should

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Ziaka, Maistros, Athens 2016, 376 [373-378].

80. On the history of those interpretations one can see the above mentioned works (notes 76 and 77). Another reconsideration is offered by P. Crone, *God's Rule: Government and Islam*, Columbia University Press, New York 2004, 377-382, in connection to holy war, and under a historical perspective, taking into consideration that both the agent who 'offers' the freedom, or the ones protected in this verse (not only the *dhimmi*s but, since the 8th century, also Zoroastrians, etc, according to Crone). Speaking of argumentation built on Q 2: 256 within the frame of Islamic exegeses in the past, she says that "Wherever this [the following] argument originated, it was a powerful one in that it denied that coercion carried any reward for either the agents or the victims. The infidels would not benefit, since nothing done under duress carries any moral meaning. The holy warriors would not be rewarded either, however pure their intentions, nor because all opinions were equally valid, as modern pluralists would claim, but rather because erroneous views were meant as a test of Muslim fortitude and thus had to be withstood rather than removed. Learning to tolerate the intolerable formed part of one's moral education" (381).

81. As to the question of salvation with regard to the notion of belonging to the community, in the three Abrahamic religions, see E. Βουλγαράκη-Πισσίνα, «'Ο Ίωνᾶς καὶ ἡ Ἀποκλειστικότητα τῆς Σωτηρίας», [Evi Voulgaraki-Pissina, Jonas and the Exclusivity in Salvation], *Ἀνθίβολα* [Anthivola] 1 (2017), 213-241.

82. For an overall presentation cf. E. Raciús, *The Multiple Nature of the Islamic Da'wah*, Dissertation, Valopaino Oy, Helsinki 2004.

83. Crone, *God's Rule*, 369.

be borne in mind when comparing the notion of Christian martyrdom, the shedding of one's own blood, uncalled for but also proving to be a fertile ground and foundation for the expansion of Christian faith, on the one hand, and on the other the Islamic understanding of martyrdom, naturally linked with the notion of conquest, the shedding of one's own blood along with the opponent's blood. The difference is striking. So were the facts in history. Yet this difference cannot evolve into the shaping of an essentialist view of history, one that would lead to a reification of one or other religion; not only because this would be methodologically incorrect, but also because it compares different historical phases that cannot be compared. It would be more accurate to seek for similarities or deviations after the 'conversion of the Roman Empire', which happened progressively and not all at once. One should compare the policies for spiritual and religious unity under the post-Constantinian Byzantine emperors with the policies of the Muslim caliphs.

And it is true that the ruler, whether pagan, Christian or a Muslim caliph, was always interested in the unity of the population in spirit, in different ways<sup>84</sup>. The Muslim way was also not one and the same in all places and times. *Dhimmitude*, the special protected status of the People of the Book, or the *dhimmi* people, is already defined in the descriptions of the Qur'ān (where one can also distinguish between earlier and later verses of the Qur'ān). The Covenant or Pact of 'Umar, attributed to the second *rashidun* (rightly-guided) caliph and conqueror of Jerusalem, but in fact a later product most probably connected to 'Umar II, the Umayyad Caliph of the 9th century, which obtained canonical status in Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), regulates among other things the height and general style of Christian buildings, so that they do not provoke the eye and dominate the space but keep a low profile in every way<sup>85</sup>.

Among other provisions of the Pact, there is at least one concerning Christian missionary activity: "We shall not manifest our religion

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84. Though I completely disagree with her exclusively negative evaluation of the striving for spiritual unity, and although I would object to many specifics, the process of attaining and building spiritual unity is as described by P. Athanassiadi, *Vers la pensée unique: La Montée de l'intolérance dans l'Antiquité tardive*, Les Belles lettres, Paris 2010.

85. See the classic study by A. S. Tritton, *The Caliphs and Their Non-Muslim Subjects: A Critical Study of the Covenant of 'Umar*, Oxford University Press, London 1930.

publicly nor convert anyone to it. We shall not prevent any of our kin from entering Islam if they wish it”<sup>86</sup>.

To claim that the population was islamised in the face of the dilemma “Accept Islam or die” would be simply wrong<sup>87</sup>. Even the idea that the choice would be strictly between conversion and obtaining a *dhimmi* status is not adequately supported by the sources’ evidence. Robert Hoyland suggests that “ninth-century Muslim historians, wishing to systematize the conquest accounts, often maintained that everyone the conquerors met was offered the same three choices of conversion, surrender and payment of a poll tax, or death in battle, but enough non-standard reports have survived to allow us to glimpse a more variegated picture”<sup>88</sup>.

Examples that he draws on in what immediately follows show us that life is much more flexible and variegated than any regulatory ideas or constructions. Yet the provision against apostasy and the prohibition against any missionary activity does not exactly provide neutral ground.

Already in the Qur’ān there is a fear expressed that Muslims might be the object of missionary activity: “Many of the People of the Scripture wish they could turn you back to disbelief after you have believed, out of envy from themselves [even] after the truth has become clear to them. So pardon and overlook until Allah delivers His command. Indeed, Allah is over all things competent”<sup>89</sup>.

The fear was not completely unfounded, given the prestige and glory of the Byzantines in the Arabs’ eyes<sup>90</sup>. So some form of protectionism

86. Pact of Umar, cited from the internet Medieval Source Book of Fordham University, retrieved from <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/pact-umar.asp> (last accessed 21 April 2016).

87. So A. Papaconstantinou phrases, in a very apposite and concise way, a basic misconception that has become a trope: “Introduction,” in *Conversion in Late Antique Christianity*, xv [xv-xxxvii].

88. Cf. R. G. Hoyland, *In Gods Path: The Arab Conquests and the Creation of an Islamic Empire*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014, 97.

89. Q 2:190. It is a verse in the frame of a *Medinan Surah*, in fact the longest, *al-Baqarah*, regulating many issues of relations to the non Muslims, and also warfare and *jihād*.

90. N. M. El Cheikh, *Byzantium Viewed by the Arabs*. A. Shboul, “Byzantium and the Arabs.” Yet by the time of Manuel II Palaiologos (reigned 1391-1425), it was the glorious Byzantine past rather than its present that was appreciated in East and West. The final



against the proselytising or missionising activity of the adversary reigned, as to a large extent religious identity was combined with cultural adherence. It was not a time of individual consciousness and personal free will. The emphasis was on building and preserving the identity of the community<sup>91</sup>.

There were no general persecutions, and coercion in the form of violence was altogether an exception, but those who transgressed these provisions against apostasy or active mission were punished<sup>92</sup>. And the ultimate penalty was death. Capital punishment seems to be the differentiating factor between the Arabs and the Byzantines, while other practices, like exile, confiscation of property, etc., are applied by both sides<sup>93</sup>.

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fall was not far off: Cf. Th. Khoury, *Manuel II Paléologue. Entretiens avec un Musulman, Introduction, texte critique, traduction et notes par Théodore Khoury*, Editions du Cerf, Paris 1966, 11.

91. On the conjunction of conversion and personal identity, and the interplay between religion and free will from an anthropological point of view in different paradigms, see D. Austin-Broos, "The Anthropology of Conversion: An Introduction," in *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion*, ed. A. Buckser and St. D. Glazier, Rowman and Littlefield Lanham, MD, 2003, 1-12.

92. A. Papaconstantinou, "Introduction," in *Conversion in Late Antique Christianity*.

93. D. Krausmüller, "Killing at God's Command: Niketas Byzantios' Polemic Against Islam and the Christian Tradition of Divinely Sanctioned Murder," *Al-Masāq* 16, 1 (2004), 163-176, DOI: 10.1080/0950311042000202579, argues that Niketas in this ninth-century controversy (see note 58) discusses with an anonymous Muslim author and refutes Holy War and murder in general as completely irreconcilable with Christian faith. However Krausmüller is completely misreading the Christian tradition when he states that "Niketas departed from earlier Christian positions, developed in anti-Manichaean polemic and Biblical exegesis, which either defined killing as a neutral act or rejected an essentialist approach in favour of God's will as the overriding criterion" (163). Despite the many references to source materials, Krausmüller fails to understand the context. Already after Constantine the Great capital punishment was very rarely used in Byzantium, which became a tradition going beyond the boundaries of Christian faith. However it seems that the Church as a humanising factor influences sentences in a therapeutic and humanising direction, even for the most serious of crimes: R. J. Macrides, "Killing, Asylum, and the Law in Byzantium," *Speculum* 63, 3 (1988), 509-538. For further background information on Byzantine understanding of Law, see also A. E. Laiou and D. Simon (eds.), *Law and Society in Byzantium*, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C. 1994.

Fear for one's life is omnipresent in the first Christian sources connected with Islam, as the Arab raids are the predominant theme<sup>94</sup>. The martyrologies give us a wealth of references to a series of new martyrs, called thus in order to distinguish them from the martyrs of Roman times<sup>95</sup>. Historical-critical reading of these narratives is necessary, of course, but the heroic element is still a significant instrument in the hands of the Christian community which also had its reasons to fear losing its own members through conversion to Islam.

### Reconsidering Scholarship on Mission

There are two basic misconceptions in today's scholarly approach relating to mission. One is that under Islam there was no Christian missionary activity whatsoever. That mission was a lost cause, a complete waste. We shall come back to that, latter, proving that the boundaries were not all that impermeable.

94. E.g. the raids on Cyprus in 649 and 650: W. E. Kaegi, "The Early Muslim Raids into Anatolia and Byzantine Reactions under Emperor Constans II," in *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam*, ed. Em. Grypeou, M. Swanson, and D. Thomas, *The History of Christian-Muslim Relations*, vol. 5, Brill Leiden and Boston 2006, 78 [73-93]. On the sentiment of the Christian population, helpless "in the hands of this 'beastly' nation," see D. Sahas, "The Demonizing Force of the Arab Conquests: The Case of Maximus (CA 580-662) as a Political 'Confessor'," *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 53(2003), 104 [97-116]. Both articles [and many more!] offer further examples and evidence on the topic.

95. A. Papaconstantinou, "On some Miracle Accounts of the Early Arab Period," in *Byzantine Religious Culture: Studies in Honor of Alice-Mary Talbot*, ed. D. Sullivan, E. Fisher and Str. Papaioannou, Brill, Leiden and Boston 2012, 323-338. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 149. Griffith, "The Life of Theodore of Edessa: History, Hagiography, and Religious Apologetics in Mar Saba Monastery in Early Abbasid Times," in *The Sabaite Heritage in the Orthodox Church from the Fifth Century to the Present*, ed. Joseph Patrich, *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta*, 98, Peeters, Leuven (Belgium) 2001, 159-160 [147-169]. See also M. N. Swanson, "The Christian al-Mahmūn Tradition," in *Christians at the Heart of Islamic Rule: Church Life and Scholarship in 'Abbasid Iraq*, ed. David Thomas, Brill, Leiden 2003), 63-92; J. R. Zaborowski, *The Coptic Martyrdom of John of Phanijōit: Assimilation and Conversion to Islam in Thirteenth-Century Egypt*, *The History of Christian-Muslim Relations*, vol. 3, Brill, Leiden 2005.

The other misconception is that missionary history simply reflects analogies arising from social models; that it does not have a particular character differing each time in different cases and contexts, based on specifics and in accordance with factuality, particular to each specific religion or community of believers in specific context. This misconception has a lot to do with the ever-increasing presence of social sciences and anthropology and their tools within historical studies. People seek resemblance based on the common sharing of human nature, rather than differences that construct a distinct identity (*ιδιοπροσωπεία*). They claim to remedy other fallacies of our scholarly methodology (-ies). But still, the stereotypical idea of the superiority of Western civilisation or Christianity, in an overwhelmingly Western and Christian academic tradition, cannot be remedied by importing other *idées fixes*, such as the *a priori* attribution to all civilisations of an “equal value”, a bias that tends to see analogies where they do not exist and to give everybody an equal share of right and wrong, regardless of historical evidence. These *idées fixes* present yet another stereotypical prejudice, whether it is based on a rationalistic disregard for all religions, or a more syncretistic understanding of religions that tends to equalise everything, or a view of them as mere socio-anthropological phenomena, immanently transforming themselves in space and time. Of course, the opposite, the reification of religion outside of space and time is equally wrong. The deconstruction process is useful in science but it should not lead to a new construction of an imaginary world. It may also happen that such a stance may be motivated by a desire to elevate one religion and culture to the level of another.

Though one should refrain from any hostile or phobic attitude towards Islam and one should try to put oneself in other people’s shoes and see things from different perspectives, one cannot disregard historical evidence, or twist it and comment on it selectively.

Historical evidence comes from explicit references in the sources, as well as the lack of such reference, and there is a lack of evidence for Muslims converting to Christianity out of free choice and disposition, without suffering any further consequences. Yet the provisions against apostasy themselves show us that conversions did occasionally happen

and did worry the Islamic authorities. There is also a lack of evidence for an inner deep existential process that would lead a Christian to become a Muslim. However, there is plenty of evidence that more socioeconomic considerations did prove a motive for conversion. Political disobedience and conflict might also be a reason for a Muslim to become a Christian, crossing at the same time the borderline of the Byzantine Empire<sup>96</sup>.

‘Ammār al-Baṣrī, a Nestorian theologian a generation later than Abū Qurrah, in *Kitāb al-burhān* (Book of Proof) states the wrong motives for conversion to Islam: the sword, bribes and cajolery, ethnic bigotry, personal preference, tribal collusion, and licentious laws and practices<sup>97</sup>. Interestingly enough he also refers to emic reasons as personal preference, and in my opinion he covers the whole spectrum of reasons and motives for conversion in a vague but inclusive way. Many of the early apologies, especially the Syriac ones, are addressed to the Christian community and try to forestall Christian conversions, by equipping them adequately with arguments to meet Islamic expansive aggression<sup>98</sup>. It was conceived as an item of educational material, also designed to give courage along with logical constructions and ready-made arguments.

Issues like the need for healing, admiration for a holy person, or miracles as such are more likely to create some sort of syncretistic variation within Islam, rather than actual conversion. We find Muslims

96. H. M. Ḥassan, «Ὁ Ἐκχριστιανισμὸς τῶν Ἀράβων καὶ ὁ Ἐξιλαμισμὸς τῶν Βυζαντινῶν: Ἡ Εἰκόνα τοῦ «Ἄλλου» στὶς ἀραβοβυζαντινὲς πηγὲς τοῦ 7ου καὶ 10ου αἰῶνα» [The Christianisation of the Arabs and the Islamisation of the Byzantines: The Image of the ‘Other’ in the Arabobyzantine Sources of the 7th and 10th Century], in *Byzantium and the Arab World, 180-181* [167-194] is speaking of the Arab tribe Banu Ḥabīb, living in Nisibīn, Northeastern Syria, who decided to cross the border and settle in Byzantium, due to heavy taxation. They did indeed do so in 930. The Byzantine emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus welcomed them and gave them land to settle. Some 12,000 converted to Christianity. Seeing the positive outcome of this endeavor, the rest crossed over, too, undertaking thereafter raids and attacks from their new position and managing to conquer important fortresses such as Ḥiṣn manṣūr. Ḥassan also gives further references (notes 98 and 99).

97. M. Hayek, ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī; *Apologie et controversies*, Dar el-Machreq, Beirut 1977, 30-33. Cf. S. H. Griffith, ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī’s *Kitāb al-burhān*: Christian *Kalām* in the First ‘Abbasid Century,’ *Le Muséon* 96 (1983), 145-81.

98. G. J. Reinink, “The Beginnings of Syriac Apologetic Literature in Response to Islam,” *Oriens Christianus* 77 (1993), 186 [165-187].

in Christian monasteries<sup>99</sup>, venerating an icon of the virgin Mary<sup>100</sup>, honoring St George<sup>101</sup>, looking for the healing operation of the relics of saints or asking for the *ḥnānā*<sup>102</sup> and so on. The transition to another faith was a step too far. The syncretistic nature of Islam and its capacity to import and organically assimilate cultural and religious elements from its environment<sup>103</sup> could be an adequate and satisfying response to much of the human need for attractions found in a different religion, without actually crossing the border of religious adherence. This has not been sufficiently studied in its connection to mission. In fact, I have never yet encountered such an explanation for the lack of conversions, despite the fact that some scholars in their historical studies have showcased the syncretistic phenomenon and the capacity of Islam to adjust and to enrich its identity from different resources found in its environment, thus creating a porous borderline between religions<sup>104</sup>.

Yet conversions were also attested. When not associated with confession of the faith and martyrdom, they were mostly (but not exclusively) associated with the liberation of Muslim territories by the Byzantine emperor. There are plenty of examples of that sort, among which the

99. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 37. H. Kilpatrick, “Monasteries through Muslim Eyes: The *Diyārāt* Books”, in *Christians at the Heart of Islamic Rule: Church Live and Scholarship in ‘Abbasid Iraq*, ed. D. Thomas, *The History of Christian-Muslim Relations*, vol. 1, Leiden, Brill, 2003, 19-37.

100. E.g., the famous miraculous icon in the Convent of Our Lady of Saydnaya in Syria, which has healed Muslims and Christians alike. Cf. M. Τάκλα, «Σαίντανάγια: Το Προσκύνημα και τα Θαύματα της Παναγίας», [M. Takla, Saydnaya: The Pilgrimage and the Miracles of Virgin Mary]: *Βημόθυρο [Vimothiro]* 1 (2009-2010), 138-140.

101. Papaconstantinou, “Saints and Saracens”, 329-330, mentions and comments on an account by Anastasius of Sinai [Narrationes, B2/2] of a miracle worked by an icon in Lydda in Palestine, listed among the earliest miracles of St. George that led to conversions.

102. A mixture of oil and water with the relics. Jacob of Edessa instructed the priests to offer it to Muslims, too. H. M. Ḥassan, «Ὁ Ἐκχριστιανισμὸς τῶν Ἀράβων καὶ ὁ Ἐξισλαμισμὸς τῶν Βυζαντινῶν» [The Christianisation of the Arabs and the Islamisation of the Byzantines], 179f.

103. An anthropological survey of Islam establishes this position in very many examples. Cf. the very recent survey by Γ. Μακρῆς, *Ἰσλάμ: Πεποιθήσεις, Πρακτικὲς καὶ Τάσεις* [G. Makris, *Islam: Convictions, Practises and Trends*], Πατάκης (Patakis), Athens 2014. Also, Cl. Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1971.

104. Cf. A. Papaconstantinou, “Introduction,” in *Conversion in Late Antique Christianity*.

most noteworthy is the re-Christianisation of Crete and the work of Nikon Metanoieite after Nicephoros Phocas recaptured the island in 961<sup>105</sup>.

There was a special ceremony for Muslims who wished to become Christians, or become Christians again, a proof from a liturgical angle that such conversions did actually take place. Daniel Sahas has studied this case thoroughly<sup>106</sup>. It is a rite of refutation of the Islamic faith, linked with the catechesis and acceptance of the Christian faith, quite common and in principle similar to other such refutations of heresies and sects. Still a major misunderstanding about the actual content of the refutation occurred, leading to a proper Byzantine controversy over the word “holosphyros” «ὀλόσφυρος» (a compact sphere), which through a labyrinth of unbelievable misunderstandings and a failure in translation of the word *ṣamad* of the *at-Taḥīd* (112) *sourah* of the Qur’ān (the Islamic side signifying the simplicity and non-trinitarian character of God, the Christian misinterpretation giving the sphere a material substance, making thus out of God a metal ball), concluded by characterising negatively the “God of Muḥammad,” Allah Himself. The refutation addressed the God holosphyros, and not just Muḥammad and his teaching. The emperor Manuel I Comnenos, who was very sensitive and very active in mission toward Islam, asked Nicetas Choniates (1155-1215/6) or “Acominatos” to change the wording, as a convert should not refute God, who is God for all, but only the heretical teaching of Muḥammad and his ‘false idea’ of God. This request created a reaction

105. E. Voulgarakis, „Nikon Metanoieite und die Rechristianisierung der Kreter vom Islam“, *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft* 3-4 (1963), 259 [192-269].

106. D. J. Sahas, “Ritual of Conversion from Islam to the Byzantine Church”, *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 36, 1 (1991), 57-69. There was a special ritual for conversion from Islam to the Byzantine Church transmitted by Niketas Choniates (ca 1155-1215/6), *Νικήτας Χωνιάτης, Τάξις γινομένη ἐπὶ τοῖς ἀπὸ Σαρακηνῶν ἐπιστρέφουσι* | PG 140, 124A-136C. H. M. Ḥassan, *ibid.* 178, interprets it as ritual designed to magnify these conversions and raise the profile of such occasions, used as a missionary tool targeting Muslims. Although an outreach to the Muslims cannot be excluded, Ḥassan’s hypothesis could be an overstatement, as this ritual simply seems to be a variation on the overall theme of a public renunciation of one’s previous faith, differentiated according to the previous religious adherence of the person “returning”. In any case, it does not suffice as an argument to prove that there was a massive and methodical effort to christianise the Muslims, as Ḥassan argues, unless it is supported by other historical evidence.

from the not very clever or highly educated priests in Constantinople and a counter-reaction on the part of the emperor, who did convince them through argumentation, and the horrific refutation was removed. Sahas describes all this in a very detailed, accurate, but also charming and at some point hilarious narration<sup>107</sup>. According to his account this case reveals, in my opinion, two different types of missionary methodology. A more compact and “holosphynos” one, if I may ironically so call it, ‘hammering’ Muslims as if with a metal ball, asking them to denounce their God alongside a long tradition of denouncing gods and daemons from the pagan era, on the one hand; and on the other a very sensitive, dialogical and friendly one, recognising that it is the same God that Christians venerate, who is however misunderstood by the Muslims and blurred through Muḥammad’s inadequate understanding and interpretation, and that the misinterpretation only was to be refuted. Sensitivity was also a matter of status, social class and – of course – education and cultivation.

Conversion was an option outside the caliphate. But the possibility of remaining a Muslim was also an option. According to Byzantine sources a mosque was present in Constantinople from the 10th century for the Muslims who stayed there, or even, as the legend goes, ever since the first, unsuccessful siege of the capital city in 717, at the request of Maslama ibn Abd al-Malik, the besieger, known as Maslamas in the Byzantine sources. As Daniel Sahas says, “according to the tenth century geographer Ishāq b. al-Husayn, Constantinople was adorned with magnificent churches, as well as mosques in use by Muslim captives whose treatment by the Byzantines was characterized by Patriarch Nicholas Mysticos (852-925) as an expression of philanthropy (*φιλανθρωπία*) and guardianship on the part of those who have the upper hand (*ὡς ὑπερξουσίῳν κήδεσθαι*), meaning the Byzantines”<sup>108</sup>.

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107. D. Sahas, “‘Holosphynos’? A Byzantine Perception of ‘The God of Muhammad’,” in *Christian-Muslim Encounters*, ed. Y. Y. Haddad and W. Z. Haddad, University Press of Florida, Gainesville 2019, 109-125.

108. D. J. Sahas, “The ‘Oriental’ Character of the Byzantine-Islamic Relations,” 384. Cf. Nicholas I Ep. 102, 376-377 | Nicholas I, Patriarch of Constantinople, *Letters*, R. J. H. Jenkins and L. G. Westerink (ed. and trans.) [*Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae* 6]. Washington, D.C. 1973. See also St. W. Reinert, “The Muslim Presence in Constantinople,

Nicolaos Mysticos, the successor of Photius to the patriarchal throne, was extremely sensitive about mission and continued the work of his predecessor, with the same fervor and interest. This is yet another testimony that mission, dialogue, respect and care belong together<sup>109</sup>.

One should also look south-east to refer to some ‘external mission’ enterprises, too, under the ‘Abbasid dynasty. The Patriarch of the Church of the East, Timothy I (727/8-823 CE), a most influential figure in Nestorian Christianity, transferred the seat of the Patriarchate from Seleucia/Ctesiphon to Baghdad, immediately after the establishment of the new city in 767 CE. The transfer provided him with better accessibility to the centre of power in the ‘Abbāsid period, which he used not only for the sake of his flock, but also for the expansion of Christianity, undertaking missionary enterprises abroad towards the East, following the Silk Road to China and the southern route to India<sup>110</sup>. In the case of Timothy I, we have a clear testimony not only of the possibility but also of the reality of Christian mission under Muslim rule. This being once emphasised, one has to state, however, that it concerns primarily external missions, which may be also used as a companion if not a vanguard to the Abbasid expansion to the East<sup>111</sup>. Even so, the Abbasid rulers were even more open minded and perceptive than one might think, given the generally acknowledged cosmopolitan character of the dynasty.

Philip Wood, a scholar of Middle East History and a prolific writer, speaks of “Christian expansion” still in the 7th Century and states that

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9th-15th Centuries: Some Preliminary Observations” in *Studies on the Internal Diaspora of the Byzantine Empire*, ed. H. Ahreweiler and A. Laiou, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington, DC, 1997, 127-129.

109. Ἰω. Χρ. Κωνσταντινίδης, *Νικόλαος Α΄ ὁ Μυστικός, Πατριάρχης Κωνσταντινουπόλεως: Συμβολή εἰς τὴν Ἐκκλησιαστικὴν καὶ Πολιτικὴν Ἱστορίαν τοῦ ἀτετάρτου τοῦ Γ΄ μ.Χ. Αἰῶνος* [I. Chr. Constantinides, Nicolaos I Mysticos: Patriarch of Constantinople: A Contribution to Church and Political History of the First Fourth of the 10th Century], Ph. Dissertation (Athens 1967), 91-116.

110. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 45.

111. Beyond the limited possibilities and occasions for mission, given the historical circumstances, it is undeniable that Christian mission was for the most part included in the form of dialogue, being irenic by nature, no matter how polemical the tone might have sounded.



“the relative freedom of Christians to proselytise Zoroastrians and pagans and expand monastic structures would remain continuous features of the seventh and eight centuries”<sup>112</sup>.

### Epilogue: Some Missiological Afterthoughts

It is obvious that one way or another Orthodox Christians never ceased to carry the joyful message of the Gospel, whenever they saw an opportunity. The story of crypto-Christians in the Ottoman Empire and still in modern Turkey is further evidence of this elusive and discreet, low profile activity, perhaps low also in terms of expectations and numbers<sup>113</sup>. There is also the fact that at the Kazan Academy, in 19<sup>th</sup> century Siberia, a whole Department focused on Islam, Arabic and local languages, theology and culture and equipped priests to function as missionaries among the Muslim populations of the region<sup>114</sup>. The same academic institution also served and promoted religious studies and dialogue as well as the cultivation of relations of respect<sup>115</sup>. The first

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112. Philip Wood, “Christians in the Middle East, 600-1000: Conquest, Competition and Conversion,” in *Islam and Christianity in Medieval Anatolia*, ed. A.C.S. Peacock, Br. De Nicola and S.-N. Yildiz Routledge, London and New York 2016 (Ashgate, 2015), 28.

113. In an interview he gave to me personally, the Ecumenical Patriarch, when asked about this delicate subject, pointed to the authority of scholarly research on this: “Στὴν Καρδιά τῆς Ὁρθόδοξης Θεολογίας καὶ Ζωῆς. Συνέντευξη τῆς Αὐτοῦ Θειοτάτης Παναγιότητος τοῦ Οἰκουμενικοῦ Πατριάρχου κ.κ. Βαρθολομαίου στὴν Εὐῆ Βουλγαράκη-Πισίνα” [In the Heart of Orthodox Theology and Life: An Interview of his All-holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to Evi Voulgaraki-Pissina], *Βημόθυρο* [Vimothiro] 4 (2011), 18 [14-27]. Among the many who have surveyed, researched and proved the existence and the nature of crypto-Christianism in Turkey and beyond, a notable study is that of K. Fotiadis, *Die Islamisierung Kleinasiens und die Kryptonchristen des Pontos*, diss. Universität Tübingen, Tübingen 1985.

114. Ἡλ. Βουλγαράκης, *Σύντομος Ἱστορία τῆς Ἐπιστήμης τῆς Ἱεραποστολῆς* [E. Voulgarakis, *Short History of the Science of Mission*], reprint from *Θεολογία* [Theologia] (Athens 1970), 59. Ε. Βουλγαράκη-Πισίνα, λ. Ἱεραποστολική, *Μεγάλη Ὁρθόδοξη Χριστιανική Ἐγκυκλοπαίδεια* [E. Voulgaraki-Pissina, sv. Ierapostoliki (Missiology), Great Orthodox Christian Encyclopedia], vol. 8 (2013), 460 [459-462].

115. A. R. Kolosova, *Narodnost' and Obshchechelovechnost' in 19th Century Russian Missionary Work: N.I. Il'minskii and the Christianization of the Chuvash*, Durham thesis, Durham University 2016, 53. Available at Durham E-Theses Online: <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/11403/>.

and most famous translation of the Qu'rān from Arabic into Russian was made by the missiologist Gordi Semionovitch Sabloukov, professor of the Academy<sup>116</sup>.

In today's Greece, we have accepted and literally saved from drowning thousands, in fact myriads of refugees from Syria and elsewhere, Muslims for the most part. Greek people in the vast majority showed great solidarity before our immigrants had been shut up in restricted areas due to EU regulations – and they still do, to the maximum of their capacity. Among these myriads of immigrants, some, very few, tired of war and fed up with the versions of Islam that caused much harm to them and their families, and finding relief in the unconditional love of the Greek people, local population and volunteers from everywhere, including practicing Christians and priests, inquired about the Christian faith, and took the step of baptism. This happened on their own initiative and has nothing to do with exploitation of the momentum and of people in need. However, in some other European countries people were completely refused entrance; in others they were selectively allowed to enter not according to their state of need, but following the needs of the market for extra hands. In some, faith-based NGOs persistently invited them to convert. That procedure, hardly a model of exemplary missionary methodology, has ended up in the conversion of many – beyond reasons of weariness, frustration and displeasure with Islam in its extreme radicalisation – in the anticipation of better treatment in terms of application for asylum or other similar needs<sup>117</sup>.

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Last accessed, July 11, 2018.

116. It took him over 30 years to accomplish this translation. It was first printed in 2 volumes, Kazan, 1877 and 1879. It was reedited and reprinted in a bilingual edition in 1907 and 1912. The translation was republished in 1991. The first edition is also available on the internet <https://falaq.ru/quran/sabl/>. Last accessed, July 11, 2018.

117. There is plenty of press coverage of this in Christian or secular newspapers from different angles. From a missiological viewpoint, as to the issues raised by conversion-based asylum claims, see D. Nagy and G. Speelman, "Conversion controlled: Missiological reflections on assessing conversions to Christianity among asylum seekers in the European Union," *Theology* 120, 5 (2017), 355-363 (<https://doi.org/10.1177/0040571X17710200>). From a human rights aspect, see Christine Goodall, *Shouting Towards the Sky: The Role of Religious Individuals, Communities, Organisations and Institutions in Support for Refugees and Asylum Seekers*, New Issues in Refugee Research, Research Paper No. 275, ISSN 1020-7473,

When speaking of today's needs and priorities in order to explore and define a strategy for the future, a task which belongs to the very core of missiological scholarship, one should bear in mind that nothing takes place in a historical vacuum. On the contrary, political developments frame and in fact determine the context of any interfaith encounter. It is more than obvious that when the swords speak and slaughters take place, there is not much room for dialogue. Yet many a time in the past dialogues did take a form of a diplomatic intervention or plea to ease the minds of the rulers for the sake of the people.

As long as dialogue goes on, education, knowledge, thinking, research and a spirit of exploration, openness, culture and civilisation are at their best. People study one another's sources and grow together. People tend to choose the best of what they see, and this is a reason why Christians should never be afraid of dialogue.

It is also obvious that the less the West involves itself diplomatically, economically and militarily in countries of a Muslim majority, i.e. Middle East and North Africa, and the more it discovers Arabic Theology and gives it the honor and place it deserves, the more the Christians in the Middle East are being supported in their struggle for existence and life. On the other hand, the more Arabic (or more generally Eastern) theology and thinking are neglected, the easier it is for Christians in the region to get crushed between Western aggression and Islamic fundamentalism, in a situation of complete disregard for human life or even for the freedom of will and the notion of personal consciousness.

As Islam is here, today, amidst our western, primarily Christian or post-Christian neighborhoods, more and more actively present in the last decades, it is time to engage with the treasure of the Christian Literature of the area. It is time for the West to seek and to study, to consider other ways of meeting with the Islamic world far beyond the constant confrontation that culminates in unsustainable threats<sup>118</sup>.

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United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Policy Development and Evaluation Service, April 2015, available on the internet <http://www.unhcr.org/554764b49.pdf>. Last accessed, July 18, 2018.

118. Besides the two above mentioned articles by D. Sahas, «Βυζάντιο, Ἰσλάμ καὶ ἀντι-ἰσλαμικὴ γραμματεία (7ος-15ος αἰ.)» [Byzantium, Islam and anti-Islamic Literature

There is a vast field remaining to be researched and explored within the frame of Arabic Christian Literature. Many works have already perished; plenty exist only in manuscript form in the rare manuscript departments of central or peripheral Libraries. Even fewer texts have been translated into any Western language, not to mention the unfortunately minimal or non-existent influence they have had on theological thought and production<sup>119</sup>.

There is a rich tradition of co-existence, of building bridges, of engaging in dialogue. Listening to this tradition, working for peace and justice, healing wounds of unnecessary confrontation and harm is our mission today at the intersection of the three old-world continents, where theology and faith have been for centuries the foundation and inspiration for life.

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(7th-15th centuries)] and “The ‘Oriental’ Character of the Byzantine-Islamic Relations: One Essence – Various Expressions”, one should also consider Roni Bou Saba, «Οἱ Χριστιανοὶ τῆς Ἀνατολῆς ὡς Γέφυρα μετὰ τὸ Ἰσλάμ» [The Christians of the East as a Bridge with Islam], *Σύναξη [Synaxi]* 136 (2015), 51-57. Similarly, Ἄ. Ἀργυρίου, *Κοράνιο καὶ Ἱστορία* [A. Argyriou, Qur’ān and History], *Ἀποστολικὴ Διακονία* [Apostoliki Diaconia] Athens 1992), 5-8. On a political level and from the perspective of the historical heritage of Greek-Arab relations, see N. Ψυρούκης, *Ἀραβικὸς Κόσμος καὶ Ἑλληνισμὸς* [N. Psiroukis, The Arab World and Hellenism], Aegaion, Nicosia 1992.

119. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 176. Al. Treiger and S. Noble, “Christian Arabic Theology in Byzantine Antioch: ‘Abdallāh ibn al-Faḍl al-Anṭākī and His “Discourse on the Holy Trinity””: *Le Muséon* 124 (3-4) (2011), 371-373 [371-417] [doi: 10.2143/MUS.124.3.2141858]. For more specific references on the manuscripts, see e.g. S. Sl. Aboulrousse, «Les manuscrits Magmu’ du monastère de Balamand et des monastères grecs orthodoxes du Mont Liban»: *Parole de l’Orient*, 27 (2002), 73-84. Cf. also the vast work of Mingana in the early 20th century: A. Mingana, *Woodbrooke Studies: Christian Documents in Syriac, Arabic, and Garshūni; Edited and Translated with a Critical Apparatus*, vol. 1-7, Heffer, Cambridge 1927-1934.

## ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Διάλογος και Ίεραποστολή στὸ σταυροδρόμι τριῶν ἡπείρων  
Ἡ περίπτωση τῆς Ἀραβικῆς Θεολογίας

Εὔης Βουλγαράκη-Πισίνα, Δρ. Θεολογίας  
Ἐθνικὸ καὶ Καποδιστριακὸ Πανεπιστήμιο Ἀθηνῶν

Στὸ ἄρθρο ἐξετάζεται σὲ ἓνα εὐρύτερο συγκείμενο ἢ περίπτωση τῆς ἀραβικῆς θεολογίας, τῆς ὁποίας ἡ γέννηση βαίνει παράλληλα μὲ τὴν ἀνάδυση τοῦ Ἰσλάμ. Ἡ ἀλληλεπίδραση ποικίλων θρησκειῶν, γλωσσῶν καὶ πολιτισμῶν εἶναι στοιχεῖο ταυτότητας τῆς περιοχῆς, ποὺ ἔχει λειτουργήσει ὡς χωνευτῆρι ἐλληνορωμαϊκῶν καὶ ἰουδαϊκῶν παραδόσεων, ἔχει στεγάσει διάφορες ἐκδοχὲς τοῦ χριστιανισμοῦ, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἔχει ἀποτελέσει τὴ μήτρα τοῦ δυναμικὰ ἀναδύομένου Ἰσλάμ. Ἡ ἀραβικὴ θεολογία, ὅπως καταδεικνύουμε, ἐξ ἀρχῆς σχεδὸν συνομιλεῖ ἀενάως μὲ τὸ Ἰσλάμ καὶ ἀναμετρᾶται μαζί του, καθὼς ἀναπτύσσει τὶς δικές της δογματικὲς ἐννοιες καὶ οἰκοδομεῖ τὴ χριστιανικὴ ταυτότητά της στὰ ἀραβικά. Πολὺ δὲ περισσότερο αὐτὸ γίνεται φανερὸ σὲ κείμενα ποὺ ἔχουν σαφῆ διαλογικὸ χαρακτήρα μὲ τὸ Ἰσλάμ. Ἡ ἀνάπτυξη τῆς ἀραβικῆς θεολογίας ἐξετάζεται ἐδῶ σὲ μία εὐρύτερη συνάρτηση τῆς συνάντησης τοῦ χριστιανικοῦ λόγου μὲ τὸν ἰσλαμικὸ εἶτε ὡς ἀρχικὴ ἐκπληξη, εἶτε ὡς στεναχώρια, εἶτε ὡς πολεμικὴ, εἶτε ὡς ἀπόπειρα διαλόγου, σὲ πρῶτο ἐπίπεδο ἀντιλογικοῦ καὶ σὲ κάποιες ὠριμότερες περιόδους πρὸ φιλικῶν. Καθίσταται σαφὲς ὅτι οἱ ἱστορικὰ περίπλοκες σχέσεις μεταξὺ λαῶν, μὲ κύριους πρωταγωνιστὲς Ἀραβες καὶ Βυζαντινοὺς, ἐν μέσῳ πλείστων ἄλλων συντελεστῶν, δὲν ἐπικαθορίζει πάντοτε τὰ ζητήματα τῆς θρησκείας καὶ τῆς φιλοσοφίας, τὰ ὁποῖα διατηροῦν –καὶ ὀφείλουν νὰ διατηροῦν– τὴ δική τους δυναμικὴ. Παρὰ τὶς ἢ δίπλα στὶς ποικίλες ἀντιξοότητες τῶν καιρῶν, ἡ ἀραβικὴ ἰδίως θεολογία, κληρονόμος τῆς βυζαντινῆς (ρωμαϊκῆς) παράδοσης, ἀλλὰ ἐκφραζόμενη στὴ γλῶσσα ἢ ὁποῖα ἔχει ἐν πολλοῖς ἐμπλουτισθεῖ καὶ ἐπικαθορισθεῖ ἀπὸ τὸ Κοράνιο, κατορθώνει νὰ διατυπώσει τὸ χριστιανικὸ δόγμα ἀλλὰ καὶ νὰ διαλεχθεῖ μὲ ἓναν συνομιλητὴ τοῦ ὁποῖου ἡ ἰσχὺς εἶναι

ἀδιαμφισβήτητη. Ἡ ἀραβικὴ θεολογία, ἀξιοποιώντας κάθε δυνατότητα διαλόγου καὶ ἱεραποστολῆς στὸ ἱστορικὸ συγκείμενο, κατόρθωσε νὰ οἰκοδομήσει τὴ συνύπαρξη, μέχρι ποὺ οἱ ὅροι τῆς συνύπαρξης αὐτῆς διαταράχθηκαν ἀπὸ ἄλλους ἰσχυροὺς παῖχτες στὸ πεδίο, ὅπως ἦταν οἱ σταυροφόροι.

Στὸ ἄρθρο ὑποστηρίζεται ὅτι σὲ μία σύγχρονη κατανόηση καὶ ἀντιμετώπιση τοῦ Ἰσλάμ ἔχει κάποιος πολλὰ νὰ διδαχθεῖ σπουδάζοντας τοὺς τρόπους τῆς ἀραβικῆς θεολογίας, οἱ ὅποιοι συμβάλλουν στὴ σύνδεση τῶν διεστώτων καὶ προάγουν τὴν καταλλαγὴ καὶ τὴν εἰρήνη στὸ σταυροδρόμι τῶν τριῶν ἡπείρων.