

**Sharpening the Doctrine of God: Theology between Orthodox Christianity and Early Islam  
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**0. Preface**

The immediate backdrop of today's reflection on historical interreligious dialogue is a week in which Nigerians and their churches burned because Muslims are offended at a beauty pageant, a Lebanese missionary woman was murdered for the unconscionable sin of ministering to pregnant women, and militant Islamists committed assorted other atrocities against Christians, Jewish children, "infidels," and fellow Muslims.

As I deliver this text, the question haunts me of whether, were it 1938, I might be delivering a dispassionate scholarly paper on Maimonides and Thomas Aquinas while the German glass shattered. My generation was raised to ask itself what we would have done had we lived in that era. I worry that I now have my answer. I would have gone about the business of my daily life as if the world were not careening toward apocalypse.

I grieve for all those who are suffering under this obscene plague of violence in God's name, and I want to do more about it than just deliver a paper.

Yet this *is* more than just a paper. It witnesses to days when brilliant Muslim philosophers could appropriate Greek *falsafa* in submission to God, and a disciple like John of Damascus, servant of the caliph, could think hard about a new tradition that was bringing disaster upon his people and find new resources to bless his harried Church. As Christians throughout the world join the Chosen People as "the Jews of the twenty-first century," we need to learn and teach habits like the ones that brought Israel through its Shoah. The generous

protections of the hyperpower to our south are no substitute for the extraordinary disciplines of perseverance and hope we need to remain on the Way of the Cross.

Scholarship can be such a discipline, but scholarship alone is not enough to sustain those who are suffering. Unless theology serves the Church and its world, it is not truly Christian theology. John the Theologian knew this, and offered his insights to preserve and deepen the most solemn acts of Orthodox liturgy. I want to be like him when I grow up.

Now on to my paper.

## **I. Introduction**

The story of Muslim-Christian encounters is a story of two traditions remaining distinct through common crises. After centuries of theological interaction centering on the permanent fault lines of Jesus Christ, God's unity or trinity, and each people's scriptures, few have found the other side's arguments convincing. Because the two traditions' commonalities intersect with their differences, partisans looking for conflict and ecumenists looking for harmony all find what they seek. But the full story is complex. The interactions of Christian and Muslim theologians might be described as a kind of interference pattern. On both sides there is much polemic, oft-renewed missionary effort, a few faltering visions of convergence, and sharpened self-understanding. In a sense there seems to be little if any progress.

Yet in other ways each tradition has gained much from its efforts. The articulation of Muslim depth grammar from the Quran onward is sharpened formatively by its encounter with Eastern Christians. Likewise, in response to Muslim theological pressure, Eastern Christians nuanced their doctrines and particularly their iconic practices of the Triune God, coming to theological conclusions vital to their identity. Each has developed in the other's presence even as its depth grammar has remained unchanged.

## II. The Rationality of Traditions

Alasdair MacIntyre's *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* describes traditions of rationality that develop, succeed, fail and possibly change as "epistemological crises" force them to respond in order to survive (MacIntyre 1988).

MacIntyre's is a philosopher's rather than a theologian's agenda. He arrives at his account of how traditions develop and interact after thoroughly examining classical Greek thought from Homer to Aristotle, Augustinian Christianity up to the time of Thomas Aquinas; and the course of the Scottish Enlightenment and its effects on developing liberalism. Competing notions of rationality and justice, not doctrine, are in view. Arguments within a tradition are at least as important to MacIntyre as arguments between traditions, but only the latter are important here. Nevertheless many similarities between MacIntyre's theory of the rationality of traditions and the pattern of theological interaction between Islam and Christianity make it useful for examining our literature.

First, MacIntyre's theory describes traditions which agree – but only incompletely – on the authority of logic in their theory and practice (MacIntyre 1988, 351). From the eighth century onward both Christianity and Islam inherited and made much use of the Hellenistic philosophical firepower available in the Eastern Roman Empire. This common heritage and their overlapping theological concerns made for enough agreement to make possible a substantive yet never-ending conversation.

Second, MacIntyre's thesis posits no conceptual frame from which to appreciate a tradition's arguments that it not itself within a tradition. It is out of the "debates, conflicts, and enquiry of socially embodied, historically contingent traditions" that the traditions themselves develop theologically (MacIntyre 1988, 350). This means no third, more "objective" perspective can be adopted from which to view the interaction between Christianity and Islam. This goes some way to respecting the way each tradition sees itself and the other, though MacIntyre himself would say only a rare "bilingual" individual is truly competent to understand both traditions from within.

Third, MacIntyre is concerned to show how traditions develop, strengthen themselves, or endanger themselves by how they respond to the competing arguments of rival traditions. The outcome of one tradition's interaction with another cannot be determined in advance (MacIntyre 1988, 361). MacIntyre's theory of the rationality of traditions only undertakes to describe their middle-times and possible defeats, rather than their beginnings. While this is problematic when considering Christianity's and Islam's competing eschatological claims, it at least manages to account for interactions in the past without imposing a hostile philosophy of history from without.

Fourth, central to MacIntyre's analysis is the idea of an "epistemological crisis," caused by some other event, which forces a tradition to change in order to survive (MacIntyre 1988, 361). Traditions overcome these crises "insofar as ...they have, by surviving the process of dialectical questioning, vindicated themselves as superior to their historical predecessors" (MacIntyre 1988, 360). Traditions

mature or fail to mature in the ways they respond to the epistemological crises they experience. They may fail to rise to the occasions according to their own standards of progress or by the standards of rival traditions, or they may succeed by finding conceptual schemes that solve previously unsolvable problems, explain the cause of the crises, and retain fundamental continuities with their old forms. The encounter of Islam during the conquest with Byzantine Christianity is promising terrain for putting MacIntyre's analysis to use, for it caused dramatic epistemological crises for both traditions which changed them fundamentally and so far permanently.

Because the depth grammars of Islam and Christianity are distinct, genuine *exchange* between rival traditions happens only rarely. More commonly each tradition produces defensive literature that relies on its own resources (while sometimes recruiting the resources of a third tradition, such as asceticism or classical philosophy). Because this generally fails to appreciate the fundamental logic of the rival tradition, rivals find it unsatisfactory, and the battle ceases in stalemate (MacIntyre 1988, 365). Even where common practices create parallel communities of theologians, philosophers, and mystics, the two camps fail to come to basic agreement. The grammatical incompatibility between Christian and Muslim life accounts for the constantly rehearsed and ineffectual arguments that dominate their interactions.

### **III. Competing Rationalities**

A satisfactory answer to the question "What is the center of the Muslim faith?" lies beyond the scope of this paper. Moreover, only a seasoned Muslim could offer it. The same is true of the center of Christian faith. Yet to proceed we need a picture, however imprecise. I suggest that our story is of Muslim "honor of the God of Muhammad" struggling to comprehend Christian "love of the God of Jesus" and vindicate itself against the Christian challenge, and vice versa.

This of course does a disservice to Muslim claims that Jesus' Gospel is misrepresented in the New Testament. A Muslim may wish to substitute "the God of the Jesus of the Bible," but this phrase is unwieldy and suggests the same level of historical support for each tradition's view of Jesus, an implication that most Christians would find unsatisfactory. Besides, Christians have long objected that the Quran and Sunna are less than reliable historical sources for Muhammad or his allegedly divine revelation.

Being a Christian, I am far more qualified to characterize the Christian logic than the Muslim one. I am not one of MacIntyre's rare multilinguals. This limitation needs to be kept in mind throughout the paper. Nevertheless the word "honor" is chosen in light of characterizations by people like Seyyed Hossein Nasr of Christianity as a religion of love of God and Islam as a more balanced religion of *knowledge* of God. The term still needs to be understood with Muslim rather than Enlightenment connotations (Nasr 1994, 35).

This picture already suggests why extended debates over Trinitarian or Christological technical terms and concepts produce no more than a trickle of converts. Christian thinking about Christology and Trinity springs from articulating how first century Jews worship Jesus without ceasing to be Jews, understanding the historical events of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, pursuing the mission of the Church, and interpreting the Old and New Testaments. On the other hand, Islamic theology springs from the Quran's unitarian repudiation of Christian tritheism and imitation of Muhammad and his companions. Christian and Muslim rationalities share interest in doctrines of Christ, Trinity, and Scripture, so dialogue and polemic are usually conducted at this level. But the subterranean differences ensure inconclusive results.

Furthermore, the thought-structures of Christianity and Islam are arranged in such a way that each underlying framework is nearly or completely irrefutable by the other (Lindbeck 1984, 10). Worship of Jesus, imitation of Muhammad, or acceptance of the authority of a particular canon is axiomatic rather than merely proven (Newbigin 1989), and thus one tradition's doctrine of God is relatively safe from the other's critiques. An effective critique might still force the tradition to work again from its core assumptions to a refined and more defensible doctrine. This is precisely how centuries of critiques from all sides shaped the Trinitarianism of the Ante-Nicene Fathers into that of Athanasius, Augustine, the Cappadocians, and the ecumenical councils. Yet the new doctrines will resemble the old. Through all the criticism from within and without, primitive Trinitarianism was shaped into sophisticated Trinitarianism, something that might hardly be recognizable to the New Testament writers or even to a simple Trinitarian like

Tertullian, yet still exhibits fundamental continuity with the God of Jesus who prayed distinctive prayers to his Father. Likewise, as we shall see, critiques by both Christians and Muslims refined Muslim doctrines of God and of the Quran (Seale 1964, 66-69) without overturning them.

There are many more than just two logics at work. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in Byzantine lands all drew extensively on classical Greek philosophy, producing in all three traditions great similarities in their formal logics and in the thinking patterns of their theological elites. Burrell provides an example of the result in the impressive formal similarity among Maimonides, Ibn-Sina, and Thomas Aquinas in their thinking about the doctrine of God. Their ways of thinking were so compatible that Aquinas could react to, adapt, and even appropriate much of the other two theologians' thought in building his systematic theology.

In fact, the influence of Greek philosophical categories seems to have shifted the intellectual centers of gravity of all three traditions away from their earlier concerns and towards more philosophical agendas, changing the traditions and drawing them together strikingly on some philosophical points. Yet for all the resulting similarity between the formal logic adopted by Byzantine Christians and Hellenized Muslims and the common concerns, each tradition used the same Hellenistic logic to treat fundamentally different and incommensurable questions arising from the two traditions' different sources and concerns. Thus the similarities are more superficial than the differences, and each tradition continued to recognize that the theological distance separating them was in the end unbridgeable.

One might also detect another fundamental logic in the common practices of mysticism which are established in most every high religious tradition. The connections between mysticisms in different traditions often allow the same kind of dialogue among mystics that takes place among philosophical theologians. The common practices shift the sets of concerns in each tradition and often draw them together. yet the different inputs – different canons, different liturgies, different figures to imitate or contemplate – prevent fundamental convergence. But mysticism must remain beyond the scope of this paper.

The traditions also encounter each other on the battlefield and the court and in the marketplace, but this paper concentrates on formal theological consequences where these forums are less important.

#### **IV. Characteristic Literary Genres**

On many occasions Christians and Muslims have sharpened their own thinking in analyzing their rival. In this context of Orthodox studies I will appeal to the Kalam's use of Byzantine theological categories and Orthodoxy's response to Iconoclasm under the backdrop of Islam. In a more western context I might have favored Thomas Aquinas' critical use of Aristotelian Islam in *Summa Contra Gentiles* (Chang 2000) and *Summa Theologica* (Burrell

1986), or Mozarab literature in Muslim Spain (Burham 1994). In a more Muslim context I could point to the Quran itself, as well as Ibn-Arabi's Sufi theology.

While polemic is designed to bolster a tradition by weakening the other, sharpening uses the other – even at its strong points – to strengthen one's own tradition. The most effective sharpening shares a fairly deep grasp of the other tradition's fundamental logic. Sharpening is thus a risky endeavor. In merely allowing the rival a place on its agenda, it implies that the rival tradition has insights worth answering and even honoring.

MacIntyre's favorite example is Aquinas' use of Aristotle after its reemergence in Europe threatened the rationality of medieval Christian theology and caused an epistemological crisis for the Augustinian Christian tradition.

A more common literary product of Islam's contact with Christianity is *polemic*. Both sides produced and continue to produce volumes of it. Polemic uses one tradition's fundamental rationality to emphasize the inadequacy of the other's. Because of the dominance of classical rhetorical and logical techniques in Eastern Orthodoxy and Islam after 750 C.E., more educated polemicists could play by rules authoritative for both traditions. However, because the deeper logic of its case remains in its own tradition rather than in the target tradition, polemic has been far more effective as a *defensive* resource, in bolstering a tradition's own confidence and strengthening the loyalty of its own adherents, than as an *offensive* resource. The target tradition, which even when agreeing on classical rules of logic and rhetoric nevertheless ultimately obeys a different deeper logic, as a whole finds the polemical case ultimately unconvincing. Even so, effective polemic has often forced both Christianity and Islam to return to its own fundamental logic and reformulate its doctrines while taking into account (whether positively or negatively) the most forceful claims of the critique. To this day Orthodox and Islamic doctrines have been shaped and hardened by each other's polemics – in particular, for our purposes, those of the Quran and of John of Damascus and his immediate followers.

Another type of literature might be called *convergence*. This is the opposite of polemic, intensely ecumenical in spirit, emphasizing commonalities and downplaying differences between the two traditions. A common course in Muslim-Christian convergence has been to emphasize God's particularity – that both traditions worship the God of Abraham. However such "convergence" can mislead. If it is not a subtle way of co-opting and subverting one tradition from the other's perspective (something both Paul and the Quran do in interpreting the Abrahamic story on their own lines in Gal. 3:1-5:1, Surah 2:124-147, and Surah 3:65-68), then it subjects both traditions to a third, mutually foreign logic, which *betrays them both*. Thus *appealing to Muslims and Christians (or Jews) as all fellow children of Abraham* does violence to Judaism's vision of the God of Jacob/Israel, and to Christianity's vision of the God of Jesus Christ; and appealing to the common monotheism of both Christianity and Islam does violence to *tawhid*, the Muslim doctrine of divine unity. Communities from different traditions that share practices tend to be more amenable to convergence – for instance, mystics, whose religious practices often overlap considerably.

A further category is *missionary* literature. It is best considered separately from the previous two types because of its unique audience and methods. While much polemic is addressed to an audience of the tradition being defended, missionary literature is truly addressed to members of the rival tradition. It is unsatisfied with the ineffectiveness of both polemic and philosophical theology at producing converts. Missionary literature tends to have a greater sensitivity to the fundamental logics of both traditions than do these other types of literature – one Christian missionary text counsels would-be missionaries that only people who have been tempted to become Muslim have a chance at truly understanding it.

Missionary literature at its best is the most receptive of any of these genres to the rival's logic. (In the end, of course, this sensitivity is put to use to subvert the other tradition's fundamental logic, which for all its strengths is still seen as inferior.) Furthermore, the fact that both Islam and Christianity are missionary movements at heart means that their missionary literatures arise from and share in practices fundamental to both faiths that the other genres comparatively neglect. Thus, ironically missionary literature can ultimately be better at reviving and sustaining the home tradition than either polemic or convergence.

Nevertheless missionary literature is often neglected in academic circles, as it will be in the rest of this essay because it is less interested in the fine points of doctrines of God than some of the more traditional academic sources.

## **V. The Quran**

The earliest and most important result of Islam's collision with Christianity lies in the Quran itself. There Islam records its canonical response to Christian beliefs and practices in its original milieu. While Christian thinking about God puts Jesus center-stage in order to see the invisible God, the Quran pushes Jesus to the sidelines with God's other prophets in order that God's glorious unity not be obscured or confused.

The Quran offers a spectrum of opinions of Christianity, from the friendly Surah 5:82 ("nearest among them in love to the believers will you find those who say, 'We are Christians'") and Surah 2:62/5:69 ("those who believe ... and the ... Christians – any who believe in Allah and the Last Day and work righteousness – on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve") to the more hostile Surah 4:171 ("O People of the Book, commit no excesses ... say not 'three'") and others. The Quran portrays Christians as fellow believers in Allah who will receive an eschatological reward (2:62/5:69). Alongside this is a verse describing them as people having "a portion of the Book" who are "invited to the [entire] Book of Allah to settle their dispute," that is, to repent of their incomplete lives and come to the fulfillment that is Islam (3:23). "Come to common terms," Surah 3:64 exhorts, "as between us and you" – terms of theological surrender, recognition that the Muslims worship Allah rightly and are not guilty of *shirk* as the Christians are. Some Christians and Jews do exactly this (3:199), so that "not all of them are alike: of the People of the Book are a portion that stand (for the right)," having already embraced Islam (3:113-114). Contrasted with these converts are "those who reject Faith," and who "will be Companions of the Fire, dwelling therein (forever)" (3:116). And elsewhere the people given "a portion of the Book ...traffic in error, and wish that



ye should lose the right path" (4:44). Christians and Jews, then, are subject to a range of critiques. These have yielded an even greater range of interpretations: convergence-minded texts relying on 5:82 on the one hand and bitter anti-Christian polemics relying on the most critical passages. They center on respecting Christians as long as they eventually repudiate their mistaken beliefs and revert to the true Islam. The Quran predicts that those Christians who ignore its warnings are subject to apocalyptic divine judgment at the last day (4:47-49, 172, 5:73). Whatever reservation is left for God's mercy is minimized by an appeal to God's desire that "the *truthful* will profit from their truth" (5:119).

The Quran's objection to Christian practice is Christianity's *shirk*, its worship of Jesus, Mary, and the saints "in derogation of Allah" (5:116). There is no justification in Trinity (5:72), for Jesus never would have condoned such a concept (5: 116) as "joining other gods with [Allah]" (4:116) or saying "Allah is one of three in a Trinity" (5:73). Such practices inevitably confuse the Christian and distract him away from the worship of the one true God.

The best description of this Quranic material is polemic: it is ostensibly directed against Christians, but its liturgical audience is Muslim. Theologically informed Christians have found its characterization of the Trinity to fall wide of the mark. Many read the Quran to be criticizing not *orthodox* (*i.e.*, truly Trinitarian and incarnational) Christian theology but Monophysite and Nestorian Christian theologies that may have predominated in Arabian society in and out of the Arabian Peninsula (Haddad in Vaporis 1986, 25-26; cf. Trimmingham 1979, 128ff in Philip 1998, ch. 4). The Quran's critique of Christian theology and practice does not ring true to Orthodox Christian ears. The Quranic appeals to Jesus' true humanity – that he and Mary "had both to eat their (daily) food" (5:75) and that his similitude "before Allah is that of Adam; He created him from dust, then said to him: 'Be,' and he was" (3:59) are only effective against schools that *deny* Jesus' true humanity. Orthodox Christians can and should affirm these claims enthusiastically, and with Muslims decry those "joining other gods with [Allah]" (4:116).

Saying that "Allah is one of three in a Trinity" (5:73, depending on the translation) is more ambiguous. In the Eastern tradition the Father is most properly called *ho theos*, meaning "God" or *Allah*, since this is the most common biblical usage, though Son and Holy Spirit are also properly called God. Western theologians would worry more about the implication that God refers *only* to one of the divine persons or that the Son and Spirit are subordinated to the Father ontologically. Nevertheless both traditions respect the same Nicene guidelines and respect each other's reasons for their practices.

To the Christian the Quran's argument opposes Christological heresies like docetism or tritheism with another heresy, Ebionism. This looks quite similar to some patristic (and modern) theologians' problem of bending so far backwards to fight one heresy that they commit others. At any rate, according to Christian categories the deep Christian conviction that "Jesus is Lord," that worship of Jesus is not worship of someone besides Allah but worship of Allah himself, goes unappreciated and challenged only indirectly in the Quran.

The Quran opposes the logic of tritheism with a fundamental logic of *tawhid* which Surah 4:171 seems to capture well: "For Allah is One God: Glory be to Him: (Far exalted is He) above having a son. To him belong all things in the heavens and on earth. And enough is Allah as a Disposer of affairs."

The focus on unity is paralleled in the Jewish and Christian canons. Yet the Quran's argument prevents Christian theology from appropriating the Quran's message. The Quran's attack on those who "say: Allah is one of three in a Trinity: for there is no god except One God" (5:73) slides off a community whose own theology calls all three divine persons *ho theos* or Allah, and who affirms the *Shema* and condemns tritheism. To acknowledge the Quranic Image is to cease being an orthodox Christian – to trade an orthodox theism for a heretical one. Thus from a Christian perspective the Quran's critique of Christianity contributes nothing at the theoretical level toward a Christian understanding of God.

On the other hand, at the practical level things may be different. A Christian reading the Quran on Christian terms can still see weaknesses in Christian theology and practice as they had found expression in Arabia and have continued to find expression since, even in formally orthodox contexts. This is true not only of Monophysite and Nestorian Christology and theology but also of the orthodox Chalcedonian variety, for all have been subject to distortion and confusion. Christians do well to heed the Quran's warnings whether or not they adopt the Quran's solution.

The Quran's theological critique of Christianity has been far more informative for Muslim conceptions of God. In exploring the proper limits of ways to think about pluralities within the divine unity, Muslims (besides some Sufis) have repeatedly found Christianity's *ousia/hypostasis* language unacceptable for describing God. If modalism and tritheism have served as lines in the sand for Christianity, so Trinitarianism has served as an uncrossable line for Muslim theologians. While Christians read the Quran's critique as applying only to heterodox Christologies, Muslims interpret it as applying to orthodox Christianity as well. As a result the Muslim doctrine of the divine word corresponds to the Christian one but remains profoundly distinct. While Seale claims that "the one is not the same as the other, but the idea to be gained from the expressions of the one is equivalent to the idea which we would gain from the other" (Seale 1964, 68-69), the idea (or the picture) is put to fundamentally different uses in each camp.

## **VI. John of Damascus**

John of Damascus, from the house of Mansur, is one of the most respected theologians in the Eastern tradition, one of only three people to share the official title "the Theologian." John's influence is hard to establish directly, but Harry Wolfson calls him "the connecting link between the Church Fathers and early Islam" (Wolfson 1972, 119). His work *The Orthodox Faith* is the first "Summa" developed in the Christian tradition, the first truly systematic theology. The principal literary products that draw on John's Muslim context are his description of Islam in *De*

*Haeresibus* and his doctrine of images. A third writing, *The Discussion of a Christian and a Saracen*, is of disputed authorship but belongs firmly in the Damascene tradition. These works draw upon Muslim thinking in mainly unsympathetic ways. Yet they respond creatively and so effectively that John's iconology lays the groundwork for the results of the Seventh Ecumenical Council, and his description of Islam sets the Orthodox and Islamic doctrines of God against each other in persistent ways.

**A. Islam as heresy.** John appropriates almost all of *De Haeresibus* from other authors, most notably the *Anakephaleoses* of Epiphanius' *Panarion* (Sahas 1970, 80-81). Only three of its 103 chapters are thought to be original. One is chapter 101, dealing with the religion of the "Ishmaelites," its origin, Muhammad, the Quran, doctrine, and practice. Sometimes it takes the form of a dialogue between Christians and Muslims, but its rhetoric is informational rather than polemical. It shows no textual or rhetorical indication of originally belonging to a context other than this list of heresies, addressed to Christians who presumably can find it helpful in their conversations with Muslims in Damascus and elsewhere (Sahas 1970, 84-86).

One place where the discourse presupposes conversations with Muslims over the points John makes is *PG* 94:765C, where John asks the Muslims why there are no witnesses like Moses and the prophets to "Muhammad's own prophethood when the Quran demands witnesses for so many other reasons. He question predates by a generation the lists of biblical passages Muslims compiled which they took as predicting the Prophet's coming, and he has to offer several examples of what he means because "they were wondering what he was talking about" (Sahas, p. 117).

John Meyendorff questions John's familiarity with Muslim practice (Meyendorff 1964, 118-119, cf. Sahas 1970, 130), but Daniel Sahas argues convincingly from the way John treats Islamic theology that he "had a thorough knowledge of the theology and Christology of the Quran" (Sahas 1970, 106). For example, John treats the Quran as *graphe*, "sent down" to Muhammad, and regards Muhammad as a false prophet rather than an epileptic, as later

Christians did (Sahas 1970, 114). The way *De Haeresibus* sets the stage for a millennium of theological debate certainly supports Sahas' impression.

In the chapter John brings his considerable theological talents to criticize the Muslim understanding of God from a mature Christian perspective. He leads with a very apt description of the Muslim doctrine of God: “[Muhammad] says that there is one God, creator of all, neither being begotten, nor having begotten” (PG 94:765A in Sahas 1970, 108). This description follows Surah 112, *Al-Tawhid*, the so-called “essence of the Quran,” implying that John picked his central text very assiduously. John's response affirms God's unbegottenness. He treats the divine unity as an assumption, and Trinity as an answer not to whether God is one or many, but how God can be *known* (PG 94:829D in Sahas 1970, 110). John accurately centers Muslim theology on *tawhid*, and his own Trinitarian theology shares the Muslim concern. Here John seems to respect the fundamental logic of Islam nearly as much as that of Christianity.

John also understands the *samad* of God in Surah 112 to mean “creator of all,” not spherical or hammered round, as later Byzantines do.

Things are inevitably different when John talks about Christ. He condenses the Quranic picture of Jesus well (PG 94:764A-C in Sahas 1970, 113-114), drawing accurately from many different Surahs and betraying a fairly deep knowledge of the Quran. He puts this knowledge to use in countering the Quran's charge of Christian *shirk*, “making partners for God.” The heart of his theological case is that in disassociating God from his Word and Spirit, Muslims are “mutilators” of God:

The Word and the Spirit are inseparable from that in which [or in whom] they have been by nature. Therefore, if His Word is in God, it is obvious that He is God. But if He is outside of God, then according to you [Muslims] God is without reason and without Spirit ...and you treat Him like a wood, or a stone, or some irrational being" (PG 94:768B-D).

To separate the *hypostases* for the sake of *tawhid* makes God less than God. The problem of relating God's essence and attributes to avoid "mutilation," *shirk*, agnosticism (*ta'til*), and anthropomorphism (*tashbih*) is later taken up by the Mutazilites and Asharites (Sahas 1970, 122). The terms of that debate definitely echo his own. Whether John anticipates them or merely responds to embryonic forms of their arguments in a Christian way, his emphasis on God's Word and Spirit raises emphasis on Word and Spirit on the Muslim side as well (Sahas 1970, 123).

John spends most of the chapter describing Islam rather than arguing with it, though he occasionally offers a judgment. While Sahas calls the chapter "the first systematic introduction to Islam, written by a Christian author," it concentrates on the discontinuities between Islam and Christianity to strengthen Christian understanding of Islam and defense against it.

***B. The Discussion of a Christian and a Saracen.*** Attributing this text to John of Damascus is problematic. Its written form is best attributable to Abu Qurra (720-825), bishop of Harran who had "heard this teaching of John of Damascus" and admired him (Sahas 1970, 145; cf. Meyendorff 1964, 120, who treats the work under Abu-Qurra). Its concerns mirror those of *De Haeresibus*, pitting an experienced Christian against a naïve Muslim:

Then ask [the Saracene]: 'Are the Spirit and the Word of God, called in your Scripture uncreated or created?' And if he tells you 'created,' say to him: 'And who created the Spirit and the Word of God?' And if, compelled by necessity, he tells you that God created them, say, '... Before God created the Word and the Spirit, did he not have either Spirit or Word?' And he will flee from you, having nothing to answer (*PG* 94:1341D-1344A).

John's advice only works if the Muslim has no answer to escape the Christian's trap. Sahas reads it as characterizing an early Islamic theology in which the idea of createdness does not yet distinguish between the Quran as book and the Quran as God's speech. Later Islamic

theology reproduces that distinction between the two, echoing the Christian distinction between eternal and incarnate *logos*.

Christians express a similar distinction between the Son and *graphe*, between Word and words (Sahas 1970, 170-171). Sahas finds the most likely route of Christian influence on this area of Muslim theology coming through the heterodox Jahmite sect's attention to the Christian doctrine of *logos*, orthodox Islam then responding to Jahmism's problematic claims (Sahas 1970, 174).

John of Damascus' knowledge of both traditions is likely to have played "a formative part" in spurring Muslim sharpening of Allah's relationship with the uncreated Quranic Word (Macdonald in Seale 1964, 68).

Wolfson claims it was in the course of debates like this that Muslims come to appreciate the need to categorize God's properties or attributes, ultimately arriving at concepts of divine attributes shaped by the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity (Wolfson 1976, 131). Christian theological pressure catalyzes Muslim reflection on the reality of God's attributes and on Quranic metaphysics (Wolfson 1976, 313), drives the Arabic vocabulary of divine attributes from patristic equivalents (Wolfson 1976, 114ff), and focuses Muslim attention to divine word, life, wisdom, and power (Wolfson 1976, 121). Wolfson even infers direct Nestorian, Monophysite, and Chalcedonian influence on Mu'tazilites, Jahm, and al-Ghazali and later Muslim orthodoxy (Wolfson 1976, 139). His analysis acknowledges the debt Islam owes to Orthodox Christianity, but it also reveals the danger of misinterpreting that debt by failing to account for Islam's *originality* in answering Christians' questions and arguments according to its own depth grammar.

Despite Wolfson's remarkable detective work and the safe conclusion that Christological and Trinitarian categories were important in shaping Muslim thought, his more daring conclusion that they *drove* Muslim thinking is impossible to verify and easy to question. Wolfson's analysis by vocabulary (114-120) is suggestive but his confidence in the existence of *real* influence behind the similarities verges on parallelomania. When Wolfson strains to find exact parallels between Christians and Arabic sources, and when the only one to be found is a Latin Father, Marius Victorinus, Wolfson resorts to the "influence

of Neoplatonism” which presumably affected both the church and the Muslims who encountered Neoplatonism during their conquests (122-123). While he claims that “the views of the orthodox Muslims and the Mu’tazilites on the problem of attributes, as well as the arguments employed by them, correspond exactly to the views of orthodox Christians and the heretical Sabellians on the question of the persons of the Word and the Holy Spirit in the Trinity” (Wolfson 1976, 139), it is hard to believe that Muslim theologians would be so careful not to commit Christian heresies!

It may well have been general philosophical similarities like Neoplatonic assumptions and Plotinus’ influence on Islam (p. 142) that were influential in guiding both the church and Islam toward parallel conclusions and heresies rather than direct influence of the church’s own theology as such. Compare Richard Bell’s less adventurous assessment: “Christian theology in a manner set the questions which Islam with its own different materials had to answer. Not only so, but the thought-world to which it had to adjust itself was no longer the thought-world of Arabia but soon came to be the same Hellenistic thought-world with which the Christian Church had had to grapple, and which in the East it had played a large part in forming” (Bell 1926, 212).

Wolfson describes a history of impressive convergence between the one God of Islam and the triune God of Christianity. It is easy to make too much of this. Theologians have often concluded from technical, cultural, and philosophical parallels that interreligious dialogue will bring an awareness of what one Orthodox theologian calls Christians’ and Muslims’ “common monotheism” and “the deep unity of the believers” (Vaporis 1986, 16). However, even were the doctrines of God of the two traditions brought into complete unity *of form*, their *contents* would remain distinct, for the God of Islam is the God of the Muhammad of Quran and Sunna (and of mutilation, if John of Damascus is correct) and the God of Christianity is the God of the Jesus of the Bible (and of *shirk*, if Muhammad and al-Ghazali are correct).

Ibn-Arabi’s theology makes this contrast clear. Despite the formal parallels between orthodox Christian and Muslim theologies, Ibn-Arabi’s treatments of the divine names (Chittick 1989, 33ff), God’s unity of essence (Chittick 1989, 29, 56-57), and how multiplicity is to be understood in terms of unity are all fundamentally Muslim. Taken together they simply could not occur in orthodox Christianity: His discussion on hierarchy of the divine names would amount to subordinationism in the Christian tradition (Chittick 1989, 47-54). His use of “Allah” to refer

only to all the divine attributes at once contrasts with the Christian use of “God” to refer to any or all persons of the Trinity (Chittick 1989, 8). What distinguishes the names is not what distinguishes Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Chittick 1989, 36). Ibn-Arabi takes great advantage of the philosophical categories Islam has learned to use since John of Damascus’ era, but he does so in a way that cannot characterize John of Damascus’ tradition. He uses them as only a Muslim could.

In other ways *The Discussion of a Christian and a Saracen* seems to influence Muslim thought about God – for instance through Qadarite thinking about Islam’s controversy about divine sovereignty, human free agency, and divine foreknowledge (Sahas 1970, 149ff). While these remain beyond the scope of this paper, they reinforce John’s role in the development of Muslim thought and theology.

**C. *The Orthodox doctrine of images.*** Chapter 102 of *De Haeresibus* treats Iconoclasts in no kinder terms than chapter 101 treats Islam. John’s enmity with Iconoclasm and location in Muslim Damascus led the Iconoclastic Synod to call him “Saracen-minded” and “inclined to Muhammadanism.” That is a very curious accusation considering the crucial part he plays in supporting and refining the Christian doctrine of images against both Iconoclastic Byzantium and aniconic Islam! The *non sequitur* shows that Iconoclasm is probably motivated less by theological concerns than by Byzantine imperial considerations – loss of much of the empire and failure to convert Muslims or Jews (Cross 1983, 687-688). Already Islam is making its presence felt in theological circles, first by precipitating a violent official Christian reaction against its growing appreciation for the use of images in worship, then by forcing a debate which ultimately cements both eastern and western Christianity’s theological and practical commitment to iconic practices.



At the theological level, the Iconoclastic critique was presented as an attack on the Christologies of the “iconodules.” Iconoclasts produced arguments against graven images from the Second Commandment, criticisms of the difference between Jesus’ flesh and the material from which icons are produced, and so on. But their most penetrating criticism was Christological: Iconoclasts considered iconodules Nestorian for separating the two natures in portraying only Christ’s human nature (Theodore 1981, 86, 90), or Arian or Ebionite for denying the divine nature altogether (Theodore 1981, 93). Against this John of Damascus and St. Theodore built a Christological case for icons – a case that given the theological context of the day had to be made in order for the practice to survive.

John’s case, which has become the settled defense of images in the eastern Church, is that the incarnation means that the “uncircumscribed” God has become circumscribed; the infinite God consented to finity. When the Word become flesh, the invisible became visible, and it became not only defensible but *right* to depict the event and remember it with veneration – respect for the prototype portrayed in the image (Anderson in John of Damascus 1980, 7). This was the only orthodox thing to do, the only truly Chalcedonian response, for all criticisms of images failed in one way or another to appreciate the two natures of Christ, or else confused the relationship between them. Furthermore, divorcing wood and paint from participating in God’s presence failed to respect the extent of Christ’s divinizing redemption of the created order.

John of Damascus showed that iconic practice was “essential” to the Orthodox faith, and to this day the feast commemorating the Seventh Ecumenical Council’s restoration of images is called the Triumph of Orthodoxy. The Byzantine style of portraying people became a way of expressing the eschatological futures of God’s saints; icons were seen as quasi-sacramental expressions of God’s presence; and their use became a central feature of Orthodox practice and theology. To this day even a brief Orthodox systematic theology is incomplete without a section on images and their importance to the Christian doctrine of God and the doctrine of Christ; and the icons of John of Damascus respect the extent of his contribution to iconology by portraying him as drawing an icon of Jesus and the Theotokos.

The influence of Islam on John’s thinking is indirect but powerful. Islam provides the primary context of the debate. It shows what a world of difference there is between the immaterial God of the Muslims and the immaterial God who has become flesh. Within the debate over icons lies nothing less than a battle for the Christian doctrines of God, Christ, creation, Holy Spirit, salvation, Church, and last things.

In John’s response to Iconoclasm we see sharpening perhaps at its finest in the Eastern Christian tradition. A heretical threat produces a quantum leap in orthodox Christian theology. *On the Divine Images* neither addresses nor refers to Muslims. The official debate is entirely

within the Church. But Islam is the subtext for all sides. It provides theological and political motivation for Byzantium's policy of destroying the images that confused Christian and Muslim alike, shelter for John of Damascus under the caliph, Byzantine suspicion of John's true motives, and sky-high theological stakes. As in John's other writings, the same fundamental logic of Christianity is at work: In the quest to know the one true God, the central focus is God as truly knowable only through Jesus, God's Word and Son. Jesus is the ultimate reason for images, just as *tawhid* is the ultimate reason for aniconic Islam. By recognizing the power behind Muslim thinking John is better able to articulate a Christian response.

## **VII. Conclusion**

Friedrich Max Müller famously claims that someone who knows only one religion knows none (Pals 1996, 3). He is wrong, but not entirely. George Lindbeck's application of Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy of language to religions (Lindbeck 1984) shows that the sensibility of a faith is something like its grammar. Every people is blessed with monolinguals who create captivating prose and poetry. Yet something about a new language energizes a familiar one. My own English grammar and vocabulary rarely improve as much as when I study foreign languages. After struggling to understand each other's strange and robust traditions and laboring to produce awkward and wooden translations, Christians and Muslims alike return to our own texts and tongues to find more than we had seen before the journey. We are forever developing in each other's presence, yet we somehow remain true to ourselves under the pressure.

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## **IX. Further Reading**

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