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A Great Father of the Church in Dialog with Islam: Saint John of Damascus

Caius Cuțaru

Caius Cuțaru

“Aurel Vlaicu” University of Arad

E-mail: c.caius@yahoo.com

Abstract

This study presents the Christian-Islamic religious dialogue in its first stage, in which the main representative of the Christians was St. John of Damascus, the last Holy Father of the Church belonging to this patristic period. Since the beginning of its manifestation, Islam was mistaken for a Christian sect, for a heresy, the hundredth, as St. John of Damascus considered. In two of his works, the Syrian Father imagines a dialogue with a representative of the new religion, being debated several issues that differed Christianity from Islam. St. John gives us the first Christian-Islamic polemic themes, themes that remained valid till today.

Keywords

Saint John of Damascus, Islam, inter-religious dialogue, Christianity, Holy Father

1. Christianity and Islam – from confrontation to dialogue

The encounter between religions and cultures is a reality of the life on this planet and nowadays it is much amplified by the new means of mass communication and modern means of transport which greatly shorten distances. The diversity of cultures and religions and their interaction have

generated, over time, various human attitudes and behaviours. The contact between Christianity and Islam, for example, lasted several centuries, each period having its own specificity depending on the actors who worked on the scene at the time.¹ The meeting often meant confrontation, the dialogue sometimes meant mutual enrichment or mutual ignorance, but as a constant, there was manifested the desire to know the other that was different.

We can be surprised to find that the inter-religious dialogue is an old practice and between the two monotheist religions, the dialogic relationship started since the first manifestations of the Islam, 7th-8th centuries AD., during the brief periods of peace between two military confrontations. We note, however, that the dialogue practice was lost in time, its need being felt more acutely nowadays.

Over time, the Christian-Islamic dialogue faced numerous obstacles, that still persist, which led to a certain distrust between the Muslim and the Christian world. Among these difficulties we can mention the theological-linguistic ones that are connected with the exegesis and hermeneutics, the property of terms, because we meet the Word / the revealed word, incarnated / dictated by God / Allah and it concerns, first all, the theologians and the linguists; other psychological obstacles were represented by the reluctance and even fear of scholars and faithful to enter into dialogue and the historical realities that followed the emergence of Islam, marked by jihad and crusade that blocked for a while the practice of this dialogue.

In medieval times there was not a tradition of the dialogue, we cannot speak about dialogues organized in certain institutional frameworks as it happens nowadays; we can meet just forms of dialogue, inter-religious dialogue attempts, spontaneous dialogues, situational dialogues, a sort of confrontation of ideas rather than a methodical one. The dialogue was in its pioneering stage, the heroic phase, the phase in which the two monotheistic religions wanted to know each other better. It was not a proper inter-religious dialogue, because the representatives of the two religions in the dialogue did not have the mandate of their religious leaders, as it happens nowadays, nor was it run in an organized form; depending on the circumstances, available religious figures attended it. Such a personality, at the height of his power, that was to be met at Omeid's court, was St. John of

¹ Anastasios Yannoulatos speaks about the character of the period of the meeting of the two religions in *Orthodoxy and the Problems of the Contemporary World*, trad. de Gabriel Mândrilă și Pr. Constantin Coman, Ed. Bizantină, București, 2003, pp. 123-151.

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Damascus (675-749 AD.), providential personality for Christ Church during the iconoclastic persecution.

St. John Damascene, called “the river of gold”, adorned the Church of Jesus Christ with numerous dogmatic, apologetic, hymnographic, homiletic, moral-ascetic works and combated the heretics and Muslims, strengthening the faith of the Christians during his time and later periods. His name, however, is connected with an unpleasant event, that of the surrender of Damascus, surrender negotiated by his grandfather, named Mansur, event that happened on 4th September 635.²

2. The first critical look on Islam

2.1. St. John of Damascus – a pioneer of the Christian-Islamic dialogue

By his origins and family environment in which he lived and was formed, St. John Damascene was at the forefront of the Christian theologians who perceived the new religion, remaining one of the privileged witnesses of the first meetings between Christianity and Islam in the Christian East. He is the last great Holy Father, the one who ends the patristic period in the East, but is also the one that paves the way for the theologians who will be confronted with Islam, who will enter into dialogue with the representatives of the different historical periods. Speaking Arabic, praying, perhaps, in Aramaic and writing in Greek, St. John Damascene had all the linguistic, cultural, doctrinal rational advantages to expose and present Islam in its beginnings.³ St. John Damascene was the one to initiate the Christian polemics against Islam, being rightly remembered in front of all Byzantine and Western writers of the Middle Ages who rejected the Qur'an.⁴

² Remus Rus, *Ioan Damaschin*, in Remus Rus, *Dicționar enciclopedic de literatură creștină din primul mileniu*, Ed. Lidia, București, 2003, p. 397.

³ See Dominique Urvoy, “Saint Jean Damascène et l’islam”, in: *La Nef* 191 (2008), in https://www.lanef.net/t_article/saint-jean-damascene-et-l-islam-24842.asp, 10. noiembrie 2014.

⁴ Maracci names the following: S. Joannes Damascenus, S. Petrus Paschasius, Gienensis Episcopus ac Martyr,... Petrus Abbas Cluniacensis, Joannes Cantacuzenus Imperator Constantinopolitanus, Abunuhus Chaldæus, & Abrahamus de Bethale

St. John Damascene refers openly to Islam in his writings, being the first Christian theologian who gives us the earliest explicit discussions about Islam. The available information concerning his life is very few, his works being the only source for reconstructing his ideas and thoughts regarding Islam. Unfortunately, a careful examination of his writings reveals little about Islam.

From all references to Islam made by St. John Damascene, results, unquestionably, that in the first centuries after the emergence of this new religion, the Holy Father knew it well enough because he was of Arabic origin and was an official at the court of the Caliph of Damascus. His familiarity with Islam dates from this period which subsequently allowed to direct his polemics towards the new religion. Unfortunately, the works that appeared in our country do not deal with this aspect of damascene controversy, so his dispute with the new religion being less studied. This explains why St. John Damascene is less known as a leading personality in the Christian-Islamic religious dialogue.

In the approach of Islam, the Holy Father was original because no one before him referred explicitly or seriously to Islam. Therefore, Andrew Louth said about St. John of Damascus that “writing about Islam he was a pioneer”⁵.

From the chapter on Islam in his work dedicated to heresies, as in other works, St. John Damascene surprised clear themes in the relationship of Christianity with Islam which remained of present interest even today: the historical and religious context in which Muhammad appears, his pseudo-prophet character, the false revelation of the Qur’an, the Bible and the post Bible traditions he took over, his teachings about God etc. For him, the new religion of the Arabs is superior the previous idolatrous beliefs, but nevertheless, even after the religious reform undertaken by Muhammad, the religion of the Arabs still retains features of the old polytheism.⁶

item Chaldaeus etc. Cf. Ludovico Marraccio, *Alcorani textus universus. His omnibus præmissus est Prodrum Totum priorem Tomum implens*, Ex Typographia Seminarii, Patavii, MDCXCVIII, p. 2.

⁵ Andrew Louth, *Ioan Damaschinul. Tradiție și originalitate în teologia bizantină – cu câteva scrieri inedite*, trad. by pr. Ioan Ică sn. and diac. Ioan I. Ică jr, Deisis, Sibiu, 2010, p. 119.

⁶ Cf. Jean Flori, *Război sfânt, jihad, cruciadă. Violență și religie în creștinism și islam*, trad. by Felicia Andreica, Editura Cartier, București, 2003, p. 111.

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Certainly, all these present St. John of Damascus as a Christian of the late Antiquity, highly trained theologically and philosophically.⁷

One should be appreciated the courage, the freedom and the determination with which St. John Damascene confessed his Christian faith amidst a hostile Muslim world, but also the value of the arguments which he used against Islam that requires a precise knowledge of the widespread belief among the Arabs winners.⁸ The arguments and the method he used in fighting Islam remain valid for the theologians of the years to come.

2.2. The Authenticity and the Originality of the Damascene Writings about Islam

If the originality of the Damascene writings has been discussed at length, the lack of originality being attributed to his fidelity to the Tradition of the Church, in the writings dealing with Islam the Holy Father remains an original writer. In dealing with the critical of damascene work dedicated to Islam, Johannes M. Hoeck,⁹ mentions four works related to the name of St. John Damascene:

- A chapter of the work *De Haeresibus liber*,¹⁰ from the heresies catalogue, which is part of the main work of St. John Damascene called *The Source of Knowledge*, based on a similar compilation written in the fifth century by St. Epiphanius of Cyprus. Islam, rather surprisingly, is treated as a Christian heresy and bears the number 101 in the printed edition. The presentation of the Islam precedes the paragraph on the iconoclasts. In some manuscripts Islam appears at number 100 immediately following the Monothelits (Nr. 99).¹¹

⁷ Pr. Nicolae Achimescu, *Islamul în percepția Răsăritului primului mileniu creștin*, in *Universul religios în care trăim*, Col. "Media Christiana", Seria Lumina, Ed. Trinitas a Patriarhiei Române, București, 2013, p. 317.

⁸ Félix Nève, "St. Jean Damascène et son influence en Orient sous les premiers Khalfes", *Etrait de le Revue Belge et Etrangère*, XII (1861), II.

⁹ Johannes M. Hoeck, "Stand und Aufgaben der Damaskenos-Forschung", in: *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 17 (1951), pp. 18, 23-24.

¹⁰ Sf. Ioan Damaschin, *De Haeresibus liber* (PG, t. 94, coll. 764-780), cf. *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca Prior*, Accurante Jacques-Paul MIGNE, Patrologiae Graecae, Tomus XCIV, S. Joannes Damascenus, Paris, 1864.

¹¹ See John Meyendorff, "Byzantine Views of Islam", in: *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 18 (1964), pp. 116-117.

The authenticity of this work, in which St. John Damascene refers to Islam, was questioned. Regarding his work *On Heresies*, the suspicion was caused by the fact that the version that has been known for a long time, was published in *Patrologia Graeca*, t. 94, coll. 677-780, by Jacques-Paul Migne, has 103 chapters, the chapter on Islam being the 101st. It was believed that the last three chapters would be added by St. John to an existing work of a hundred chapters (*centuria*), or three chapters that would be added later.¹² Kotter's edition shows that the original edition of the treatise *On Heresies* was a *centuria* with a hundred chapters and the chapter on Islam was the last chapter. A proof for this is a manuscript of the 9th or 10th century which ends with chapter one hundred, the last chapter dealing with Islam.¹³

- The *Dialogue between a Saracen and a Christian*, is a combination of two *opuscula*, both of which can be found under the name of Theodore Abū Qurra, also known as Theodore of Ḥarrān, an author who has also lived, for a while, at St. Sava Monastery near Jerusalem, most likely after the death of St. John Damascene. The dialogue was published twice under the name of John of Damascus, once by Lequien and once by Gallandus, both editions were reprinted in J.-P. Migne.¹⁴ In each of these editions, the two original opuscula are in reverse order, which underlines the inconsistency of the Damascene manuscript tradition on this point and strongly suggests that the dialogue is a compilation of the writings of Theodore Abū Qurra attributed to John Damascene by later copyists.¹⁵ One of those who attributed this writings to St. John Damascene was Robert Grosseteste, who translated it into Latin in the thirteenth century, but it was previously used by Abu Qurra in the ninth century, which leads us to the conclusion that "it can not be much later than John. It was plausibly suggested

¹² See Berthold Altaner, Alfred Stuiber, *Patrologie: Leben, Schriften und Lehre der Kirchenväter*, ed. 8, Herder, Freiburg-Basel-Viena, 1978, p. 527, cf. A. Louth, *Ioan Damaschinul. Tradiție și originalitate...*, p. 118.

¹³ Cf. A. Louth, *Ioan Damaschinul. Tradiție și originalitate...*, p. 118.

¹⁴ *PG*, t. 94, coll. 1585-1596 (Lequien); *PG*, t. 96, coll. 1335-1348 (Gallandus). The text corresponds to *Opuscula*, 35 (*PG*, t. 94, coll. 1587 A-1592 C) și 36 (*PG*, t. 97, col. 1592 CD) of Abū Qurra.

¹⁵ Hans Georg Beck, when trying to accept as author St. John of Damascus, mentions a manuscript in which The *Dialogue* is anonymous and another is attributed to Sisinius the Grammarian. See Hans Georg Beck, *Kirche und theologische Literatur im byzantinischen Reich*, C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, München, MCMLIX, p. 478.

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that the *Dispute* is based on the oral teaching of the Damascene rather than being fixed by him in writing “¹⁶.”

- Another dialog is officially assigned to Theodore Abū Qurra in the title, which, however, specifies that Theodore wrote διὰ φωνῆς Ἰωάννου Δαμασκηνοῦ. The expression Διὰ φωνῆς, an equivalent of ἀπὸ φωνῆς is a technical expression, recently studied exhaustively by M. Richard¹⁷ and means “in accordance with the oral teaching” of John of Damascus. The real author here is, obviously, Abū Qurra and *The Dialogue* can also be found in some manuscripts under his name, with no mention of St. John Damascene.¹⁸
- The fourth anti-Islamic writing, ascribed to John Damascene, is a unique Arabic writing *The Rejection* which has never been studied.¹⁹

Of these texts, the chapter on Islam in *De Haeresibus liber* seems to be the only reliable. But even in this case, doubts were expressed about the authenticity and the quotations from the Qur'an are considered by some researchers as subsequent interpolations.

John Meyendorff's conclusion is that:

“Irrespective of the result of the critical anti-Islamic writings attributed to John of Damascus, apparently his contribution to the history of Byzantine polemics against Islam is small.... in terms of time, they were not the first written on the subject by a Byzantine author. From the theological point of view, they do not add much to the undeniable glory of John Damascene... The study of the liturgical texts attributed to John of Damascus confirms the strong impression of the first reading of the chapter on Islam in *De haeresibus liber* – that of John living in a Christian ghetto which keeps intact the political and historical Byzantine perspectives”²⁰.

Obviously, Saint John still lives in Byzantium. The fact that the Byzantine emperor – whose victorious return in Middle East is expected with

¹⁶ A. Louth, *Ioan Damaschinul. Tradiție și originalitate...*, p. 119.

¹⁷ M. Richard, “Ἀπὸ φωνῆς”, in: *Byzantion*, 20 (1950), pp. 191-222.

¹⁸ Teodori Abūcarae, *Opuscula ascetica*, PG, t. 97, col. 1543, cf. *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca Prior*, Accurante J.-P. MIGNE, Patrologiae Graecae, Tomus XCVII, S.P.N. Andreae Chretensis Archiepiscopi, Joannis Malalae, Teodori Abūcarae carum episcopi, Paris, 1865.

¹⁹ J. Meyendorff, “Byzantine Views of Islam”, p. 117.

²⁰ J. Meyendorff, “Byzantine Views of Islam”, p. 117.

hope – actually fell in the iconoclastic heresy is, for him, a matter of greater concern than the beliefs of the Arab conquerors.

2.3. Islam: the Hundredth Christian Heresy or a New Religion?

In his *Fountain of Knowledge*, St. John Damascene makes a harsh criticism against heresies and develops the teaching of the faith of the Church. In the section dedicated to the heresies, entitled “*De Haeresibus liber*” in a summary, which stretches over a few pages, St. John Damascene presented only certain aspects of the Islamic teaching characterizing them as being of a «hilarious value».²¹

At the end of his treatise on heresies, St. John Damascene extensively develops the “hundredth heresy”, namely, the religion of the Ishmaelits, Saracens or Hagarians (descendants of Hagar, Abraham’s servant and his son Ishmael). Classifying Islam among the other Christian heresies, and not as another religion, different from Christianity, St. John shows the ambiguity existing in the Christian world that was just meeting Islam.

Even if in the end it turns out that the last part of chapter 101 of the paper *De Haeresibus liber* containing quotations from the Qur’an, is not a later interpolation, this would not provide clear evidence that St. John has read the Qur’an.²² Any knowledge of Islam, direct or indirect, which is evidenced by his writings, refers only to four sure – the second, third, fourth and fifth – and to the oral Islamic traditions, especially those related to the worship of the Ka’bah at Mecca, which give John a pretext for ridiculing the Islamic legend about Abraham’s camel tied to the sacred stone. However, this means far less for the Holy Father to be considered a connoisseur of the new religion. From the above findings we can conclude that St. John of Damascus was familiar with only parts of the Qur’an in the original Arabic, as the earliest Greek translation appeared only after the saint’s death.

In this first approach, in the introduction, the hieropolitan monk begins with the origin of the superstition of the Ishmaelits or Hagarians, very old in their countries, idolatry subsisting here until the time of Emperor Hera-

²¹ Sfântul Ioan Damaschin, *Izvorul cunoștinței*, PG, t. 94, coll. 765 A, 772 D. See St. John of Damascus, *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 37, Trad. Frederic H. Chase Jr., New York, 1958, pp. 153-160.

²² John Ernest Merrill, “On the Tractate of John of Damascus on Islam”, în: *Muslim World*, 41 (1951), p. 97; see Paul Khoury, “Jean Damascene et l’Islam”, in: *Proche Orient chrétien*, 7 (1957), pp. 44-63; 8 (1958), pp. 313-339.

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clius. The Church Father refers to the pre-Islamic Arabs superstitions of religion, such as the worship of the morning star or of Aphrodite, also called Chabar. This reminiscence of pre-Islamic Arabian polytheism is one of the commonplaces about the origins of Islam repeated by different authors in different ways. St. John refers to a pre-Islamic Mecca cult of Aphrodite, called Χαβῆρ or Χαβάρ by the Arabs, which survived under the form of a veneration of a sacred stone, Ka'aba.²³ The same story is mentioned by Constantine Porphyrogenitus in his *De administrando imperio*.²⁴ Around the year 725, Germanus of Constantinople also mentions that "Saracens, in the desert, address to an inanimate stone and make an invocation of the so-called Χοβάρ."²⁵ St. John Damascene identifies Χαβάρ or Χαβῆρ (he uses both forms), both Aphrodite and the Ka'ba, which, according to him, is the head of the pagan goddess.²⁶ The fact that a cult of the morning star existed among the Arabs before the advent of Islam seems certain, and this was known by the Byzantines, who have tried to find traces of paganism in Islam.²⁷

Presenting the emergence of Islam, the false prophet Muhammad (Mamed in Greek), in the time of Heraclius,²⁸ opens the way to the founder of the Christian critics of Islam, who could not be considered among the prophets, especially because of the status given by the new faith, that is of seal and ending of the line of prophets. His poor theological training, as evidenced by the random and partial knowledge of the Old and New Testaments during the links with the Arian monk,²⁹ his "simulating piety", his claiming to be the continuer of Jewish and Christian revelation through a

²³ PG, t. 94, coll. 764 B, 769 B.

²⁴ Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De administrando imperio*, I, 14, ed. by Moravcsik, trad. R. J. H. Jenkins, Budapest, 1949, pp. 78-79.

²⁵ The letter of Toma of Claudiopolis, cf. S. Germani opera, *Epistolæ dogmaticæ* (PG, t. 98, col. 168 CD), cf. *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca Prior*, Accurante Jacques-Paul Migne, *Patrologiae Graecae*, Tomus XCVIII, *Sancti Germani Oecumenici Patriarchæ ad Anthinum Dyaconum Naratio de Sanctis Synodis et de subortis jam inde ab origine apostolicæ prædicationis hæresibus*, Paris, 1865.

²⁶ Sf. Ioan Damaschin, *De Hæresibus liber* (PG, t. 94, coll. 764 B, 769 B).

²⁷ J. Meyendorff, "Byzantine Views of Islam", p. 119.

²⁸ Sfântul Ioan Damaschin, *Izvorul cunoștinței* (PG, t. 94, coll. 765-766).

²⁹ Some Christian authors mention a Nestorian monk with the name Serghie, who, probably, is not the same Arian monk Bahīra about whom Abū al-Fidā' Ismā'īl ibn 'Alī (Abou'Ifēda) speaks in his work Adolphe-Noël Desvergers (ed.), *Vie de Mohammed*, Imprimerie Royale, Paris, MDCCCXXXVII, pp. 9 și 104-105, note 17.

scripture that came from heaven, the ridiculous teachings transmitted, are all accusations against Muhammad. Then, publishing the alleged findings from heaven, he established a new cult: “with the protection of the people by faith and false piety, he insinuated that a Scripture from heaven was revealed by God. Therefore, in his book there were written some ridiculous teachings, it has sent this way to worship God.”³⁰ Muhammad is seen as a founder of a heresy based on the Old and New Testament, plus the alleged discovery of “the scripture from heaven” and from these “ridiculous discoveries” he taught his disciples to worship God.

We have already seen that St. John Damascene places Islam among the Christian heresies. This attitude towards Islam was based on the fact that the normative writing of the Islam, the Qur'an, acknowledges the revealed character of both Judaism and Christianity. Therefore, St. John and his contemporaries tended to apply the Islam the criteria of the Christian Orthodoxy and to assimilate Islam with a Christian heresy already condemned. Thus, Muhammad seemed to be an Arian and Pneumatomachianist at the same time, because he denied the divinity both the Logos and the Holy Spirit. In fact, the historical truth is that the first meetings of early Islam with Christianity involved the Monophysite and Nestorian communities, not the Aryans and the name assigned by John the Muslims – κόπται τοῦ Θεοῦ (“hewers of God”)³¹ – because they cut the Logos from God – the Word of God and the Holy Spirit, is only a response to the accusations of the Muslims against Christians that are ἑταίριασταί – “those who acknowledge God’s partners”.³²

The next series of accusations aimed at the theology of the Qur'an and implicitly at the Islamic revelation contained therein. The fundamental principles of the law of Muhammad are the unity and oneness of God, the creator of the world, Who is neither born nor gives birth.³³ Jesus Christ is God's Word and His Spirit, but is created, being the Prophet and servant of God. He was not crucified by the Jews who were persecuting Him, but

³⁰ PG, t. 94, coll. 765-766.

³¹ PG, t. 94, col. 768 D.

³² PG, t. 94, col. 760 B.

³³ In Qur'an, in Sura 112, called *Sura of Cleansing* or *Sura of the Unity*, which is against the Christian belief in the Holy Trinity, it says: «Say: “He is the unique God, the eternal God, He does not give birth and is not born and nobody is like Him”» Sura 4, 169. For the quotations from the Qur'an see *Coranul*, trad. by dr. Silvestru Octavian Isopescul, Ed. ETA, Cluj, s.a.

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was kidnapped in heaven by God who loved him.³⁴ Recognizing his dependence upon God, Muhammad accused the mistake of Christians to call Him the Son of God.

The resumption of Aryan teachings about a created divine Logos, which lowers the Son of God to the status of a creature, identifying Jesus Christ with God's Spirit, as well as the confusion between Mother of God and Maria, the sister of Moses and Aaron, who would have born the Saviour Jesus Christ,³⁵ can not be accepted by the Holy Father. There is also mention of the Docetist teaching about the Lord's apparent body. The Jews wanting to crucify him after they caught him, "crucified only his shadow. Christ himself, he said, suffered no cross, no death" but God took him to heaven with Him, because He loved him – says Muhammad.³⁶ These are just some of the doctrinal issues under discussion and which can be found in several heretical teachings that circulated in the early centuries of Christianity. Thus, Islam appears to St. John Damascene as a heresy embedding several heresies, the result of the influences suffered by Muhammad during his training, and his ignorance regarding the Judeo-Christian tradition.

There is an imaginary dialogue between God the Father and Christ the Saviour ascended to heaven, which shows the same Islamic testimony concerning the lack of any divine nature in Jesus Christ:

«And he also said that, once Christ would be ascended to heaven, God would have asked him, saying: "Jesus! you said: I am the son of God and God?" Jesus after Him replied: "Have mercy on me, Lord! You know I did not say that and I do not disdain to be Your servant. But evil men have written that I made that statement; they have lied about me, and they are in error". God

³⁴ Here is a famous passage of sura 4, 157, «And [for] their saying, "Indeed, we have killed the Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary, the messenger of Allah." And they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him; but [another] was made to resemble him to them. And indeed, those who differ over it are in doubt about it. They have no knowledge of it except the following of assumption. And they did not kill him, for certain».

³⁵ In Sura 19, called *Mary's Sura*, an unforgivable confusion is made between the Mother of God and Mary, sister of Moses and Aaron, that the exegets of the Qur'an try to diminish: «Și ea îl aduse pe el la poporul ei purtându-l. Ei ziseră: So she pointed to him. They said, "How can we speak to one who is in the cradle a child?" [Jesus] said, "Indeed, I am the servant of Allah . He has given me the Scripture and made me a prophet», (Sura 19, 29-30).

³⁶ PG, t. 94, coll. 765-766. The patristic text quotes Sura 4, 156, with a strong Docetist character, common to other gnostic Christian sects.

then replied: “I know you have not said this”». ³⁷

The Qur'an contains only inaccuracies, mistakes and confusion about the Old and New Testament, inaccuracies starting from the ignorance or the partial knowledge of these holy books of Judaism and Christianity by Muhammad. If we were to give just a few examples we could mention: the confusion between the Virgin Mary and Miriam, sister of Moses and Aaron, the sacrifice of Ishmael, “Prophet Noah”, the prostration of the angels before Adam etc. In the New Testament, in the Qur'an, the prophet Jesus, the Word of God, was “thrown” into the bosom of the Virgin Mary, was created, not born of the Father from eternity, was not crucified, but only his appearance was on the cross, so there can be no resurrection. And God can not have associates, much less a Son, for God does not give birth and is not born. Moreover, the Qur'an sees the Christian Trinity as consisting of God, Mary and Jesus! Further details about the childhood of Jesus, such as the story of the making of those birds from clay and their liveliness come downright from the Apocrypha. ³⁸ In short, it is a mixture of heresies and folk traditions of the Arabian 7th century AD. ³⁹ On the other hand, the Qur'an does not impress either in terms of formal logic or literary style, consisting of phrases attached each other, often without grammatical resources, without any logical cause or purpose connection, with ideas that are repeated, and overlap, that intersect in a verbal system with a unique structure with a harmony of dull, tiring sounds. ⁴⁰

The Muslims have no doubts regarding the literary value of the Qur'an as inspired literature because, as stated, the Qur'an is the uncreated word of Allah. As such, it not subject to any interrogations on the content and

³⁷ PG, t. 94, coll. 765-766, cf. Sura 5, 116ff.

³⁸ See *Evanghelia arabă a copilăriei Mântuitorului*, Cap. XXXVI, în *Evangheliile apocrife*, trad., introductive study, notes and commentaries by Cristian Bădiliță, Editura Humanitas, București, 1996, p. 135.

³⁹ D. Urvoy, “Saint Jean Damascène et l’islam”, in https://www.lanef.net/t_article/saint-jean-damascene-et-l-islam-24842.asp, 10.11.2014, at 17:32.

⁴⁰ **The Muslims do not agree with these, having a whole literature concerning the stylistic beauty of the Qur'an, its unique character, its rhetoric, its rhythm and the richness of syntax, so that they speak about its miraculous literary perfection in comparison with the few Arab writings existing at that time.** See Toufic Fahd, *Islam e sette islamiche*, în *Storia dell'islamismo*, Coll. Oscar Saggi, Henri-Charles Puech (ed.), trad. Maria Novella Pierini, Ed. Laterza, Roma, 1997, p. 56.

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even less of any questioning of its divine authenticity.⁴¹ It is memorized as a whole or in part, recited since childhood and throughout the whole life.

As regards the Prophet of Islam, he lacks the previous testimonies of the prophets who prophesied about him or about the revelation he received: "... all the prophets from Moses onward, in turn, proclaimed that Christ will come, that Christ is God and the Son of God will come in flesh, he will be crucified, he would die and rise, and he will judge the living and the dead. And when we say: why hasn't your prophet come in like manner with others to testify for him?", They say that "God does what He Himself wishes."⁴² We can also mention that there were no witnesses at the receiving of the revelation, as in the case of Moses and the divine miracles to confirm the authenticity of the revelation: "... the God who gave the law to Moses in sight all people to a mountain that smokes, has not sent the Scripture, you speak, in your presence, to reassure you?"⁴³ As for the mode of transmission of revelation, the Muslim answer, absolutely hilarious, amazes even more: "... but we ask how your Prophet was revealed the Scripture. They answer that the Scripture descended upon him during sleep",⁴⁴ ie. when he was unconscious. The argument that St. John Damascene brings against the revelation of the Qur'an is taken against from the Qur'an, where there is an urge not to do or not to receive anything without witnesses (Sura 4, 7), but Muhammad received the revelation without witnesses, without any guarantee, moreover, in his sleep: "For the one who entrusted the Scripture has no guarantee, and does not know anyone who may have testified in his favour in advance. Moreover, he received it in a sleep!"⁴⁵

Instead, the Muslims consider the Christians idolatrous, associators, as they introduce a partner to God, an associate, the Christ – the Son of God made man (the accusation is called in Arabic *shirk*). It is, in fact, the great criticism that Muslims give the Christians, called "partisans of a second", according to the meaning of words that have passed to all Muslim languages as insulting epithets.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Mohyiddin Yahia, "Esegesi contemporanea", în *Dizionario del Corano*, Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi (ed.), Arnoldo Mondadori Editore S.p.A., Milano, 2007, p. 259.

⁴² *PG*, t. 94, coll. 765-766.

⁴³ *PG*, t. 94, coll. 765-766.

⁴⁴ *PG*, t. 94, coll. 767-768.

⁴⁵ *PG*, t. 94, coll. 767-768.

⁴⁶ This is the proper meaning of the nouns *scharik*, *schouraka*, *aschrāk*, used by the Muslims when speaking about the Christians.

The charge of *shirk* is one of the classics of the Qur'an allegations made to the non-Muslims, including the Christians, but the charge of idolatry, because of the veneration of the Cross is not present in the sacred text of Islam, appeared in the *hadith*, where there is an account of a conversation between Muhammad and some Christians, where he says: "What prevents you from becoming Muslims is your claim that God has a Son, the worship of the cross and eating pork."⁴⁷

In defence of the triadological dogma, St. John Damascene brings testimonies of the prophets and the scriptures, in which they believe. "And you, as you claim, accept the prophets. And if we say wrongly that Christ is the Son of God, they have taught us and gave us this" – says the Father of the Church,⁴⁸ and this is not an allegorical interpretation, but one in the spirit of the Scripture. On the other hand, Muslims themselves say that "Christ is the Word and Spirit of God," and then the charge of idolatry is no longer justified, "because the Word and the Spirit are inseparable in the One that they are natural. If He is in God as the Word of God, it is clearly God Himself. But if He is besides God, God is, up to you, without Logos (Word) and without the Spirit. Therefore avoiding associating someone with God, you mutilate him."⁴⁹ Therefore, St. John calls the Muslims "mutilators" of God. The problem of the created or uncreated nature of the Word and the Spirit is discussed extensively in *The Dispute*.

Contemporary apologists have sought notions for the three persons of the Trinity against which Muslims were accustomed to blaspheme since their childhood in Qur'anic terminology there are terms such as *Prince*, *Word* and *Spirit*,⁵⁰ in order to make them understand that Christians worship three gods, not one, being polytheists.

Likewise, Father Professor Nicolae Achimescu speaks when referring to St. John of Damascus and the corrections that he brings to the Islamic doctrine on the Person of Jesus Christ. It may be noted that:

"St. John of Damascus makes rigorous corrections as regards the teaching the Qur'an about Jesus Christ. The fact that in the

⁴⁷ Abdel M. Haleem, *Early kalām*, in Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Olivier Leaman (eds.), *History of Islamic Philosophy*, Routledge, Londra, 1996, p. 77.

⁴⁸ *PG*, t. 94, coll. 767-768.

⁴⁹ *PG*, t. 94, coll. 767-768.

⁵⁰ See M. l'abbé de Bougarde, *Passage du Coran a l'Évangile faisant suite aux Soirées de Charthage, et a la Clef du Coran*, Typhographie de Firmin Didot frères, Paris, 1855, dialogues VII și VIII, pp. 71-96.

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Qur'an (see Sura 5, 116 u.), the presence of the Son of God incarnate, Jesus Christ, is seen as a form of polytheism is categorically rejected by St. John of Damascus. He complains that the Muslims accept the message of the prophets of the Old Testament in other respects, less the one that Christ (known only as a prophet in Islam) is the Son and the Word of God."⁵¹

Father Professor Nicolae Achimescu called attention to the fact that: «St. John's argument, used by many Christian apologists should at least be nuanced, as Siegfried Raeder⁵² states, Arabic uses two terms for what is called "word": *kalam* and *kalima*. *Kalam* is a collective expression (*nomen collectivum*) and means "word" or "talk"; *kalima*, however, means singular word (*nomen unitatis*). When referring to Jesus, the Qurran never uses the term *kalam*, but always *kalima*».⁵³

St. John of Damascus was right to regard Islam as heresy or "Christian" sect as there existed in the history of Christianity heretical Gnostic sects that uttered doctrinal errors like Islam. Hence comes the confusion that the Father of the Church makes between religion and sect, considering Islam as a Christian sect and not a separate religion. He could not have known that further developments will score Islam on a different trajectory, on a special one.

Together with these polemical arguments related to the opposition between absolute monotheism of Islam and the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, St. John reaches another point of disagreement – the problem of the free will and predestination – and his entire argument is supported by the most violent epithets they apply Muhammad, "pseudoprophet", "hypocrite", "liar" and "adultery". All these were, of course, later widely discussed by other polemicists.⁵⁴

The Muslims hate the worship of the Holy Cross, accusing the Christians of idolatry. It was seen in the previous chapters how St. John Damascene fought iconoclastic heresy that it was only a kind of echo of the

⁵¹ N. Achimescu, *Islamul în percepția Răsăritului primului mileniu creștin*, in *Universul religios...*, pp. 315-316.

⁵² See S. Raeder, *Der Islam und das Christentum. Eine historische und theologische Einführung*, Neukirchener Verlag, 2003, p. 170, cf. N. Achimescu, *Islamul în percepția Răsăritului primului mileniu creștin*, in *Universul religios...*, p. 316, note 6.

⁵³ See N. Achimescu, *Islamul în percepția Răsăritului primului mileniu creștin*, in *Universul religios...*, p. 316.

⁵⁴ J. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Views of Islam*, p. 120.

Qur'an anathemas against cult images. In a practice already famous, the pilgrimage to Mecca and the visit of the Ka'bah, the polemist noticed a flagrant contradiction in the Islamic doctrine, which responded to the accusations of the Muslims.⁵⁵ The reproach that the Holy Father makes them is that, although the ones who accuse the Christians of idolatry worship a stone, which they consider to belong to Abraham: Ka'ba,⁵⁶ kisses and embraces it, and the arguments for these religious gestures at least puerile, if not reprehensible. Some say that on that stone would have joined Abraham with Hagar, and others that there Abraham would have tied the camel at Isaac's sacrifice or even that it would be the head of Aphrodite, they called Chabar, but these gestures, according to St. John Damascene, are not a sufficient basis for worship, but rather for reasons of repudiation.⁵⁷ Or, if for any of these reasons Muslims venerate the Ka'ba, much more must they honour the Holly Cross "which destroyed the power of demons and the temptations of the devil!"⁵⁸

The criticism of the Christian theologian moves on some suras of the Qur'an. Certainly, the one who was brought up at the court of the caliph has got a fair idea on Islam's holy book, written under the Caliph Abu-Bakr and completed during Otman. He shows that Muhammad recorded in as many chapters called suras, his inventions and delirium dreams,⁵⁹ calling these Qur'anic suras as "silly writings», each bearing a title such as *Women Sura* (Sura 4) *Cow Sura* (Sura 2) *Table Sura* (Sura 5), etc. In the first of those mentioned there were aspects of family morals, which state that every man can have four women and thousands of concubines, if possible, that he can easily repudiate one, if he wants, and he can take another. The Qur'anic substrate explained the immorality and ruthlessness of Muhammad, who wanted the beautiful wife of his companion Zaid (Sura 33).⁶⁰ The passions of the Prophet of Islam explain the Qur'anic regulations regarding divorce, valid until today: "He who wishes to repudiate

⁵⁵ F. Nève, *St. Jean Damascène et son influence en Orient*, II.

⁵⁶ Ka'ba, called "The House of God", is supposed to have been built by Abraham with the help of Ishmael. It takes the most important place in the Mosque of Mecca. Within its walls there is the stone referred at, the famous Black Stone which is, obviously, a relic of the idolatry of the pre-Islamic Arabs.

⁵⁷ *PG*, t. 94, coll. 769-770.

⁵⁸ *PG*, t. 94, coll. 769-770.

⁵⁹ F. NÈVE, "St. Jean Damascène et son influence en Orient", II.

⁶⁰ See *PG*, t. 94, coll. 769-770.

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his wife can (divorce). But if, after divorce, returns to her husband after another. In fact, it not allowed to take her if she was not married to one another. And if a brother divorced, his brother may take her ,if he wishes after those” (see also Sura 2, 225, u).⁶¹ In this context, Father Professor Nicolae Achimescu show that,

«As a great ascetic, Saint John Damascene does not ignore the Islamic pseudo-moral, especially “the sexual morality” of Islam, as it is depicted in the Qur’an, Sura 4 devoted to women: “Take those wives you love from women – two, three or four ...” (Sura 4, 3). The spicy marriage of Muhammad with his stepson’s wife, Zaid, is the most suggestive example in this regard».⁶²

As such, St. John Damascene, by his reference to the sura “Women”, criticizes the Muslim law of marriage, polygamy and the divorce, accusing Muhammad of adultery with Zayd.

From the references to Sura *Camel of God*, which is not in the Qur’an,⁶³ the Holy Father launched attacks on the conception of the afterlife, joys or rather the pleasures awaiting for the believers: “you will get stunned by drinking wine and you will fall asleep. Then, with a head hard of sleep and drunk with wine, forget the pleasures of heaven. So how does the prophet thought that these things will be happening to you in heaven?”⁶⁴ In fact, St. John of Damascus accuses the Prophet that he knows nothing about afterlife and suggested that Muslims’ fate after death will be a tragic one: “And add outer darkness, eternal punishment, noisy fire, and the worm that never sleeps demons of hell”.⁶⁵ His attacks aimed at Muhammad’s prophetic authority, ridiculing the description that he makes of heaven. About sura “Cow” St. John says it contains some ridiculous sayings and he passes over.

In the end, there are several Muslim ritual and food prescriptions different from both Judaism and Christianity. Among these included: the practice of circumcision, even for women, the refusal of both the Jewish Sabbath and Christian baptism, dietary laws that forbid certain foods al-

⁶¹ PG, t. 94, coll. 769-770.

⁶² N. Achimescu, *Islamul în percepția Răsăritului primului mileniu creștin*, in *Universul religios...*, p. 316.

⁶³ Even if the sura did not exist in the Qur’an, elements of St. John’s story about the camel are to be found in Qur’an, sura 7, 11, 17, 26, 54, 91.

⁶⁴ PG, t. 94, coll. 771-772.

⁶⁵ PG, t. 94, coll. 771-772.

lowed by the Old Testament Law and allow others that are banned, and the total prohibition of wine, all of which being mentioned without making any comment.⁶⁶

Thus, in the contents of a single chapter, St. John Damascene reported dogmatic and moral errors that gave rise to the heresy of the Arabs, together with the most monstrous errors, such as the Gnostics and Manichaeans, who have long obstructed the religious truth and the preaching of the Gospel, just as it will be done by Islam in the future.

2.4. *Disceptatio Christiani et Saracens*

St. John Damascene is the author of *Dispute between a Christian and a Saracen*, reflecting very well, from its beginning, the misunderstanding inherent in any dialogue before its inception.⁶⁷ This second text is a controversial one, appearing as a short dialogue between a Christian and a Muslim, who asks for an answer to certain questions and objections. A.-T. Khoury noted that “the text (*Dispute*, o.n.) deals with the central issues occupying Muslim theological reflection of the 8th century”⁶⁸ and aimed at current issues which St. John Damascene had in mind.

The approach is interesting, because if the beginning and the ending represent a proper dispute (*Disceptatio* 1-4, 11), the central section (*Disceptatio* 5-10) deals with various complaints that the Saracen could make the Christian (“if the Saracen has to ask you, saying ...”), which supports the point of view according to which we are dealing with the notes taken by the lessons of John. *The Dispute* exposed a series of disagreements between Muslims and Christians and debated various topics through which the Muslim hoped to demonstrate the absurdity of the Christian theology.

The text that we have comes from the dialogues of the Syrian Bishop Theodore Abū Qurra who, according to a testimony that does not have any support, received the argument from St. John Damascene himself. In this book we find, in substance, the kind of controversy that the Holy Father instructed the Christians, and they could take as model in their subsequent

⁶⁶ PG, t. 94, coll. 773-774.

⁶⁷ See D. Urvoy, “Saint Jean Damascène et l’islam”, in “La Nef”, Nr. 191, martie 2008, in https://www.lanef.net/t_article/saint-jean-damascene-et-l-islam-24842.asp, 10.11.2014, at 17:32.

⁶⁸ Adel-Théodore Khoury, *Les Théologiens byzantines et l’Islam. Textes et auteurs (VIII^e-XIII^e S)*, Ed. Nauwelaerts, Louvain, Béatrice- Nauwelaerts, Paris, 1969, p. 71.

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disputes with the Muslims. The aim of the author is to abolish any Muslim attack directed against the Christian teaching. Moreover, St. John Damascene, being a close friend of the Omeid court, could afford to launch such a critique that even a Muslim did not dare to do.

This simulated dispute shows controversy points of great subtlety that remained classical in the Christian-Islamic polemics. Here are some examples:

«If you'll be asked by a Saracen: "Who do you say that is Christ?" Answer "The Word of God; "do not even think you're wrong; because He is called in Scripture, the Word, and the arm of God, and the power of God and in many other ways. Moreover, in return ask him: "From your Scripture what do we know about your Christ?" Then he will be eager to ask you another question, seeking to get rid of you. But in no way answer him until he answered your question. For forcing, he will have to answer you, saying, "In my Scripture He is called the Spirit and the Word of God." Then ask him again: "The word of your Scripture was created or uncreated?" And if He will tell you: "Uncreated" tell "Behold, you agree with me. For anything is not created, only God is uncreated." If, however, will tell you that the Word and the Spirit are created, then ask him:" Who created God's Word and Spirit? "For if required, they will say" God Himself created (Word and Spirit) " then you tell him again: "Therefore, before God created the Spirit and the Word, He had no Spirit, no Word." When he heard this, he will run having nothing to answer».⁶⁹

The Holy Father wished to draw attention to that who does not believe in the eternity of God's attributes of word and spirit reaches the alternative that before their creation God was deprived of His word and spirit, and to deny that uncreated character of the spirit and of the word is a terrible heresy (*Disceptatio* 5, 19-22).

Another subtlety of the Saracens will be discussed in Chapter 6, the argument following the created or uncreated character of God's words (*logia*), Muslims deliberately confusing the word of God and the words of revealed Scripture, when asked whether the words of God were created or uncreated. Depending on the answer of the Christian, the Muslim polemics wanted to demolish the Christian doctrine of the divinity of Jesus

⁶⁹ PG, t. 94, coll. 1585-1588.

Christ, demonstrating that the divine Logos was created, so is not an uncreated God. Nevertheless, the Holy Father made the distinction between the eternal Word of God, the personal Word (*enypostatos*) incarnate at “the fullness of time” and the words of the Scripture, “speaking of God” that are created and remain inspired words but not enhypostasized. Here’s how, this imaginary dialogue appears in the Father’s text:

«But if you are really asked by a Saracen: “The words of God are created or uncreated?” We are asked this question by the Saracens in the desire to show, moreover, that the Word of God is created, what is (not) or is false. If you say “created”, he says, “Behold, I tell you that God’s Word is created”. You say, “Uncreated” he says, “Every word of God is created, yet they are not gods.” Here you agree with me that Christ, who is the Word of God, is not God. Therefore you will answer nor created nor uncreated, but you will answer him: “I testify that there is only one Word of God, who is uncreated: as you confessed yourself: the Scripture, however, in totally does not say the word [λογία] as *verba*: but *ρήματα* that is *sermones* (words) of God”. And the Saracens say: And as David said: “The words of the Lord, pure words?” (Psalm 11: 6). Tell him he spoke figuratively and not in the proper sense [χρησιολογικῶς], it is not the proper and strong significance of words. And if your Saracen says: “What do you mean figuratively and proper sense?” Answer him: “Its meaning is the stable and reliable description of things; and the figurative sense means a worthless description”».⁷⁰

Against Muslims’ objection that God can not descend into the womb of a woman, because God has no contact with the bodily, the material, St. John Damascene finds arguments both in the Christian Scriptures of the New Testament and in the Qur’an:

«If the Saracen says to you: “How God descended into a woman’s womb?” Tell him this: “Let’s use your Scripture and mine!” Your Scripture says, that God has cleansed the Virgin Mary more than any other flesh of a woman and the Holy Spirit and the Word of God came down to her [O Mary, God has chosen you and purified you and chosen you from the world wimps] (Sura 3, 37); And my gospel says: “The Holy Spirit will come

⁷⁰ PG, t. 94, coll. 1587-1588.

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upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you” (Luke 1:35). This means that the two have the same vocabulary and the same meaning». ⁷¹

From this type of accusations, we see the specificity and uniqueness of Christianity and its doctrine of the incarnation of the Son of God in the womb of the Virgin Mary.

There could be heard, from the Muslims, frequent accuses about the carnal needs of the human nature, such as food, drink, sleep, etc., to which our Saviour Jesus Christ was subject in His earthly life, issues captured by St. John:

«If you’ll be asked by a Saracen: “If Christ was God, how is it that He ate, drank and slept, was crucified and died and all?” Tell him: “As the eternal Word of God, who created all things, as my Scripture testifies and your Scripture too, He Himself created inside the body of the Holy Virgin, a perfect man, endowed with soul and thought. This man ate, drank and slept: instead, the word of God neither ate, nor drank, not even slept, He was not crucified and did not die, but the body that Christ took from the Holy Virgin was crucified”». ⁷²

It is true that the Islamic world could not understand the ordeal of the Cross and believed that Jesus Christ could not suffer on the Cross. They needed the answer that, on the Calvary Cross, it was not God the Word, but the humanity of the Word that has suffered, because the body was taken from the Virgin Mary who suffered, being crucified. ⁷³ Therefore, the Christians had to maintain and strengthen the statement about the Saviour’s death on the Cross for the salvation of mankind and not to leave any doubt concerning the value of the salvation that the Messiah-Christ has achieved. From the same dialog imagined by St. John Damascene we deduce that the polemics of the first period between Christianity and Islam had both theological issues (Christological) and philosophical, theodicy issues such as the origin of evil and the free will, issues long disputed among Muslim thinkers from the beginning of Islam. The Holy Father prescribed the Christian solution to the two issues and defended human freedom against the fatalism of the Muslim dogma and its inevitable consequences.

⁷¹ *PG*, t. 94, coll. 1587-1588.

⁷² *PG*, t. 94, coll. 1589-1590.

⁷³ See dialogue VII in *Soirées de Carthage*.

It remains, even for today's Christians that are in dialogue with Muslims, the task of explaining and to make the Muslims understand the original sin and its washing away by the redemptive act of Jesus Christ.⁷⁴ Here's how St. John imagined that inter-religious dialogue regarding the evil:

«A Christian was asked by a Saracen: "After you, who do you think is the cause of evil and good?" / Christian replied: "All good plays as the cause of God, but not evil" / Saracens: Then what about the cause of evil? / Christian: The devil, which is so by its decision (will) and also we humans. / Saracens: Why / Christian: Because of their own free will. / Saracens: How? You mean you have free will and can do whatever you want? / Christian: We were created by God with free will in two aspects. / Saracens: What are they? / Christian: I can do evil and I can do good, or what is right and wrong. In this sense, if evildoers are punished by the law of God, but if I do good I will not fear the law, but I am even rewarded by God and gain His mercy. Likewise, before the man, the devil was created by God with free will and sinned. And God banished him from his own state».⁷⁵

During that historical period the discussion about good and evil regarded the nature and extent of the divine decree (*qadar*). The thorny question arises: does *qadar* leave room for human free will or people act through coercion? According to M. Abdel Haleem,

"This dispute has given rise to two groups: the qadars – the people who claimed they have qudrāh (power) over their actions, some go so far as to deny the pre-existing knowledge of God, and the jabriyyahs, who claimed divine power and claimed that we are under constraint to the point that God creates human actions, good or bad, man being like a feather in the wind without its own power".⁷⁶

The Dispute, St. John Damascene gives the impression that he had jabriyyahs' arguments, which he presents as claiming that God is the cause of everything, be it good or bad. In his reply, St. John adopted a middle way between Qadars and jabriyyahs and affirms God's foreknowledge,

⁷⁴ F. Nève, "St. Jean Damascène et son influence en Orient", II.

⁷⁵ *PG*, t. 94, coll. 1589-1592.

⁷⁶ Abdel M. Haleem, *Early kalām*, in Seyyed Hossein Nasr și Olivier Leaman (eds.), *History of Islamic Philosophy*, pp. 79-80.

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He works through the created order, which has a relative freedom, and collaborates with the people's free will, "so there is a distinction between what is specifically God's will and what is by consent or tolerance- his longsuffering (patience)".⁷⁷ It follows that the creation is complete and what is happening in the universe is in accordance with God's will, but this is not an evidence for a continuous creative activity. Saint John's position here is close to the mu'tazilits' future doctrine that stresses the free will of man, based on a Quranic verse, which shows that the good comes from God, and the evil comes from people (*Disceptatio* 1, 1-5).⁷⁸

The problem of the good and the evil is justified by several examples. First it says that God is not the author of evil, for if

"the good and the evil come from God, God would seem unfair, up to you, what is not... if God would like, he would permit the adulterer to be unchaste, the thief to steal and the killer to kill, as you say, then they deserve a reward: for they have done the will of God. The law makers would seem false and their books lying when they require us to whip the adulterers and thieves⁷⁹ and kill the murderers: because they have only listened to the will of God".⁸⁰

The conclusion of the Christian interlocutor imagined by St. John of Damascus is that "the good and the evil are in man's power".

The Muslim raises a moral problem with repercussions on theodicy, as "God creates, He shapes the child in the mother's womb", then He would be guilty of the collaboration with the debauched and the adulterer, who procreate in sins. So He would be the author of the evil; Muslims wanting to demonstrate in this way the predestination of all human facts, good or bad, that from the Christian point of view is unacceptable, because God would appear as the author of the evil. The Christian argumentation proposed by St. John of Damascus is a larger one, distinguishing between God's act of creation of the first six days of creation and the emergence of rational and irrational creatures afterward by the regularities He placed

⁷⁷ A. Louth, *Ioan Damaschinul. Tradiție și originalitate...*, p. 126.

⁷⁸ A. Louth, *Ioan Damaschinul. Tradiție și originalitate...*, pp. 126-127.

⁷⁹ "The [unmarried] woman or [unmarried] man found guilty of sexual intercourse – lash each one of them with a hundred lashes, and do not be taken by pity for them in the religion of Allah, if you should believe in Allah and the Last Day. And let a group of the believers witness their punishment".

⁸⁰ *PG*, t. 94, coll. 1591-1592.

within them, which do not make the Creator directly responsible. In the births after the primordial creative act man has his own contribution with an obvious moral character, everything being under the species of the good or the evil.

In the final answer, St. John Damascene becomes even more compelling, distinguishing between God's will and permission, because if He wants some of the things, He allows others, working with the will of man, which He does not cancel.⁸¹

The ending of the imaginary dialogue is a classical one for the Eastern apologetics, present in many other situations, and focuses on the victory of the Christian point of view over the Muslim: "At these, the Saracen was astonished and having nothing to ask the Christian left and never discussed again".⁸²

The two works of St. John of Damascus were the first attempts of a inter-religious dialogue with Islam, a dialogue more imagined than real and a controversy arose from a good knowledge of Islam, a knowledge from its source. Although there have been many attempts of an inter-religious dialogue, the practice proved that between the two there could be only a dialogue of the deaf, with no results. In his *Dispute between a Christian and a Saracen*, St. John Damascene tries to make a dialogue. But this controversy had to strengthen the Christians of his time under the rule of Islam and to give them the basic arguments to answer the apology of Islam. If in its early years the Islam was tolerant in the East, it was because it met a much better structured Christianity, more cultured and better catechized than Maghreb, for example. But, nevertheless, during the next twelve centuries the Christians became a minority, a reality that became especially dramatic in the last century.⁸³

3. Conclusions

St. John Damascene is an example of a theologian belonging to the Eastern Christianity who entered into dispute or dialogue with Islam on various issues. His attitude of inter-religious openness was not singular in that

⁸¹ PG, t. 94, coll. 1593-1594.

⁸² PG, t. 94, coll. 1593-1594.

⁸³ "I cristiani nei paesi islamici: a colloquio con Samir Khalil Samir", Aleksander Romanowski (ed.), în *Studii Cattolici*, 446 (1998), trad. de Caius Cuțaru, *Creștinii în țările islamice: de vorbă cu părintele Samir Khalil Samir*, în: *Teologia* 3-4 (2002), p. 187.

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period. From this point of view, the Christian East is with many centuries before the West. When, finally, the Christian West began to be seriously concerned about Islam it used the results that the Christian East arrived at in the dialogue with the Islam.

Although he has not written much about Islam and even if he has not fully decoded the new religion, considering it as a Christian heresy, St. John Damascene, having a great power of synthesis, draws the main doctrinal dividing lines between Christianity and Islam. The importance of his testimony is the fact that it is the only testimony dating from the patristic period, namely, the end of it, being made by one of the best connoisseur and systematiser of the teaching of the Orthodox faith, and because it is made from inside a personal, family experience, which includes the new religion already imposed in Damascus and the Middle East for some decades.

The harsh criticism against Islam is particularly relevant for our times. The Holy Father did not consider the new teaching as a serious matter, but just another Christian sect, which is one of the shortcomings of his approach, the reason being that, in theological terms, the new religion only represented a construction proper for primitive peoples. He could not guess, at that time, that what was much lower Christianity, as doctrine and height of moral-religious living, will have such a brilliant historical evolution.