

THE KNOWN CHRIST OF ISLAM IN RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

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Abstrak: Kristologi Yohanes dari Damsyik sering dilihat sebagai *crypto-Monophysitism*. Ini disebabkan beberapa teolog Barat kurang memahami konteks historis pergumulannya. Dengan meletakkan kristologi dari Damsyik dalam konteks politis, sosial dan religiusnya terungkap bahwa kristologinya menekankan keAllahan Yesus disusun dalam rangka dialog dengan kristologi Quran yang menekankan kemanusiaan Yesus. Yohanes dari Damsyik jelas berjalan dalam kristologi Chalcedonian.

Kata-kata Kunci: *religious dialogue, John of Damascus, Syriac Christianity, Christology.*

Introduction

Religious diversity is not a new phenomenon in human life. Christianity from its very beginning was born in a pluralistic environment.¹ Although Christians have not been unaware of religious plurality, the increasing awareness of religious plurality, especially the resurgence of Islam, has forced some Christians to re-

1. Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, vol. 1 (London: SCM, 1974), has shown that Greek culture had penetrated Palestine including Judea from c. 260 and 250 BC. He points out that a Greek school existed in Jerusalem.

evaluate and to reconstrue theologically the relationship between the Christian faith and the faith of other religions. Unfortunately some Christians will either arrogantly and insensitively respond to Muslims or behave sceptically to the detriment of the Christian faith.

In South East Asia Islam is an important religion to be seriously taken into account in Christian theology.² Confident and sensitive attitudes of Christians in the dialogue or even the debate with Muslims require, first of all, a solid and comprehensive base of Christian theology and also a clear understanding of Islamic faith. True Christian-Muslim dialogue can only be achieved as Christians and Muslims respectively clearly express their own theological positions. The intention of the dialogue, Hans Küng states, is to make a Muslim understand why it is that Christians believe in this Jesus as the Word.³

This essay argues therefore that Johannine Christology, as pointed out by John of Damascus, could or should become the starting point for a true Christian-Muslim dialogue.⁴ We shall focus

2. Hans Küng, 'Christianity and World Religions: The Dialogue with Islam as one model', *Muslim World* LXXVII (1987), 80, calls for more serious attention to Islam. 'Islam', he writes, 'can no longer be ignored by Christian theology, but must instead be reconsidered both politically and theologically as a reality of the one world in which we live and to which we apply our theological efforts'.

3. Küng, 'Christianity', 93.

4. Terry C. Muck, 'Theology of Religions after Knitter and Hick: Beyond the Paradigm', *Interpretation: Journal of Bible and Theology* (January 2007), 7-22, suggests that religious dialogue must go beyond Western models.

our study first on Syriac Christianity, for it frames the context of John of Damascus. Having explored the context we shall then examine the texts of John of Damascus' writings.

The Context of John of Damascus

1. Political Setting

The history of the Middle East, in the seventh and eighth centuries, to a certain extent, may be described as an epoch of expansions and conquests of the Arab-Muslim *umma*.⁵ Indeed the expansions and conquests paved the way for the Islamic civilization.⁶ Even though the progress of expansion took several decades, we have to bear in mind that most of the local people welcomed and accepted the Arabs, even to the extent of considering them as liberators.⁷ On the eve of the Arab-Muslim conquest there was an accumulation of negative feeling against the Byzantine Greeks in Syria because the people were discontented with the unsettled

5. On *umma* see Djaka Soetapa, *Ummah: Komunitas Religius, Sosial dan Politik dalam al-Qur'an dalam Masyarakat Indonesia* (Jogyakarta: Dutawacana University, 1991).

6. cf. Philip K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs* (London: Macmillan, 1964), 174-175, 240f; Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge: CUP, 1988), 916. Hitti and Lapidus point out that Islamic civilization was built upon the matrix of the Middle Eastern civilization.

7. cf. David Knowles, Dimitri Obolensky, *The Christian Centuries. vol.2: The Middle Ages* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1969), 82; Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia. vol. 1* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 340-41.

political and social situations due to the intermittent wars and high taxes levied on the Syrians.

It is important to note that before the conquest peoples from Arabia had migrated from the barren desert to the 'Fertile crescent' in order to have a better and more comfortable life. This centuries-long process of infiltration culminated in large-scale movement of people from Arabia into the Middle East after the conquests. The presence of the Arabs in the Middle East therefore further secured the conquests and expansions. The Arab-Muslims who migrated to Syria were welcomed and well-accepted because, as Samuel Moffett points out, Syria already had a large Arabic and mixed Arabic population, infused for centuries with migrations of northern Arabic tribes.⁸

Moreover, the age-long process of assimilation of Arabs in Syria was further strengthened by the kind and generous attitude of the Arab Muslims to the conquered people who were mainly Christians.⁹ The existing social and administrative systems were kept

8. Moffett, *Christianity 1*, 341; cf. L.V. Vaglieri, 'The Patriarchal and Umayyad Caliphate', in *Cambridge History of Islam vol. 1*, Eds. P.M. Holt., A.K.S. Lambton., Bernard Lewis (Cambridge: CUP, 1970), 60,77; Richard Bell, *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment* (London: Macmillan, 1926), 18-19.

9. To the large community of Syrian Christians, Arabic Islam seemed more friendly than the Byzantine Orthodox. They had vividly seen the kindness of pagan Persians to Monophysites in captured Damascus, Antioch, and Jerusalem, whereas the triumphant return of the Christian emperor Heraclius meant persecution again for the heretics. See Moffett, *Christianity 1*, 341; Vaglieri, *Cambridge History 1*, 62; K. S. Latourette, *A*

relatively intact. This was primarily due to the unfamiliarity of the Arabs rulers with the systems because they were less educated than the conquered population. For the Christians, due to their superior education, many opportunities were given them to be administrative secretaries, teachers, philosophers, architects, scientists, admirals in the newly-built Muslim fleet, instructors of the princes, artists, etc. Some rose to high but extremely vulnerable positions in national and provincial governments.¹⁰

However, in general, the old bureaucratic systems were used by the Arabs to rule the conquered lands and primarily to continue the collection of existing taxation of both land tax (*kharaj*) and poll tax (*jizya*). Land tax represented the Islamic community's right of ownership over the conquered land of non-Muslim peoples.¹¹ Peasants who were allowed to keep their land were later badly affected by the taxation payments. Taxes on peasants often reached 50% of the value of their produce.¹² Non-Muslim urban (workers,

History of the Expansion of Christianity vol.2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1966), 298.

10. Moffett, *Christianity*, 338; cf. M. A. Shaban, *Islamic: A New Interpretation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1971), 43; Vaglieri, *Cambridge History I*, 88; Latourette, *Expansion II*, 27; Daniel J. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1972), 25.

11. Bat Ye'or, *The Dhimmi: Jews and Christians under Islam* (London: Associated University, 1985), 52; Shaban, *Islamic*, 48.

12. Lapidus, *Islamic*, 45.

merchants) had to pay capitation tax (*jizya*) ranging from one to four dinars according to the wealth of the male adult taxpayers.¹³

2. Social Setting

In the post-conquest period the distinction between Arab and non-Arab was very crucial. Being an Arab meant being an elite, in a superior class of the society. Though non-Arabs were treated fairly well they had to serve their new masters by paying taxes, a symbol of belonging to an inferior class in the society. The Arabs as the conquering peoples constituted the elite class.

The 'second class' group of people under the Arabs were called clients (*mawali*). The clients were people who converted to Islam. Islam as a religion of 'peace' (Sur. 2: 208; 8: 63) during conquest was strictly a religion of the Arabs. They did not impose Islamic beliefs and practices on the conquered populations. Hitti¹⁴ notes that there is no evidence of mass conversion to Islam amongst the conquered people until after such stringent regulations as those of Umar II (717-720) and the Abbasid al-Mutawakkil (847-861). When conversions did occur, they were an embarrassment because they created a status problem¹⁵ and led to claims for financial privileges which directly affected the size of the state revenue.¹⁶ Though those who converted

13. See Shaban, *Islamic*, 43-44; Lapidus, *Islamic*, 44-45; Hitti, *Arabs*, 171.

14. Hitti, *Arabs*, 232.

15. On *mawali* problem see Vaglieri, *Cambridge History I*, 90-91.

16. Lapidus, *Islamic*, 43; Hitti, *Arabs*, 219,232. They recorded that the state revenue declined in Egypt from fourteen million dinars in the time

to Islam had been accorded the status of clients (*mawali*), a status which they bitterly resented, their zeal for the new religion made them intolerant to the non-Muslims.

The third class of the society was made up of *Ahl al-dhimma* (protected peoples) i.e. the Christians, Jews and Sabians.¹⁷ The Prophet Muhammad had made a covenant¹⁸ with them because he regarded them as 'peoples of the Book', the religions of earlier written revelations. The Prophet's successors, the Caliphate, continued this tolerant policy and even extended it later to the Zoroastrians.¹⁹

of Amr bin al-As to five in the time of Muawiyah (661-680) and later to four under the Abbasid Harun al-Rashid (786-809) and finally to three million; and in al-Iraq the revenue fell from a hundred million under Umar bin al-Khattab to forty million in the days of Abd al-Malik (685-705). Also Latourette, *Expansion II*, 302f; Bell, *Origin*, 187-188.

17. Sabians or Mandeans are the Johannine community who still survive in the marshy district at the mouth of the Euphrates. This group is mentioned in the Qur'an (Sur. 2:59; 5:73; 22:17)

18. Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 10-11. In 629 the Muslims for the first time had annexed the oasis of Khaybar about 95 miles from Medina. The Prophet's agreement was that the Jews were allowed to remain in the oasis but they were to hand over one-half of their cultivation to the Muslims. This later became the model for the Arab Muslims when they conquered *dar al-Harb*. The Prophet's covenant with the Christians of Najran in South Arabia read as follows: 'The people of Najran and their dependents enjoy the protection of God and Muhammad, for their life, their religion, their land, and property, for their churches and the practice of their religion - no bishop or monk or *waqif* will be forced to give up his position - and for all that is in their hand, little or much, provided it be not the product of usury of blood-money from heathen times'. cited in Bell, *Origin*, 178-179.

19. cf. Hitti, *Arabs*, 233.

Though the *dhimmi*s had to pay land and poll taxes, they enjoyed a wide measure of tolerance, and the rights of self government. The *dhimmi* which the Arabs adopted from the Persians' *melet* system, is a system in which tolerated religions are both restricted in social, political and military service and protected by the Arab rulers from the harassment of Arab-Muslims.²⁰ This system, however, subtly oppressed and alienated the *dhimmi*s.²¹ This social segregation, in the long run, created an inferiority complex amongst the Christians.

3. Religious Setting

As has already been noted, the Arab conquerors were welcomed by the Syrians who had been oppressed by the Byzantine emperors. In the religious sphere, the Byzantine Christians had been trying to impose their religious beliefs on other religious groups, particularly to the Monophysites who were numerically strong in Syria. But these efforts had failed, and the resulting tensions and resentments made the Muslim conquerors more welcome, and their presence, after the conquest, more acceptable.²²

20. Moffett, *Christianity*, 344, 367 n 68.

21. See Bat Ye'or, *Dhimmi*, 131-133; Kenneth Cragg, *The Arab Christian* (Louisville: Westminster, 1991), 57.

22. Lewis, *Jews*, 19; Latourette, *Expansion II*, 295, remarks that the Monophysites preferred the Arab-Muslims to the Chalcedonian Byzantine rule. The disaffection had been accentuated by the efforts of Byzantine emperors who enforced religious uniformity on the Monophysites who were numerically strong in Syria.

Nevertheless, the Arab conquerors drastically altered the position of the Byzantine Christians from the role of oppressors to the *dhimmi* status. Christians were tolerated and protected as long as they paid taxes,²³ because the Arabs regarded them as people of the Book and the Arabs were not aware of any schism in Christianity.

The Copts in Egypt, the Nestorians in Mesopotamia and Persia, the Monophysite Jacobites in Syria and Chalcedonian Orthodox throughout the Byzantine provinces all had long histories of disputes with the Byzantine and Persian rulers.²⁴ The conquest of the Byzantine Christian provinces by the Arab-Muslim army ended civil strife, as well as the Orthodox church's violent persecutions of both the dissident churches and the synagogues.²⁵ The Christological controversies in AD 451 brought about the division of the apostolic church. Naturally as the Chalcedonian Orthodox or Melkite church was recognised as the official church by the Byzantine emperor, the Monophysite (Jacobite) and the Nestorian churches were regarded as illegal. Thus, the results of the conquest, inter alia, were that the Chalcedonian Orthodox clergy were freed from excessive interference by the Byzantine emperors in church affairs; the Monophysite Jacobites were rescued from harassment by the Orthodox; the Nestorians found themselves well accepted by Arab-

23. cf. Moffett, *Christianity*, 340.

24. For a discussion of the origin and expansion of the Copts, the Nestorian and Jacobites see Aziz S. Atiya, *A History of Eastern Christianity* (Millwood: Kraus Reprint, 1980), 13-302.

25. Bat Ye'or, *Dhimmi*, 51.

Muslims.²⁶ In other words, the new master had conceded a relatively large measure of religious freedom by both tolerating and protecting the Christians. In so doing, the Arab Muslims had shown what we call Islamic toleration.

The Monophysite Jacobites who were the majority in Syria under *pax Islamica*, were able to grow beyond the Syrian lands. The lifting of the old barriers between the Asiatic territories under the Byzantine and Persian domination furnished the Jacobites with the opportunity of missionary expansion eastward in areas where the Nestorians had almost a complete monopoly.²⁷ The Nestorian Diophysitism or the 'Church of the East', continued to experience the generosity of their new masters as with the ancient Persian rulers. Under the Arab-Muslims, the Nestorians also further expanded their missionary work.²⁸ The phenomenal expansion of the Nestorian church was made possible by the combination of strong theological education support and their readiness, self-sacrifice and enthusiasm in evangelism. Moreover, they also combined evangelism with educational and medical services.²⁹ Latourette³⁰ assesses that the Nestorians formed the largest Christian community in the Middle East followed by the Monophysites and the Melkites respectively.

26. Moffett, *Christianity*, 341; see Latourette, *Expansion II*, 266-272.

27. Atiya, *Eastern Christianity*, 194.

28. see Atiya, *Eastern Christianity*, 257-266.

29. cf. Atiya, *Eastern Christianity*, 257-258.

30. Latourette, *Expansion II*, 284.

The Arab conquest had significantly reduced the dominance of two overlapping religious systems and boundaries of the Middle East i.e. Christianity and Zoroastrianism, who then gradually mingled into the stream of Islamic civilization. In its beginning, Islam never separated religious and political matters. Religious problems and issues were always regarded as political matters and vice versa. These two sides of the same coin remain characteristic of Islam throughout its history. This basic character of Islam explains the gradual disappearance of other religious systems in the Islamic imperium.

Nevertheless, during the Umayyad Caliphate (661-750) Christians throughout all Syria were not only tolerated but, in Hitti's words, 'well treated'³¹ until the reign of Umar II (717-720).³²

The most striking restrictions imposed on Christians by Umar II were the exclusion of Christians from public office, prohibiting their wearing turbans, requiring them to cut their forelocks, to don distinctive clothes with girdles of leather, to ride without saddles or only on pack saddles, to build their houses not higher than those of Muslims, to erect no place of worship and not to lift their voices in

31. Hitti, *Arabs*, 233.

32. Atiya, *Eastern Christianity*, 269, states that the pressure on Christians by Umar II (717-720) was pre-eminently economic. It was most likely that during Umar II's reign the Arabs were more educated. The feeling of greater independence of the Arabs on the Christians' service could contribute to precipitate their changing feeling and attitude towards the Christians.

times of prayer. Also, no Christian's testimony against a Muslim in court could be accepted.³³

And yet, according to Lewis,³⁴ most of these disabilities had a social and symbolic rather than a tangible and practical character since the only real penalty imposed on the *dhimmi*s was taxation. Though it was essentially symbolic, it became, in our evaluation, a painful experience for the *dhimmi*s in their everyday life situations.

It was most likely that Umar II's policies were not extensively implemented for long.³⁵ His short reign due to his tragic death had made his policies unsuccessful in their impact upon the social and political life of the people. It was highly possible that Umar's policy brought about the decrease of state revenue as more people converted to Islam. This was another reason Umar's policy was not popular to the Arab-Muslims.

Atiya³⁶ mentions that the position of Christians in society was far from despicable since some of them were scribes of the Sultans, and chamberlains of the kings, and physicians of the nobles, and bankers.

The Arab Muslims, as noted, had tolerated the existence of other religions in the Islamic empire and had little missionary zeal to convert the conquered peoples to Islam. But there was a steady

33. Hitti, *Arabs*, 234; see also Lewis, *Jews*, 25-66.

34. Lewis, *Jews*, 26.

35. cf. Hitti, *Arabs*, 234; Vaglieri, *Cambridge History I*, 93.

36. Atiya, *Eastern Christianity*, 270; cf. Gibbon, *Decline*, 383; Latourette, *Expansion II*, 271.

progress of conversion from Christianity to Islam due to the oppressive taxation.³⁷ However, mass conversion to Islam only took place under the pious Umar II who 'sought to put the empire on a Muslim, rather than a strictly Arab, basis'.³⁸

It is reasonable to infer that the conversion was accelerated by the interreligious encounters of monotheistic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) which evidently showed a large number of similarities in vocabularies and terminologies. And yet, the evidence available does not indicate with certainty that there were also Muslims converted to Christianity.

Despite the steady and numerous conversions to Islam, Christians in the Middle East, as Cragg³⁹ maintains, remained the majority population well into the ninth century. In general, people perceived Islam as another Judaeo-Christian heresy with strong Arian or Monophysite elements in it.⁴⁰ What seems increasingly clear from what is discussed above is that during the Umayyad Caliphate (661-750) Christians were both tolerated as well as restricted. The conquest of Arab-Muslims and the restrictions during the establishment of the Islamic empire did not drastically reduce the Christian population from a majority to a minority group.

37. cf. Latourette, *Expansion II*, 303.

38. Lapidus, *Islamic*, 52; Shaban, *Islamic*, 132.

39. Cragg, *Arab*, 56; Hitti, *Arabs*, 231; Atiya, *Eastern Christianity*, 200, describes the tenth century as the age of decline of Syrian Christianity.

40. Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 26.

The Arab Muslims, in general, had granted a large measure of tolerance to the Christians in return for taxes to the state. Christians could still contribute to the social political life under the Arab Muslims; they were even allowed to play a major role in the community.

Nevertheless, an examination of Christianity during the early development of Islamic civilization (AD 661-750) has shown that a large number of Christians converted to Islam. The steady conversion to Islam is attributable to a number of interrelated factors. Latourette⁴¹ perceptively puts it that

conversions from Christianity to Islam were wrought by the military victories of Islam and the conviction that the divine favour must be with the latter, followed later by the desire to escape the discriminatory taxation and the inferior social status which were the lot of Christians under Muslim rulers. Added to these factors were the migrations of Muslim peoples into territories previously under Christian but then Muslim rulers.

At this juncture, we can say that economic and social advantages were the overriding motive for a Christian to become a Muslim. By converting to Islam *dhimmi* Christians who were socially an inferior class, became members of the Islamic *umma*, the dominant society, with all its advantages. It is probably for this reason that John of Damascus abandons his high position and life of luxury for the simple

41. Latourette, *Expansion II*, 290.

and contemplative life in the monastery. He may have wished to make clear his rejection of such advantages. The context forces John of Damascus to search for the appropriate response in building a religious dialogue with the new religion.

John of Damascus or Yuhanna bin Mansur bin Sargun, was born in Damascus around 655 AD.⁴² This doctor of the Eastern church⁴³ came from a prominent and respected Christian family. He served the Umayyad Caliphs as the minister of finance.⁴⁴ His father Bin Mansur had held a high position of responsibility, in succeeding his own father Mansur bin Sargun, as the financial administrator⁴⁵ of the Caliph. Yuhanna's grandfather, Mansur bin Sargun, on the eve of the Arab conquest was a governor of Damascus, responsible for financial and military affairs. Mansur bin Sargun assumed the highest position in the Caliphate Muawiyah I (661-680), which made the Christian city Damascus as the capital of the Islamic empire.

42. Traditionally, 675 is the date of John's birth. But recently Joseph Nasrallah basing the fact that John was a close friend and commensal of Yazid I who became the Caliph at the age of 36 in 680 AD, has proposed 655 AD as the possible date of his birth. Daniel Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 38-39 suggests 652 AD as an alternative date.

43. Pope Leo XIII declared him 'Doctor of the Roman Catholic Church' in 1890.

44. cf. Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 42-43; F. Kattenbusch, 'John of Damascus', in *New Schaff - Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* VI: 208.

45. Hitti, *Arabs*, 195; Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 26-29. They conclude that the Mansur family's responsibilities under the Umayyad Caliphate were financial in nature. As the financial controller this position was the highest and most important position after the Arab generals.

Thus, the Mansur family had served the Umayyad Caliphate for three generations, and yet the Mansurs remained faithful to the Chalcedonian doctrines. The Mansur family was respected by both the Muslims and Christians.

In 724 AD,⁴⁶ at the age of 69 years after a long service in the Caliphate administration, John of Damascus resigned and entered a monastery called St. Sabas near Jerusalem. Sahas⁴⁷ thinks of two possible reasons as to why John of Damascus abandoned his high position and life of luxury: it may have been a reaction to Emperor Leo's (717-741) policy in regard to the iconoclastic controversy and punishment of the Caliph. Sahas, however, believes that the motives of John of Damascus for entering the monastery were primarily personal, out of his own choice to follow a life of complete devotion. This is possible. But the main reason is possibly, as noted above, motivated by John of Damascus' context.

Thus John of Damascus had seen a large number of Christians being converted to Islam because of the social and economic advantages. He felt that the Church would collapse if that happened continuously and increasingly. It would reduce the Christians from a majority to a minority body of society. Since a monastery serves as a place for spiritual devotion and also responsible for the faith and *'the*

46. G. W. Bromiley, *Historical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), gives 715 as the date when John entered the St. Sabas monastery.

47. Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 43,45.

*fate of Church as a whole*⁴⁸ (italics mine), we can infer that John of Damascus' motif to enter the monastery of St. Sabas could not be limited just to the external or personal reasons. It was due to his concern for the existence and the mission of Christianity in the context of Islamic expansion / civilization. How then does John respond to or build a religious dialogue with the new emerging religion?

The Texts of John of Damascus' Writings

John of Damascus wrote the *Fount of Knowledge* as a manual of Christian doctrine in 743⁴⁹ in response to a request from his adopted brother Cosmas who succeeded bishop Peter as bishop of Maiuma. The *Fount of Knowledge* is a synthesis of all Greek theology and learning up to John of Damascus' time and has been called - in Chase's words - 'the last work of any theological importance to appear in the East'.⁵⁰ The *Fount of Knowledge* consists of three parts namely, *Dialectica*, the *De Haeresibus*, and the *De Fide Orthodoxa*. The *De Haeresibus* as an integral part of the *Fount of Knowledge* surveys 103 heresies, so that Christians in pursuing the truth can easily distinguish what is false and absurd.

48. John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University, 1979), 66.

49. Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 54, 68f, relates the date of the writing of the *Fount of Knowledge* with the martyrdom of bishop Peter in AD 743.

50. Cited in Moffett, *Christianity*, 343.

Chapter 100/101 of the *De Haeresibus* is, according to Sahas, an early systematic introduction to Islam written by a Christian writer for Christian readers. Its purpose was to inform the Christian of the newly-appeared 'heresy'⁵¹ and to provide some preliminary answers to its 'heretical elements'.⁵²

Thus, in spite of the martyrdom of bishop Peter, John of Damascus wrote chapter 100/101 of the *De Haeresibus*, in particular, not to inflame hatred and vengeance,⁵³ but rather to inform Christians of the fundamental differences between Christianity and Islam and provide them material for their encounter and debate with the Muslims. In other words, it was basically a manual for defensive argument.⁵⁴ It is perhaps worth adding that, Sahas remarks, the *Disputatio Saraceni et Christiani* was written by John of Damascus⁵⁵ as a 'supplement to and an elaboration of, the preliminary discussion of chapter 100/101 of the *De Haeresibus*'.⁵⁶

51. Frank H. Foster, 'Is Islam a Christian Heresy?' in *MW* 32 (1932), 126-133, has examined the heretical nature of Islam.

52. Bell, *Origin*, 207-208; similarly Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 57, 94.

53. cf. Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 95.

54. cf. Bell, *Origin*, 186, 208.

55. Scholars (Jugie, Meyendorff) have debated the authorship of the *Disputatio*. Bell, *Origin*, 186; and Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 100-102, inter alia, maintain the *Disputatio* as the authentic writing of John of Damascus. Sahas argues that as far as the content matter is concerned, the subjects discussed in the *Disputatio* are all found in Chapter 100/101 of the *De Haeresibus*.

56. Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 102.

The subject discussed in the *Disputatio* which can be found in the chapter 100/101, was presented in the form of a dialogue between a Christian and a Muslim. The *Disputatio*, Sahas puts it, is a summary of the most essential questions of early Muslim theology, as well as of the most common ready-to-use answers that a Christian should have in mind whenever confronted by a Muslim in debate.⁵⁷

By comparing the two texts one can easily detect that chapter 100/101 of the *De Haeresibus* gives the impression of being a general introduction to Islam, while the *Disputatio* supplements the discussion or the debate with the Muslim so that Christians were in a better position due to their accurate understanding of both Christian and Islamic theology. Thus, by taking cognizance of Islam; while seriously and firmly holding to Christian faith, Christians might persevere in abiding in Jesus in the overwhelming current of Islamic civilization, or even, by God's grace, bring a Muslim to Christ.

Even though Melkite Christians were in conflict with the Islamic Caliphs, John of Damascus had a positive attitude towards the Muslims. He was well accepted by the Muslims though he labelled Islam as a heresy. His basic overriding concerns in writing these two texts were to inform Christians in general, who were steadily decreasing in number, to stress the false and heretical nature of Islam and not to create hatred against the Muslims, This was, most likely, the reason why he wrote the *De Haeresibus* and *Disputatio* in the form of a dialogue: for Christians to easily understand the content

57. Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 122.

and its arguments and use them directly in debates. Though John of Damascus had pioneered the Christian-Muslim debate, yet the Christians did not always follow his path or line of thought.

It is well founded at this juncture to infer that during John of Damascus' long and brilliant service in the Umayyad court, surrounded by Muslims, he often engaged in religious debates with them.

Having covered a sketchy description of the life of John of Damascus in the Muslim environment and the background of his writings, we are now in a position to analyze and examine the main issue of the early Christian-Muslim debate. This exposition of the content of the texts⁵⁸ focuses on Christology which is, in the final analysis, the issue of the debate.

John of Damascus begins his *De Haeresibus* by identifying Islam with the Ishmaelites. Even though the proper name of the religion is Islam (Sur. 3:19; 5:3), he intentionally calls Islam the religion of the Ishmaelites in order to underline the historical common ground with the Judaeo-Christian faith. 'The Ishmaelites' is used in John of Damascus' writing to show the origin of Islam and also because he knew that it was a 'name fully acceptable to the Muslims'.⁵⁹ The Muslims also called themselves, as noted in chapter 100/101, *Hagarenes* because Ishmael 'was born to Abraham from

58. The Greek text and its English translation have been prepared by Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 132-159. The numbering follows Migne's edition.

59. Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 70.

Hagar'. Sahas comments that the expression the son of Hagar (*Hagarenes*) referring to the Muslim was widely used by the later Byzantine authors probably in order to demonstrate that the Muslims were Abraham's illegitimate children and false monotheists.⁶⁰

The third name of Islam, *Saracenes*, occurs 34 times in both the *De Haeresibus* and the *Disputatio*. According to Islamic tradition, as mentioned in chapter 100/101 of the *De Haeresibus*, 'Hagar said to the angel, 'Sarah has sent me away empty' (*Sarra kenēn me apelusen-764A*). Hence, Muslim called themselves *Saracenes* when the debate took place in spite of their proper name, Islam. It is worth noting here that all these names were not coined by John of Damascus, as he used what the Muslims called themselves. The Muslims were called and called themselves *Ishmaelites*, *Hagarenes* and *Saracenes* to show the patriarchal origin of Islam as monotheistic religion.

It is interesting that John of Damascus labelled Muhammad as the 'false prophet' but he at the same time recognized Muhammad's monotheistic preaching. To put it in Sahas' words, 'John of Damascus' awareness of the idolatrous character of the pre-Islamic religion in Arabia leads him to a positive recognition of Muhammad as the person who brought his people back to monotheism'.⁶¹

60. Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 70.

61. Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 72.

According to John of Damascus, Muhammad was a false prophet due to the heretical nature of Islam. Islam, in his understanding, was not another new religion but rather a Christian heresy like the Nestorians and others. This line is buttressed by the fact that he called Islam Ishmaelites, Hagarenes or Saracens instead of Islam and branded Islam a 'heresy', 'deceptive superstition', and 'forerunner of Antichrist'.⁶² He wrote that Muhammad 'who having casually been exposed to the Old and the New Testament and having supposedly encountered an Arian monk, formed a heresy of his own' (765 A). In the mind of John of Damascus the expression 'the Antichrist' referred to 'everyone who does not confess that the son of God came in the flesh, is perfect God, and became perfect man while at the same time He was God'.

Evidently, Islam was a Christian heresy. The terms used by John of Damascus related Islam closely to the Judaeo-Christian traditions. It was a heresy due to its defective Christology, acknowledging Christ's humanity, but denying Christ's divinity.

Having discussed the nature and character of Islam in John's writing and set it against the backdrop of his environment and ministry, we are in a better position to explore the main issue of his debate with the Muslims as reflected in his writings.

62. Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 69, further notes that the expression of the 'forerunner of Antichrist' was not employed for the first time against only Islam. It had been used for emperor Leo III, his son Constantine V, the Patriarch of Constantinople John VII Grammaticos (836-842) and possibly for some other prominent political and religious leaders during the Iconoclastic controversy.

The Main Issue In The Christian - Islam Debate

John of Damascus began his debate with the Muslims by pointing out the essential common grounds of both Islam and Christian faith. That is to say, monotheism is characteristic of both Christianity and Islam. He almost directly quoted the content of Sur. 112 (*Tawhid*) which is the core and the quintessence of the Qur'anic message. The Qur'an writes: 'Say: He is Allah, the One, Allah, the eternally Besought of all, He begetteth no nor was begotten. And there is none comparable unto Him' (Sur. 112). John of Damascus writes: 'He [Muhammad] says that there exists one God, maker of all, who was neither begotten nor has he begotten' (765A). This common ground however is the source of the fundamental difference between Christianity and Islam. This most essential disagreement, in John of Damascus' mind, was derived from the doctrine of the unity of God (*al-Tawhid*). In other words, the doctrine of the unity of God became the basic drive behind the rejection of Christ's divinity. Being a Muslim and accepting Jesus as God was regarded as *shirk* (associating Allah with another god).

In short, John of Damascus started his discussion with the common ground which was the basic foundation of both Islamic teaching and the Christian faith. This common denominator of monotheism became the stumbling block for Muslims to confess Jesus Christ as God.

In this respect it is imperative at this junction to cite John of Damascus' theology concerning the doctrine of the oneness of God.

He asserted that ‘God is one not many’.⁶³ On the basis of the Scriptures which he directly quoted in discussing the ‘Proof that God is one and not many’. (Ex. 20: 2-3; Deut. 6: 4; Isa. 43: 10; John 17: 3), he⁶⁴ impressively writes concerning the oneness of God:

We believe then in One God, one beginning, having no beginning, uncreated, unbegotten, imperishable and immortal, everlasting, infinite, uncircumscribed, boundless, of infinite power...creator of all created things, seen or unseen...one essence, one divinity, one power, one will, one energy, one beginning, one authority, one dominion, one sovereignty, made known in three perfect subsistences...

Having set the elementary agreeable point, John of Damascus then continued in chapter 100/101 to summarize the Qur’anic Christology. He writes:

He [Muhammad] says that Christ is Word of God (Sur. 2:81; 3:34; 4:169), and his Spirit (Sur. 4:169), created (Sur. 3:59) and a servant (Sur. 4:170; 19:31; 43:57-61), and he was born without a seed from Mary (Sur. 2:87, 253; 3:45; 4:157,171; 5:46,75,110,112,114,116; 19:34; 33:7; 57:27; 61:6, 14), the sister of Moses and Aaron⁶⁵ (Sur. 3:33; 19:28; 30:31). For, he says, the Word of God and the Spirit entered Mary (Sur. 4:171; 19:17; 21:91; 56:12) and she gave birth to Jesus who was a prophet (Sur. 3:39, 79; 4:171; 5:75; 19:31; 33:7) and a

63. John of Damascus, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*. Trans. S.D.F. Salmon., vol. IX, *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 4.

64. John of Damascus, *Exposition*, 6.

65. See Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur’an* (London: Sheldon, 1965), 78.

servant of God. And that the Jews, having themselves violated the Law, wanted to crucify him (Sur. 3:54) and after they arrested him they crucified his shadow (Sur. 2:67; 4:155), but Christ himself, they say, was not crucified nor did he die (Sur. 4:155); for God took him up to himself into heaven (Sur. 3:55; 4:156) because he loved him. And this is what he says, that when Christ went up to the heavens God questioned him saying: 'O Jesus, did you say that 'I am Son of God, and God?' (Sur. 5:116). And Jesus, they say, answered: 'Be merciful to me, Lord; you know that I did not say so, nor will I boast that I am your servant; but men who have gone astray wrote that I made this statement and they said lies against me and they have been in error' (Sur. 3:55f; 4:171; 5:17, 72, 116; 9:30f; 19:35, 90-93; 39:4; 112:3). And God, they say, answered to him: 'I knew that you would not say this thing'. (Sur. 5:119) (765AB).

The documentation demonstrates the good understanding of the Qur'anic teaching that John of Damascus had.

The major issue in the discussion between the Muslims and Christians was the person and nature of Jesus Christ. In the Qur'an, Jesus or Isa is mentioned in 15 out of 114 Suras. Thus, Jesus was not only known in the Qur'an but was placed honourably with many titles as compared with other prophets who preceded him. John of Damascus began the debate by quoting the Qur'anic message regarding Christ. He was fully aware of the similarity of the issue of the Logos and the uncreatedness of the Qur'an. The Qur'an mentioned several times that Jesus was Word (*kalima*). Sur. 4:171, for instance, reads:

People of the Scripture! Do not exaggerate in your religion nor utter aught concerning Allah save the truth. The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only a messenger of Allah, and His Word which He conveyed unto Mary, and a Spirit from Him.

Based on this verse and other similar Qur'anic passages, Parrinder⁶⁶ concludes that Jesus as "Word" does not mean that he is a "prophecy" or that he comes "with a word" but rather that he both comes as the effect of the word of God and is the word which God "cast" upon Mary. Thus it asserts Jesus' creatureliness.

In similar lines, Muhammad Ali⁶⁷ although writing from the Ahmadiyyah movement, reflects classical Islam when he says that Jesus Christ was called 'His Word' (*kalimatu-hu*) to show only that:

he is looked upon as a created being like other mortals, for all created beings are called *words of God*: 'Though the sea became ink for the Words of my Lord, verily the sea would be used up before the Words of my Lord were exhausted, even though We brought the like thereof to help' (Sur. 18:109). Jesus Christ is thus one of these numberless words.

Jesus, continued Ali, was called *a* spirit from God (*ruh-un minhu*), not *the* spirit of God. And since the spirit of God was breathed into Adam (Sur. 15:29), every man therefore was spoken of as having the spirit

66. Parrinder, *Jesus*, 47. His statement is in line with the older commentators such as Tabari and Raghīb.

67. Maulana Muhammad Ali, *The Religion of Islam* (Lahore: The Ahmadiyyah Anjuman Isha'at Islam, 1950), 230.

of God breathed into him (Sur. 32:8-9).⁶⁸ Hence, Jesus Christ was simply a human being like every other man who equally had a spirit from God. Though the Qur'an had a dignified perception of Jesus Christ, it insisted that he was only a human prophet.

The usage of "spirit" (*ruh*) in the Qur'an in connection with Jesus occurs 7 times (Sur. 2:87, 253; 4:171; 5:110; 19:17; 21:91; 66:12).⁶⁹ Interestingly enough, three times the Qur'an mentions the role of the Spirit in supporting Jesus' life. But while the support of the Spirit is mentioned, there are other people who are aided by the Spirit (Sur. 58:22).⁷⁰ To put it differently, the role and function of the Spirit in supporting Jesus and other mankind equally, implied that Jesus the Jew was just a man of flesh and blood.

In this regard, Parrinder makes an observation. On the basis of Sur. 17:85 and 16:2, he points out, there is a close relationship between the Spirit and the Command or Affair (*amr*) of God. Taking this point up, we note that *amr* denotes a personified agency bridging the gap between the transcendent God and the world of change and growth.⁷¹

68. Ali, *Islam*, 230.

69. W. G. Shellabear, 'The Meaning of the word 'Spirit' as used in the Koran', *Muslim World* 4 (1934), 355-56, remarks that at the beginning of Muhammad's prophetic career he believed that the spirit (*ruh*) was something distinct from the angels and yet in some way associated with them...and it is only in the Medina suras that we find the word *ruh* connected with the name of Jesus the Messiah.

70. cf. Parrinder, *Jesus*, 49.

71. A.S. Tritton, *Islam: Belief and Practices* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1962), 17-18.

All in all, when the Qur'an says that Jesus is the Word of God and his Spirit, it affirms his humanity, the historical Jesus. But, at the same time, it rejects Jesus' exclusive sinlessness, his incarnation and his divinity.⁷² In other words, the concept of Jesus as Word of God, from the standpoint of the Qur'an differs from, although it is related to, that of the Johannine Logos. Jesus as Word of God (*kalima*), to a certain extent, is an *echo* of Logos Christology.⁷³

Sur. 3: 59 says: "Lo! the likeness of Jesus with Allah is as the likeness of Adam. He created him of dust, then He said unto him, "Be" (*kun*) and he is." The Qur'an says that the historical Jesus came into existence when God uttered His creative word 'Be' and not as a result of a human act.⁷⁴ Chapter 100/101 says that Jesus 'was born without a seed from Mary the sister⁷⁵ of Moses and Aaron'. Even though some

72. cf. Ali, *Islam*, 229-231; In Hadith and Muslim Tradition Jesus is called the Word and the Spirit. On accounts of Jesus' sayings and deeds in the Hadith and Traditions see Muhammad Ata ur-Rahim, *Jesus Prophet of Islam* (Johore Bahru: Omar Brothers, 1978), 221-229.

73. Henry Lammens sees the term *kalima* (fem. singular) as an echo of the Logos of John's Prologue.

74. The Qur'an, in great detail, gives an account of Jesus' conception and nativity (Sur. 19:16-21; 3:37-47; 19:22-34). For a fuller treatment of the annunciation and the birth of Jesus see Parrinder, *Jesus*, 67-82.

75. There are three lines of explanation:

- a). Mary was a descendant of Moses and Aaron;
- b). It is a surname of Mary; and
- c). It indicates a confusion of the Qur'an in distinguishing Mary and Miriam who was the sister of Moses and Aaron.

Muslims⁷⁶ acknowledged the virgin birth of Jesus, they generally believed that Jesus was created by the creative and all-powerful word of Allah.

In comparing the birth of Jesus and Adam, being both without a father and created by God's decree (cf. Sur. 2:110-111), the Qur'an stressed the true humanity of Jesus.⁷⁷ Parrinder remarks that the acceptance of the virgin birth does not necessarily "give Jesus primacy over all other prophets,"⁷⁸ nor imply acceptance of his divinity.

Jesus was called servant (*abd* - Sur. 4:171; 19:30) and prophet (*nabi*), as mentioned in chapter 100/101, in the Qur'an. Both these titles asserted the humanity of the historical Jesus. The Qur'an therefore is in line with Christian tradition only as far as the humanity of Jesus is concerned.

Chapter 100/101 goes on to speak on the death and crucifixion of Jesus. Chapter 100/101 writes that Jesus "was not crucified nor did he die; for God took him up to himself into heaven because he loved him" (765B). Even though the natural death⁷⁹ of

76. The old Muslim theologians, like, Baidawi, accept the virgin birth of Jesus. But modern generations, for example, Muhammad Ali, deny Jesus' virgin birth. cf. Parrinder, *Jesus*, 69-71.

77. cf. Parrinder, *Jesus*, 70-81.

78. Parrinder, *Jesus*, 70.

79. There are 4 references in the Qur'an which mention the natural death of Jesus, namely, Sur. 3:48; 5:19, 117; 19:34. For a critical discussion of the death of Jesus see Parrinder, *Jesus*, 105-121. Parrinder argues that Sur. 4:155-159 refers to a real death and a complete self-

Jesus Christ was mentioned in the Qur'an, yet the crucifixion of Jesus was rejected. In Muslim minds, the idea of a great prophet like Jesus who died shamefully on the cross is debasing Allah's messenger, and thus dishonouring Allah. For the Christians, the death of Jesus on the cross is a redemptive act of atonement. On the cross, Jesus took upon himself God's wrath upon the wickedness of all humanity. Not only the idea of crucifixion was rejected but the idea of personal moral sins was alien in the Qur'an. Since the Muslims claimed that all human acts both good and evil have emanated from the immutable and absolute decree of Allah, hence, to believe that Jesus the Jew died ignominiously on the cross for the sins of humankind was an impossibility for them.⁸⁰ Consequently, Jesus' crucifixion and the ensuing interpretation of Jesus' death as atonement in Muslim understanding were extraneous in Islamic theological construct (cf. Sur. 6:164).

The oft-quoted Quranic verses on this subject read:

And because of their disbelief and their speaking against Mary a tremendous calumny; And because of their saying: We slew the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, Allah's messenger – They slew him not nor crucified, but it appeared so unto

surrender of Jesus. Thus he rejects the idea of substitution and a post-millennial death of Jesus i.e. he did die at some future time.

80. See for example Mahmood Joenoes, *Tafsir Qur'an Karim* (Singapura: MPH, 1968), 94-95. He says that to believe Jesus died for the sins of man is unacceptable to the right minded because according to the justice laws of God, even to human-made laws, whoever is found guilty of committing sin, he alone deserves punishment, and not other innocent people.

them; and lo! Those who disagree concerning it are in doubt thereof; they have no knowledge thereof save pursuit of a conjecture; they slew him not for certain. But Allah took him up unto Himself. Allah was ever Mighty, Wise. (Sur. 4:156-158).⁸¹

This passage is usually interpreted that Jesus did not die on the cross since God rescued him by substituting him with someone else.⁸² Though the idea of substitution had been debated, many Islamic commentators had insisted that Jesus was not crucified but that someone else had died in his place. Parrinder observes that some of the earlier Muslim historians were reluctant to make assertions about what happened at the cross, in contrast to the later writers who spoke freely of a substitute being crucified.⁸³ Mahmood Joenoes

81. Michael G. Fonner, 'Jesus' Death by Crucifixion in the Qur'an: An Issue for interpretation and Muslim-Christian Relations', in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 29 (1992): 432-450. Fonner has written a fresh interpretation of Sur. 4:155. He asserts that the meaning of verse 155 is best understood not as a statement of historical fact about Jesus but, rather, as a rebuke of the Jews, since its context is a harsh rebuke and criticism of the Jews. Fonner concludes that Jesus did die by crucifixion and that it appeared on the surface that the Jews had done it; in fact, however, God was the divine actor behind the cross.

82. Concerning Sur. 4:156-158, Parrinder, *Jesus*, 112, comments that it must be made quite plain that the Qur'an itself does not say that Jesus suffered in a false body (in the Docetic fashion) nor does it say that a substitute was made so that somebody else suffered in his place. Any later addition to this is unjustifiable and a perversion of the text. All that Sur. 4:157 says is 'but appeared so unto them', is translatable either 'he was counterfeited for them', or, better, 'it appeared to them as such'. In short, the Qur'an does not say that Jesus suffered in a false body or another person died in his place (substitutionism).

83. Parrinder, *Jesus*, 118.

asserts, for example, that it was not Jesus who was crucified on the cross but Jahuza (Judas?) who looked like Jesus.⁸⁴

Muhammad Khan and Mahmoed Joenoes, *inter alia*, translate Sur. 4:158: 'Allah exalted him (Jesus) to Himself'. Joenoes⁸⁵ interprets it to mean Allah exalted him to His glorious place or His favourite place (my translation). The overriding motive behind the rejection of Jesus' crucifixion is the impossibility of accepting and comprehending Jesus' divinity, as a logical consequence of the *Tawhid*. For a Muslim who holds and believes the oneness of God (*tawhid*) it is impossible to confess Jesus as God. The historical Jesus was simply a man, being called a Word and Spirit of Allah. Hence, he is not to be regarded as Logos made flesh.

Returning to the main charge of the Muslims that Christians are polytheists by confessing Jesus as God, John of Damascus in replying to this accusation writes:

...this is what the prophets and the Scripture have handed down to us; and you, as you claim, accept the prophets. If, therefore, we wrongly say that Christ is the Son of God they also were wrong, who taught and handed it down to us so...Again we respond to them: 'Since you say that Christ is the Word and Spirit of God, how do you scold us as *Associators*? For the Word and the Spirit is inseparable each from the one in whom this has the origin; if, therefore, the Word is in God, then God, according to you, is without word and without spirit. Thus, trying to avoid making associates to God you have mutilated Him. For it would be better if you

84. Joenoes, *Qur'an Karim*, 94.

85. Joenoes, *Qur'an Karim*, 94.

were saying that he has an associate than to mutilate him and introduce him as if he were a stone, or wood, or any of the inanimate objects. Therefore, by accusing us falsely, you call us *Associators*; we, however, call you *Mutilators* (Coptas) of God'. (768C-D)

John of Damascus put forward two lines of argument. First, he showed that Christians' confession of Jesus' divinity was a continuation of what the prophets - whom the Muslims equally accepted as their authority - have proclaimed. Secondly, by ascribing titles to Christ, John of Damascus demonstrated that the Muslims, in accusing the Christians as polytheists, were actually making a fatal error by 'mutilating or dividing Allah'.

It becomes clear that chapter 100/101 describes the essential Qur'anic Christology. The Qur'an affirms his true humanity and calls him a prophet, and a servant, but rejects his divinity though it calls him 'Word of God and his Spirit'. The text further records Jesus' self-confession when he was exalted to God in heaven that he was not 'son of God and God'. Humankind had erroneously proclaimed Jesus as God. But we have to bear in mind that, Julius Basetti-Sani argues, the insistence with which the Qur'an emphasizes the human aspect of Christ is not intended - as Muslim commentators and Christian anti-Muslim apologists pretend - to exclude the divinity of Jesus.⁸⁶

86. Julius Basetti-Sani, 'For a Dialogue Between Christian and Muslims', *Muslim World* LVII (1967), 191.

The expressions “when the Christian was asked by the Saracene” (1336) and “if you will be asked by a Sarac” (1341C) in the *Disputatio*, indicate that debates between Muslims and Christians had already taken place. In the *Disputatio*, the burning question of the debate, as in the chapter 100/101, concerning Jesus Christ is supplemented. Sahas perceptively points out that the emphasis of the discussion was centered not on the person, but rather on the nature of Christ who is the “Word of God” (logon Theou).⁸⁷

John of Damascus writes: ‘What do you say that Christ is? Say to him [the Muslim]: Word of God’ (1341C). It is significant to note that the expression Word of God (logon Theou) was widely used by the Christians in referring to Christ, while the Muslim *umma* used the expression in referring to the Qur’an.⁸⁸ This expression could be used as the point of contact in the debate and serve, most likely, as an introduction to Johannine Christology. In the debate the Christian could reply by asking the Muslim a similar question: ‘What is Christ called in the Qur’an?’. To this question, the Muslim as expected could only answer by saying: ‘In my Scripture Christ is called Spirit and Word of God.’(1341C)

John of Damascus continued to pressurize the Muslim in the debate by asking:

87. Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 113 n 1. The Greek text indicates clearly this distinction by using the interrogative pronoun in the neutral gender ‘What do you say that Christ is’ (Ti legeis einai ton Christon;) instead of the masculine ‘whom do you say that Christ is?’

88. Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 113.

And then you again tell him [the Muslim], 'In your Scripture are the Spirit of God and the Word said to be uncreated or created?' And if he tells you that they are created, say to him: 'And who created the Spirit and the Word of God?' And if, compelled by surprise, he tells you that God created them, say to him: 'Here, if I had said this to you, you would have told me that 'You have concealed your testimony and from now on you will not be credible no matter what you say.' However, I will ask you also this, Before God created the Word and the Spirit did he have neither Spirit nor Word?' (1340D)

Evidently, John of Damascus was particularly concerned with the notion amongst the Muslims that the Word of God was not eternal when it referred to Jesus. The Muslims regarded the Qur'an as the Word of God and therefore it is eternal and uncreated.

The Qur'an says that Christ is 'Spirit and Word of God'. When Muslims were asked whether 'Spirit and Word of God' was created or uncreated, they were placed in a difficult position in the debate. If they answered they were created, they were actually denying the basic foundation of Islam. That is to say, they rejected the eternity and uncreatedness of the Qur'an. On the other hand, if they replied that they were uncreated, then they were trapped for being heretics.

Nevertheless, Christians were also in a difficult position when they were being asked by the Muslim whether the Words of God (logia tou Theou) were created or uncreated. The Muslim asked this question in order to prove that Jesus Christ was created by God. If the Christians answered that the Logos was uncreated then the

words of God were equally eternal and uncreated. In this regard, John of Damascus in the *Disputatio* carefully differentiated between the Word of God and the words of God. He notes:

And if you answer ‘They are uncreated’ he tells you that, ‘Here, all these that are words of God, although they are uncreated, yet they are not Gods. Behold you confessed that Christ, although he is the Word of God, he is not God.’ For this reason let not the Christian say either ‘created’ or ‘uncreated’ (but), ‘I confess that there is only one hypostatic Word of God, who is uncreated, as you also confessed; on the other hand my Scripture (Graphên), as a whole, I call not ‘words’ (logia) but ‘utterances of God’ (rhêmata Theou) (1344A).

The accuracy of John of Damascus’ knowledge of the emergence of Islamic heretics during his days is clearly reflected in the text. The expression “heretics” (1341D) is apparently an allusion to the Jahmites and to the early Mutazilites who suffered heavy persecutions during the Umayyad period.⁸⁹ The Muslim sects Jahmites and Mu’tazilites strongly opposed the uncreatedness and eternity of the Qur’an both as God’s word and man’s utterances. The distinction of the Qur’an as God’s speech and man’s words, in early orthodox Islam is not clearly stated. It is significant, as Sahas notes, that the later orthodox Muslims felt such distinction necessary in order to reaffirm the eternity and uncreatedness of the Qur’an. Hence, the Qur’an was proclaimed to be uncreated and eternal, but

89. Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 114.

through its pronouncement by men, created.⁹⁰ Thus we have in Orthodox Islam the doctrine of the eternal uncreated Qur'an practically taking the place of the eternal uncreated Logos.⁹¹

In answering to the created or uncreatedness of the Word of God, the Christians replied by confessing one hypostatic nature of the eternal Logos and the createdness of Scriptures. The distinction made by John of Damascus evidently showed the pre-existence of the Logos and the historical and culturally bound nature of the Scriptures.

In closer observation, the underlying issue in such dialogue is implicitly concerning the authority of the Qur'an. In the portion of the *Disputatio* quoted above, John of Damascus, in line with the Jahmites and the Mu'tazilites, said subtly that the Qur'an is not eternal and uncreated. Elsewhere, John of Damascus viewed the Qur'an as a book "worthy only of laughter" (765A, C; 772D). That is to say, the authority of the Qur'an as Holy Scripture is being questioned or nearly rejected. Thus, from the Christian point of view, the basic and essential hindrance to seeking dialogue with Muslims is regarding the authority of the Qur'an. Nevertheless it does not necessarily mean that dialogue is impossible.

At this point, before we summarize by integrating what has been discussed, we note the reactions of Muslims as a result of the dialogue. John of Damascus records the reactions of the Muslims to the challenge of the Christians in the dialogue:

90. Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 116-117.

91. Bell, *Origin*, 210-211.

And we [Christians] ask: 'And which is the one who gives witness, that God has given to him the scriptures? And which of the prophets foretold that such a prophet would arise?' And *because they are surprised and at a loss* (we tell them) that Moses received the Law by the Mount Sinai... (emphasis mine) (765C).

Again,

When again we ask them, 'How is it that, although in your scripture he commanded not to do anything or receive anything without witnesses, you did not ask him 'You first prove with witnesses that you are a prophet and that you came from God, and which scripture testifies about you'', *they remain silent because of shame* (italics mine) (768A).

These were the responses the Muslims showed when Christians asked them concerning the prophethood of Muhammad. Closely related to these questions were the authority of the Qur'an as the word of God. When the Christians were charged as 'associators ...and idolators because we venerate the cross' (768C-D), John of Damascus replied by pointing to the traditions and also by questioning the attitude of Muslims in venerating the Ka'bah. Various answers had been given by the Muslims to justify the sacredness of the Ka'bah. But according to John of Damascus all the answers were actually reflecting the inaccuracy of the Qur'an (769A) and thus the authority of the Qur'an was at stake. The dialogue abruptly ends because the Muslims, according to John of Damascus, 'are embarrassed' (769A).

In the *Disputatio*, the discussion of the createdness or uncreatedness of the Word of God brings about a terrifying effect on the side of the Muslims. John of Damascus picturesquely describes how the Muslim 'will flee from you not having anything to answer...and if you want to report him to the other Saracenes he will be very much afraid of you' (1341D).

It is interesting to note that John of Damascus closes his *Disputatio* with the words: And the Saracene who was very much amazed and surprised, and having nothing to reply to the Christian, departed without challenging him anymore (1348B).

What we have been able to say up to this point, with some certainty, concerning the reactions and responses of the Muslims, is this: John of Damascus had been actively engaged in the Christian-Muslim debate even before he entered the monastery of St. Sabas. From his experience in the debate he could vividly record the responses of the Muslims. It is far from true that John of Damascus had a motive to trenchantly criticize the Muslims and thus incite and inflame a spirit of hatred and hostility.⁹² By showing the unauthoritative nature of the Qur'an and the acceptance of Christ's humanity in Islamic theology, John of Damascus not only showed his deep knowledge of the Qur'an, he was also able to establish the point of contact with the Muslims. In doing so he encouraged the Christians

92. This is buttressed by the fact that John of Damascus is called by the Iconoclast Synod as 'Saracen minded'. See Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 3-13.

to bravely and prudently engage in debate with the Muslim and thus to bring him, if possible, to Christ. In writing the *Haeresibus* and the *Disputatio*, John of Damascus also had an evangelistic purpose in mind. This statement is substantiated by the fact he was emphasizing the divinity of Christ. Schaff remarks that the emphasis on divinity is not only in these two works but in his overall theological framework.⁹³ It is not surprising therefore that John of Damascus' Christology is often misinterpreted. His Christology is branded as a crypto-Monophysitism. That is to say, the hypostatic union modifies the human nature of Jesus so that He would no longer be *fully man* (italics mine).⁹⁴ It is crucial to recognize that in the Iconoclastic controversy John of Damascus obviously affirms Jesus' humanity. In order to justify his position regarding the possibility of painting an image of Christ against iconoclasts who deny Jesus' humanity, John of Damascus insists upon His human characteristics. This means that Jesus was human like all of us and can be represented in an image.⁹⁵ Thus, John of Damascus maintains a balanced view of the divinity and humanity of Jesus in line with the Chalcedonian Christology.⁹⁶ However for the sake of debate with the Muslims he has quite clearly

93. Schaff, *History IV*, 633.

94. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 156-57.

95. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 158.

96. This is buttressed by the fact that John of Damascus states: our Lord Jesus Christ, we confess that there are two natures, one divine and one human, joined together with one another and united in subsistence, so that one compound subsistence is formed out of two natures: but we hold that the two natures are still preserved, ...Christ, indeed, is one, perfect both in divinity and in humanity. (*Exposition*, III. V).

stressed the divinity of Christ.⁹⁷ This however does not necessarily mean that his Christology is crypto-Monophysitism. Only when one takes into account John of Damascus' *Sitz im Leben* can he better understand John's Christology. It should now be evident that John of Damascus views the Qur'anic Christology which emphasizes Christ's humanity as inadequate, and thus it needs to be supplemented with Johannine Christology which emphasizes Christ's divinity.

Summary

During the Umayyad Caliphate Christians in general were not physically persecuted, but were rather treated as a 'protected community'. It was natural for people in this kind of situation where they were discriminated against, to find their own survival either by holding strongly to or compromising their religion, or emigrating to the Byzantine territory. On the other hand, the Christians were divided theologically and were also under attack from various heretical teachings. Islam, inter alia, was a menace to the Churches in Syria. The steady conversion of Christians to Islam due to the economic advantage created a serious problem in the church. To put it succinctly, the church in Syro-Palestine was at risk and in a difficult position to grow spiritually and expand numerically and geographically.

97. It is interesting to note, as Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 156, points out, that Byzantine Christology are reluctant to investigate Jesus' human nature.

In writing the *De Haeresibus* and the *Disputatio* John of Damascus was primarily driven by a deep anxiety that the majority of the Christians were not aware of the heretical nature of Islam. Hence when confronted with Muslims, as naturally often took place in the community life, they were not prepared to hold a dialogue.

From the Christian point of view, the basic problem, during the Christian encounter with the Muslims in the debate, concerned the authority of the Qur'an and the prophethood of Muhammad. But from the Islamic perspective, the Christians were polytheists and idolatrous. Christians were polytheists because they confessed Jesus the Jew of Nazareth as God and idolatrous because they venerated the cross. Though the humanity of Jesus was acknowledged, the divinity, the incarnation and the atonement were rejected in the Islamic theological doctrine.

In this regard John of Damascus eloquently pointed out that Logos Christology can be a "starting point" in building a common ground to seek dialogue with the Muslims. In his view of the debate, Qur'anic Christology was not to be criticized or even be revised. Instead of being trenchantly critical, Christians should admirably add to or supplement the Qur'anic Christology with Johannine Christology. It did not necessarily mean however that Christians should accept fully the authority of the Qur'an. In the dialogue with the Muslims, the Christians should provide what was lacking in the Qur'anic Christology. There are some truths in the Qur'an. In this case, Qur'anic Christology, defective and ill-defined as it is, should be

supplemented with Johannine Christology. The closer observation of Qur'anic Christology requires that it should be complemented with the Johannine Christology. Qur'anic Christology which stresses Jesus' humanity and partially acknowledges 'what He does' (function), remains deficient and incomplete; hence it needs to be restored and amended with Johannine Christology so that a true Christian-Muslim dialogue can take place. This is possible due to the person (ontic)-function characteristic of the Johannine Christology.⁹⁸ The Johannine Christology shows more completely both the nature of Jesus person as human-divine and the deeds He does (function) related to His identity (ontological). This is the *sine qua non* of a true Muslim-Christian dialogue.

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98. Though functional and ontological Christology are not opposite in the Fourth Gospel, scholars have generally recognized the prominence of the divinity of Jesus in the Johannine Christology. E. Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1968), held that John's Christology is presented in the form of naïve docetism. He denied the reality of Jesus' humanity as described in the Fourth Gospel. John pictures, Käsemann believes, that Jesus was not a real human being but rather he appeared to be one. For a criticism of Käsemann's theory see M.M. Thompson, *The Humanity of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).

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