A Christian theologian at the court of the Caliph: some cross-cultural reflections

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There are various ways of comparing cultures and exploring their interaction, all of them raising theoretical questions of such density that there is a danger of never passing beyond issues of methodology. One can attempt to avoid this by jumping *in medias res* and dealing with the theoretical issues as they are encountered. 'A Christian theologian at the court of the Caliph': this points to a clash of cultures, defined in perhaps the simplest form; that is, in terms of religion. By investigating this situation, deeper and broader questions will emerge.

First, the Christian theologian. For the first part of his life he was known as Mansur ibn Sarjun, for the latter part of his life as Joannes, perhaps Abba Joannes – or Abba John, we would say – as he was a monk.[1] The different forms of the two names highlight the 'cross-cultural' theme: the first is Arabic, the second Greek. He is usually known nowadays as John (or St John) Damascene, that is, of Damascus, where he was born and spent the first part of his life. The caliph in question is less certain. We do not know when John/Mansur was born. He may have been a child in the court of the first of the Umayyad caliphs, Mu'awiya, who reigned from A.D. 661-680 (or as he would have put it from A.H. 41-60), and there is a legend that he was a playmate of one of the sons of 'Abd al-Malik (A.D. 685-705).[2] He was almost certainly an official in the court of Walid, caliph from A.D. 705-15, and may have served under his successor, Sulayman, who reigned for two years, or even under Umar II (A.D. 717-20).

But all that will be less than illuminating without some background understanding of the history of the Middle East in the seventh century A.D.. The seventh century was a watershed for the history of the Middle East – and in fact for the history of Europe and Western Asia as far as northern India. In the course of this century two landmarks, clearly in place in the earliest history of the Eastern Mediterranean world we possess – that of Herodotus, were swept away. The

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first landmark was the basic unit of society, the old city state: a city with its public spaces and public life that, with its agricultural hinterland, formed a fairly self-sufficient economic unit. This was eroded over a period of time that critically includes the seventh century. I shall not, however, have very much to say about that.[3] The other landmark was the – admittedly flexible – frontier that separated the Eastern Mediterranean world (eventually the Mediterranean empire known as the Roman Empire) from the Persian Empire, that ran – ideally, from the Greek or Roman point of view – along the upper Tigris valley and the lower valley of the Euphrates. This was ultimately swept away and replaced by a frontier that consisted of the Mediterranean itself, and the Taurus and Anti-Taurus mountains that separate Asia Minor – now Western Turkey – from the rest of Asia. The ripples of that change of configuration spread throughout Europe and across Asia at least as far as India, but the epicentre, so to speak, was located in the Middle East – the area now covered by Syria, the Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, Iraq and Saudi Arabia.[4] My story takes place in two cities right at the heart of this area: Damascus, where Mansur-John was born, and Jerusalem, where he died.

At the beginning of the seventh century, the two areas separated by the historic boundary of the Tigris-Euphrates were the Byzantine Empire – or the Roman Empire, as its inhabitants called it – with its capital in Constantinople, now Istanbul, and the Sasanid Persian Empire with its capital in Ctesiphon, not far from modern Baghdad. Relations between these empires had always been tense, raiding across the frontier was endemic and the frontier was, as already stated, flexible. With the murder of the Byzantine Emperor Maurice in 602, the Persian Shah, Chosroes, who at one time had been sheltered by Maurice, took the opportunity provided by the instability of the neighbouring empire to invade it. In the course of the second decade of the seventh century, most of what we think of as the Middle East was conquered by the Persian army. Jerusalem itself fell in 617, a catastrophe for the Christians who had come to regard it as their holy city, the site of the Holy Places, and a centre for pilgrimage for Christians from the whole of the Mediterranean world. Not only did Jerusalem fall, but the relic of the true Cross, allegedly discovered almost three hundred years earlier by Helena, the mother of Constantine, the first Christian Roman Emperor, was seized and taken back to Ctesiphon. For some years the Middle East was ruled as part of the Persian Empire. In 610, however, the Byzantine Empire began to regain stability with the accession of the Emperor Heraclius. Eventually he invaded the Persian Empire from the north, reaching Ctesiphon in 627 and recovering the relic of the true

Cross: Chosroes was deposed by his son and murdered. Heraclius' recovery of the true Cross was to be long remembered: it features prominently in the legend for the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross in the *Golden Legend* of Jacobus de Voragine and at the end of the fifteenth century Piero della Francesca depicted Heraclius' victory in a magnificent fresco next to the high altar in the Church of San Francesco at Arezzo. By 630 the Byzantine Empire was back where it had been at the beginning of the seventh century with a much weakened neighbouring Persian Empire in the East.

Heraclius had taken Persia by surprise by invading from the north; almost immediately afterwards both the Byzantine and the Persian Empires were taken by surprise by an invasion from the south, from the deserts of Arabia. What lay behind this invasion from the south is shrouded in mystery.[5] The conventional story is that many of the Beduin tribes of the Arabian desert had found a militant unity under the new religion of Islam, preached by Muhammad, who died in 632. Be that as it may, one by one the cities of the Middle East fell to the Arab armies. Damascus fell in 635, Jerusalem in 638; the Persian Empire crumbled in the 640s; Alexandria was taken in 642, and despite several attempts the Byzantines were never able to regain it. In a very few years Syria ceased to be a frontier province of the Byzantine Empire and became the hub of an Arab empire, stretching from north Africa to the Iranian plateau. Under the Umayyad caliphate (661-750), Damascus became the capital of this Empire.

One reason why the Arab conquest made such rapid progress was that it had limited objectives: the Arabs did not attempt any profound cultural change in the provinces they conquered; they simply established military control, and used the already existing civilian structures of government. In particular, the fiscal administration remained in place, collecting the taxes, including the new poll tax imposed on all non-Muslim subjects, for the new military masters. Mansur came from a family that for generations had held high position in the fiscal administration of Syria. His grandfather seems to have been a veritable Vicar of Bray, retaining his position in charge of the fiscal administration throughout the vicissitudes of the seventh century that I have just outlined. Mansur ibn Sarjun (the Arab name he presumably adopted towards the end of his life was the same as his grandson's) had served under the Byzantine emperors at the beginning of the century; in the Persian period from 612 to 628 he served the Persian shah; when Heraclius re-established Byzantine control in 628 he managed to hang on to his job, though he was required to pay a heavy indemnity; and according to some

accounts, he not only survived the Arab conquest of 635 but was himself responsible for negotiating the surrender of the city to the Arabs, thus preserving it from pillage. Mansur ibn Sarjun was succeeded by his son, Sarjun ibn Mansur, so that John – let us call him – was born the son of a high official of the Umayyad court in Damascus. Despite the name by which we know this family, whatever race they may have belonged to (they may have been Semitic),[6] they belonged to the Hellenized élite of Damascus,[7] not to the common people of the region. They spoke Greek, not Syriac, though as officials of the Umayyad court they presumably spoke Arabic as well. John at any rate received a proper Hellenistic education and had a good command, not just of spoken Greek, but of the rather purer Greek the literate classes used for 'literature'. His tutor was a Greek monk called Cosmas, who wrote quite a bit of religious poetry that has survived to this day in the liturgical texts of the Greek Orthodox Church.

There is a legend that, as a boy, John had as one of his play-fellows the future caliph Yazid II (720-24) and that they had lessons together.[8] Whether that is so or not, it seems certain that John was raised as a Christian, even though some of the Arabic sources seem to give the impression that his father, and even his grandfather, had converted to Islam.[9] These sources are later, when conversion to Islam was becoming more common, and so perhaps they are simply reading back what they regarded as customary; the early Umayyads seem not to have encouraged the conversion of non-Arabs. But anyway it is difficult to believe that John was born into a Muslim household, since conversion to Christianity from Islam – and it is certain John ended his life as a Christian – was regarded as apostasy and attracted the death penalty. Of the rest of John's life in Damascus we know nothing, except that he, like his father and grandfather, rose to a high position in the civil service. Some time, probably shortly before 720, John left the civil service in Damascus and became a monk at the famous monastery of Mar Saba (the Great Lavra) outside Jerusalem – the monastery is still there, functioning as a monastery, the longest-surviving Christian monastic community. There he died, certainly before 754 and almost certainly after 743.[10] Of his life in the monastery we know practically nothing: at some stage it seems he was ordained priest, but that is all.[11]

However, he wrote a great deal, and much of it has survived. This tells us little about him as a person (the Byzantines did not often write about themselves, not at any rate until much later), but they tell us much about the concerns of the Christian community to which he belonged. There is, however, one group of his

writings about which I shall say little, but which I ought to mention here, as it refracts some light on, if not John as a person, at least on John as a Christian and a monk. This comprises his liturgical compositions, which have not been properly edited, but are scattered throughout the service books of the Orthodox Church. Several very fine prayers – still used today – are ascribed to John,[12] and some of the poetry used in the services of the Byzantine Church – including the Easter canon, sung just after midnight in the celebration of Orthodox Easter.[13] This tells us nothing directly about John as a person, but it points to something deeper than what might be suggested by the image of a civil servant turned theologian.

The largest single group of John's writings is polemical – mainly against other Christian groups who maintained doctrines he regarded as heretical. John thought it important what one thought or believed: there was correct belief and error, and error was to be avoided. One of his treatises is, in fact, a list of heresies, among which he includes the heresy of the γνωσιμάχοι – fighters against knowledge – who, he says, 'resist any knowledge of Christianity, holding it to be excessive to search out any knowledge from the holy Scriptures, since God seeks nothing else from a good Christian than good works' (*On Heresies* 88).

It is perhaps worth exploring this matter of orthodoxy and heresy a little further. A map of the Middle East could serve a number of purposes, and one of them would be to show the geographical origins of the three great monotheistic religions. It includes Egypt and the Sinai peninsula: the crossing of the Red Sea and the giving of the Law, the Torah, to Moses on Mount Sinai are the defining events of Judaism. It also includes Jerusalem, the holy city of the Jews, the site of the Temple. It includes Galilee, the site of Jesus' preaching; Jerusalem, where he was crucified and, Christians believe, rose from the dead; and Bethlehem, where he was born. It includes, too, the Arabian peninsula, with the city of Mecca, the holiest city of the Muslims, and Medina, where Muhammad fled in 622: an event that marks the beginning of the Muslim era. In John's time, all these religions jostled in the Middle East: they all made claims. Some they held in common: they all believed in one God, for instance. Some were incompatible: Christians claimed to supersede Judaism, and Muslims to supersede both Christianity and Judaism. For Christians, and particularly for Christians of John's colour, there was a further factor. Christians in the Middle East disagreed amongst themselves, and these differences stemmed from the attempts in the fifth century to define the orthodoxy of the Imperial Church. At the Council of Ephesus (431)

Nestorianism was condemned with its alleged tendency to separate the humanity of Christ from his divinity: many of those who could not accept anti-Nestorian imperial orthodoxy found a haven over the frontier in Persia. At the Council of Chalcedon (451) an opposite tendency was condemned, called Eutychianism, that so stressed the unity of Christ as to obscure the human nature that Christ shares with the rest of humanity. This caused longer-lasting problems for the Roman Empire. Very many Christians, especially in Syria and Egypt, refused to accept the decisions of Chalcedon: they did not go away, as had most of the Nestorians, but remained in the Empire as a potential source of (sometimes violent) resistance to the religious policies of the Emperor. Christian orthodoxy had come to have political, as well as religious significance. Greek-speaking Christians like John were likely to uphold the form of Christianity that had been defined by the Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon and others, earlier and later, held in and around the capital, Constantinople, by the Emperor and attended by bishops, in principle from the whole of the Mediterranean world, but often in practice largely from Asia Minor and the Balkan peninsula. Let us call them 'Byzantine Christians'; that is, Christians who accepted the form of Christianity defined at the capital, which had been called Byzantium before it had acquired the name of 'Constantine's City'. Many Syrian Christians believed as the Byzantines did, but many did not: the largest group who disagreed were called (and sometimes called themselves) 'Jacobites', after a certain Jacob Baradaeus (Burd'ono) who in the sixth century had set up a separate episcopal hierarchy for those Christians who refused to accept the Christological Definition of the Council of Chalcedon. So long as Syria and Palestine were provinces of the Byzantine Empire, Byzantine Christians were in the ascendant: they had the support of the imperial structures, while the Jacobites were discriminated against and often persecuted. Being in the ascendant, Byzantine Christians could dismiss the Jacobites without needing to take them very seriously.

The seventh century saw an enormous change: Byzantine Christians, Jacobites, and Jews too, as well as other religious groups, some Christian, others not, like the Samaritans and the Manichees, competed on more or less equal terms. It was the Muslims now who were in power. This seems to me to be the reason why the latter half of the seventh century sees an enormous efflorescence of polemical literature: 'dialogues' or disputations between 'Orthodox and Monophysite' (written by Byzantines), between 'Orthodox and Nestorian' (written by Jacobites), or, more significantly, between 'Christian and Jew', and eventually 'Christian and

Muslim'. (As we shall discover later, it is probable that the first example of a 'dialogue' between Christian and Muslim was by John himself.) The new situation seems to have created a crucible, as it were, in which each group refined what it really stood for. It was no longer good enough to misrepresent or simply outsmart one's opponent, one had to try and convince him (or convince others who were inclined to take his views seriously). This led to renewed interest in logic and dialectic: to be convincing, arguments need to be valid.[14] The same situation had already led, though I cannot pursue that here, to a more sober style of hagiography: the recorded deeds of the saints needed to be credible to those not inclined to believe them, not just to those who wanted them to be true.[15] John of Damascus is heir to all that, and – I think – in both phases of his life.[16] As we have seen, in Damascus he belonged to the Hellenistic élite of the city, a group that was most likely to embrace 'Byzantine Christianity'. When he moved to Jerusalem, he moved to a part of the Middle East where Byzantine Christians were also strong. The reason is, I think, not far to seek. Jerusalem was a centre of pilgrimage for Christians from throughout the Mediterranean world, and most Christians throughout that world were 'Byzantine'. From the time of Constantine onwards, the Holy Places were objects of imperial largesse, and this largesse would naturally be directed to those who supported the Christianity of the Emperor. So, for both these reasons, in a area of mixed allegiance, Jerusalem would be a magnet for 'Byzantine Christians'.[17]

John of Damascus' most well-known work he called the 'Fount of Knowledge'. This is in three parts: *Philosophical Chapters*, *On Heresies*, and finally an *Exposition of the Faith.*[18] It is clear that this is a crystallization of the work of refining that had taken place in the latter half of the seventh century. John begins by setting out his tools: the *Philosophical Chapters* are a mixture of forms of argument, and definition of terms; it draws on handbooks of Neoplatonic logic, and for its definition of theological terms distils the reflections of those theologians he regarded as orthodox.[19] The second part contains brief accounts of one hundred heresies: it marks out the ground that lies beyond the true faith. The third part is most interesting and summarizes what for John were the key points of Christian doctrine in one hundred chapters. (For John, as for many of his contemporaries, Christian and others, the number 100 was a symbol of perfection.) If one looks carefully at all this, one discovers that very little of it is at all original: indeed, very little of it is expressed in John's own words. It is, in fact, a work of consummate *plagiarism*: i.e. a tissue – better, perhaps, a mosaic – of

(largely) unacknowledged quotations from other people. Why? Partly it is because John belonged to a culture that did not at all prize originality: if something was really new, then that was tantamount to saying that it was wrong. It has long been recognized that the Byzantines prized faithfulness to the past above any kind of originality.[20] Human history was not thought to be a history of achievement and progress, but of forgetfulness and decline: the most ancient traditions preserved the truth most faithfully. As Christianity made itself at home in the Roman Empire, it accommodated itself to this conviction. Even though in the first century it had come into the world as something new, it made its own the long and venerable history of the Jews and cast its Gospel as a recovery of a pristine wisdom that had been obscured by later myths and fables. Nevertheless there was a tension in Christianity as it looked back to the unique event of the Incarnation, a tension found in John's *Exposition of the Faith*, when he calls the Incarnation τὸ πάντων καινῶν καινότατον, τὸ μόνον καινὸν ὑπὸ τὸν ἥλιον ('the newest of all new things, the only new thing under the sun': *Exposition of the Faith* 45). But that is not the whole story. The religious situation of the latter part of the seventh century certainly encouraged refinement, but a refinement that was also conservation. Byzantine Christians defended the Christianity they had known when they were swept away from the mainland of the Empire: by the end of the century they knew why it all mattered, and could defend it.

This plagiarizing of the past has different aspects, and in this connection it is instructive to compare John with Maximus the Confessor, the seventh-century monk and theologian (580-662), who represents an earlier stage in the refinement of the Christian dogmatic tradition. Maximus, like John, was deeply learned in the writings of those who had come to be called the 'Fathers', the Christian theologians whose writings had acquired an authority, second only to that of the Bible, in determining the lineaments of Christian orthodoxy. But Maximus uses these authorities in a rather different way from John: he weaves quotations from the Fathers into his own exposition of points of doctrine; sometimes he quotes quite long extracts (usually prefacing such a quotation by 'they [or the saints] say'), which, however, often turn out to be fairly free quotations, subordinated to the movement of Maximus' own argument; occasionally Maximus simply invents quotations, to give an air of ancient authority to ideas that he is convinced are true (and which therefore must have ancient authority).[21] In contrast, John is quite straightforward, even scholarly. Even where he is following Maximus in his choice of authorities (as he often does, especially when he is drawing on

Nemesius, the fourth-century bishop of Emesa, for material on human psychology and providence),[22] he seems to have gone back to quote directly from the sources. What we call plagiarism is rather the device used by Byzantine theologians to signal and express their sense of belonging to a tradition, something indicated by a closing remark to the first chapter of John's *Exposition* about 'not moving ancient landmarks or transgressing the divine tradition' (itself an echo of Proverbs 22. 28). Both John and Maximus use plagiarism, but they represent different aspects of this appropriation of the wisdom of the past. Maximus exploits his authorities with the supreme confidence of a virtuoso: he is sometimes wayward, often inaccurate, but frequently exhilarating. John, however, appropriates the past with the scrupulous care of a scholar. Theologians find Maximus much more exciting, but John belongs to a tradition of scholarship that seeks not simply to exploit traditional wisdom, but also to refine, verify and preserve.[23] Already in the sixth century, theologians such as Leontius of Byzantium had exposed forgeries that allowed writings from the hand (or the school) of the fourth-century heretic, Apollinaris, to pass as works of the great defender of orthodoxy, St Athanasius of Alexandria. This sifting of tradition continued into the seventh and eighth centuries: the Sixth Ecumenical Council, held in Constantinople in 680-1, has been called by one modern authority 'the council of antiquarians and palaeographers';[24] similar care was taken over citations from the Fathers at the Seventh Ecumenical Council in 787.[25] It is this tradition that John belongs to, and he is a distinguished representative of it. Not only does he take care over his (usually unacknowledged) citations from his authorities in the *Exposition of the Faith*, but in his huge collection of authorities, known as the *Sacra Parallela*, which only survives in fragmentary form,[26] he displays an interest in the theological ideas of the Fathers, and a breadth of learning, unparalleled in late antiquity.

Let us turn to an example of the way in which the late seventh century saw Byzantine Christians coming to value and defend what they had received. By the beginning of the seventh century, many Christians in the Eastern Mediterranean attached great significance to religious imagery – pictures, mosaics, perhaps even statues, of Christ, Mary the Mother of God, and the Saints. They played a role in public worship; perhaps even more important, smaller religious pictures could be found in private rooms and provide a focus for private devotion. It was not just a matter of aesthetic taste: such religious images were thought in some way to embody the holiness of the one they depicted; they were venerated, prayed to; it was believed that they worked miracles, some were thought to exude a healing oil.

The salvation of Constantinople from siege by the combined forces of the barbarian Avars and the Persians in 626, while the Emperor Heraclius was absent fighting on the frontier against the Persians, was ascribed to a picture – an icon – of the Mother of God that had been carried by the Patriarch of Constantinople in procession round the city walls. It was probably on this occasion that an initial verse was added to an already ancient song in praise of the Mother of God called the 'Akathist Hymn' – that is a hymn sung standing up, in procession for instance – placed on the lips of the Queen City of Constantinople herself:

> To you, Mother of God, champion and leader, I, your city, delivered from sufferings, ascribe the prize of victory and my thanks. And may you, in your invincible power, free me from all kinds of dangers, that I may cry to you: 'Hail, Bride unwedded!'[27]

Such veneration of pictures seemed to some idolatry, and Jews, in particular, challenged Christians to explain how this practice squared with the commandment against graven images in the Old Testament (e.g. Exodus 20. 4-5). We find the first Christian response to this in seventh-century arguments against such Jewish objections. Both Leontius (590-*c.* 650), bishop of Neapolis in Cyprus, and Stephen of Bostra, bishop of an unknown see in (it is presumed) Arabia in the (probably late) seventh century, wrote works against the Jews in which they defended the Christian practice of veneration of the cross and holy icons.[28] They argued that the same law that forbids idolatry positively commands the setting up of images of the cherubim before the ark of the covenant. Thus out of the Old Testament itself the Byzantines found justification for their practice of the veneration of icons. They argued, too, that in venerating icons, they were not worshipping the material of which the icons were made, but venerating the one depicted.

It is significant that such a defence of icons against Jewish objections had already been mounted by Byzantine Christians of the Middle East by the end of the seventh century. For at the beginning of the eighth century religious pictures became an issue for Christians within the Byzantine Empire. In 730, if not before, the Emperor Leo III ordered the destruction of icons throughout the Byzantine Empire. The patriarch of Constantinople, Germanus, protested and resigned. Letters of his survive, from before and after 730, defending the veneration of icons against what we call the 'iconoclasts', though contemporary defenders of the

icons more frequently called them εἰκονομάχοι – fighters against the icons. But the firmest and most coherent defence of the icons against the iconoclasts came from John of Damascus. In three tracts, written shortly after 730, John defends the Christian veneration of icons. Unlike Germanus, he was writing from outside the Byzantine empire: he was, as we have seen, a subject of the Umayyad Empire. The Byzantine Emperor could not touch him, so John was free to write what he liked. Nevertheless, one would hardly guess from reading John's tracts that he was writing about affairs in a political state in which he had never set foot. He speaks of the limits to the Emperor's power in Church matters from within a tradition that goes back to the resistance to the Arianism of the Emperor Constantius by the great fourth-century churchmen, Ossius of Cordoba and the Patriarch of Alexandria, Athanasius.[29] Athanasius had protested that the Church should not be governed by imperial edicts. John uses the same language: 'emperors are concerned with the good order of society, but the state of the Church is a matter for its shepherds and teachers' (*On Images*, II. 12). What the emperor has done in banning icons is 'piracy'. But what is striking about John's defence of the icons is what I would call his theological confidence. This is partly because he is drawing on an already existing justification of the tradition of veneration of religious images: indeed passages from the treatises of Leontius and Stephen against the Jews containing the arguments that we have already referred to were included by John in the *florilegia* he appended to his tracts against the iconoclasts. But he develops this tradition: not only is he quite clear why use of such religious imagery is important, but he knows where it fits into a broad theological scheme. It is, for instance, rooted in the doctrine, central to Greek theology, that human beings are created in God's image, so that looking beyond the surface – from the face to the heart, so to speak – is central to the kind of religion Christianity is.[30] Equally important for John is the fact that Christianity is not merely spiritual and intellectual but involves bodies and matter. The iconoclast accusation of idolatry could evidently take the form that Christians were worshipping matter. John handles this with great firmness:

> I do not venerate matter, but the Creator of matter, who became matter for my sake, and accepted to dwell in matter, and through matter worked my salvation; therefore I will not cease to reverence matter, through which my salvation was worked.[31]

John's voice was probably not heard in Constantinople. The iconoclasts knew that he had rejected iconoclasm, and at the Council of Hieria in 754 denounced him more comprehensively than any other defender of the icons,[32] but they seem not to have known anything of his arguments (nor, does it seem, did those who defended the veneration of icons in Constantinople, even at the beginning of the ninth century).[33] Nevertheless, in 843 iconoclasm was finally defeated; and in the whole story of that struggle, as yet imperfectly understood, John and later monks from his monastery of Mar Saba played a crucial role.[34]

Umayyad subject, or Byzantine in exile? It is difficult to avoid the question of John's real cultural allegiance when reading his defence of the veneration of icons. He had the freedom, vis-à-vis the Byzantine Emperor, of an Umayyad subject, but he addressed the question of the limits of the Emperor's authority as a Byzantine churchman. There is something of the same quandary in his attitude to Islam. John of Damascus is one of the earliest witnesses to Muslim theology.[35] What that means is that John's two brief discussions of Islam can be dated earlier than almost any other evidence we have – the earliest Muslim theologians of whose ideas we know anything, the Mu'tazilites, seem to be somewhat younger contemporaries of John.[36] All this arouses a certain interest, and a recent French edition of John's writings on Islam by an Islamicist was clearly inspired by hopes of what might emerge from looking at one of the earliest encounters between Christianity and Islam.[37] Such hopes are likely to be dashed. Not that the writings of John of Damascus on Islam are without interest.

What does John know of Islam? He knows that Muslims believe in one God, that he is their Creator, that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary and was a prophet, but he never did suffer or die on the Cross. He knows that Muslims accuse Christians of associating Christ with God in a way that compromises monotheism. He in turn criticizes dreams (through which Muhammad received many of the revelations in the Qur'an) as an unreliable way of revelation, and argues that Muslims are idolatrous in their worship of the Ka'ba. He knows four suras (the name given to the chapters of the Qur'an), three of which correspond to suras in the Qur'an as we know it. He notes that Muslims are forbidden to drink wine. He also knows about Muslim ideas of providence and argues against the strict form of the doctrine (everything that happens is in accordance with God's will, so that success entails legitimacy) that later sources tell us was orthodoxy under the Umayyad caliphs. There is a little more, but it is pretty meagre, though it does suggest that John had real knowledge of Islam, which is hardly surprising. His

attitude, however, is quite negative: the first discussion of Islam (the second is a *Dialogue*, already noted) is the last chapter of his treatise on heresies – it is Heresy, no. 100. Islam, the religion of the Ishmaelites, or Hagarenes, or Saracens, is simply idolatry, the four suras composed by Muhammad (as he puts it) that he knows are 'stupid' and 'ridiculous'. Not a very promising start to what is possibly the first literary encounter between two World Religions![38] But John did not think of his encounter with Islam as an encounter with a world religion: it was simply the last – and least – of the heresies. I do not think that he could conceive that Islam would last, still less could he conceive that Syria and Palestine would never again form part of the Byzantine Empire. Consequently, although he never set foot within the Byzantine Empire, I do not think he ever thought of himself as anything other than a Byzantine subject in exile – an exile that might last his lifetime, but was nevertheless simply a temporary condition.

There was no Byzantine Augustine. That is true in many ways: no-one in the Byzantine East, not even Maximus the Confessor, drew together the strands of earlier Christian tradition in such a commanding way as Augustine did for the Latin West. But it is true in a more particular way. No-one in the East challenged the deep-seated notion of the coinherence of the Christian Church and the Christian Roman Empire. In almost the last days of the Byzantine Empire, Patriarch Anthony was to declare: 'it is impossible for Christians to have a church and no empire. The empire and the church have a great unity and community – indeed they cannot be separated.'[39] Augustine, however, in his great work, *The City of God*, sought to persuade his readers that there is no such thing as a Christian state: that empires and states come and go, but that this has nothing to do with the eternal truths to which the Christian Church bears witness. Even the Roman Empire, synchronized with the Christian era – for Christ was born in the 'days of Caesar Augustus', the first Roman Emperor – will pass away, though Augustine himself found that hard to swallow. It took about a thousand years for Augustine's conviction to sink into Western consciousness, and even now the Roman Empire can strike a chord. Byzantine Christians eventually had the Roman Empire torn from them, but they continued to dream, and continue to dream still. So we must not be surprised if John of Damascus failed to recognize in the caliph he served for several years anything more than a temporary usurper of the Roman Emperor, the divinely ordained ruler of the οἰκουμένη, the 'inhabited world'.

Nevertheless, this Christian theologian who spent his prime at the court of the caliph perhaps achieved something that transcended the culture that he thought his

own, though it had been swept from his grasp, and achieved that *because* he lived in a culture that was not his own. For I have argued that John represents what was fused in the crucible of political powerlessness: stripped of political power, the 'Byzantine Christians' of Syria and Palestine had to work out what their religious heritage entailed, how it all hung together. And what John achieved had vast influence.

John died in the middle of the eighth century. By the tenth century, at the latest, his *Exposition of the Faith* had been translated into Arabic, for the benefit of those Christians of the Middle East who had preserved their faith, even if they lost their culture, whether Hellenistic or Syriac. By that date, too, and perhaps more significantly, his *Exposition* had been translated into Old Slavonic, for the benefit of the Slavs who began to turn to Christianity in its Byzantine form within a century of John's death, and who, by the sixteenth century, thought of Moscow as the Third Rome, the political and religious heir of Constantinople. In the twelfth century the *Exposition* was translated into Latin, and the Scholastic theologians of the thirteenth century found the shape of the *Summa Theologiae* (as they called their systematic presentations of Christian theology) in that work, and much of their theology, too. The painstaking work of compilation by a monk in Arab Palestine crossed into several cultures and helped mould their understanding, not just of theology but of human nature, too, for many chapters of his *Exposition* patiently explore the way human beings function, drawing on both the ascetic wisdom of Christian monasticism and the reflections of classical philosophy. Perhaps, then, when we look at the Christian theologian who knew the court of the early caliphs, if we do not at all find what we might hope, I think we gain some insight into the way cultures are shaped and interact.

NOTES

This is a re-worked version of an inaugural lecture, given at Goldsmiths College, on 24 November 1994. I am grateful to the editors of *Dialogos* for the opportunity provided to explore these issues more deeply, to the readers for their helpful suggestions, and to Professor Averil Cameron, who put me on to much scholarly literature I would otherwise have missed.

1 The Arabic names used here, and later for John's father and grandfather, are those given by Le Coz and Auzépy: R. Le Coz (ed.), Jean Damascène, *Écrits sur Islam* (Sources Chrétiennes 383, Paris 1992) 43-9 (hereafter, "Le Coz"); M-F. Auzépy, 'De la Palestine à Constantinople (VIIIe-IXe siècles): Étienne le Sabaïte et Jean Damascène' in *Travaux et Mémoires* 12 (1994) 183-218 (hereafter "Auzépy"). They are in turn taken from the Arabic sources. The Greek sources, notably Theophanes,

Chronicle (here drawing on an Arabic source), simply give Greek versions of the Arabic names. There is some confusion in the Greek sources (e.g., John is sometimes referred to as Μανσούρ, sometimes as ὁ τοῦ Μανσούρ), perhaps because the Greeks were no longer familiar with patronymics, which seem to have fallen out of use in the later Roman Empire (see C. Roueché, *Aphrodisias in Late Antiquity* [London 1989] xx), and treated Μανσούρ as a family name.

2 P.J. Nasrullah, *Saint Jean de Damas* (Harissa 1950) 59.

3 On this question see, from a rapidly growing bibliography, J. Rich (ed.), *The City in Late Antiquity* (London 1992) and, more specifically on the Eastern Empire, A.M. Cameron, *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity, A.D. 395-600* (London 1993) 152-75.

4 For an important attempt to rethink the significance of this change, see G. Fowden, *From Empire to Commonwealth. Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton 1993).

5 The traditional account has been challenged, especially by Patricia Crone and Michael Crook in their *Hagarism. The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge 1977). Although their own account is full of difficulties, they raise problems that will not go away.

6 According to D.J. Sahas, of 'semitic ancestry', in B. Lewis and F. Niewohner (eds.), *Religionsgespräche im Mittelalter*, Wölfenbütteler Mittelalterstudien 4 (1992), 204 (which I have not been able to consult: it is cited by Averil Cameron in her review of Le Coz, *Journal of Theological Studies*, NS 46 (1995) 371). Le Coz seems to take a similar view: see p. 43.

7 *Pace* Sahas (see n. 6 above).

8 See Nasrullah, *Saint Jean de Damas*.

9 See Le Coz, 47-8.

10 The decree of the Iconoclast Council of Hieria (754) condemning John ('Mansur') seems to regard him as already dead; John Damascene's main work, *The Fount of Knowledge*, is dedicated to his old tutor, Cosmas, as bishop of Maïuma, a position he assumed in 743.

11 This account of what little we know of John's life owes much to Le Coz and to Auzépy. There is also a detailed discussion of the sources for John's life by Gerhard Richter in his introduction to Johannes von Damaskos, *Philosophische Kapitel* (Stuttgart 1982) 2-32, of which neither Le Coz nor Auzépy makes any use. The sources yield very little, but Auzépy perhaps takes her scepticism further than is necessary in denying that John became a monk at Mar Saba. Her main point, that the *Life of St Stephen the Sabaïte* fails to mention John among the luminaries of Mar Saba, is met by the reason given long ago by J.M. Hoeck for the extreme lateness of any biographies of the Damascene, viz. 'dass man in Mâr-Saba Wunder mehr geschätzt habe als Wissenschaft' (Richter, op. cit. 7, referring to J.M. Hoeck, 'Stand und Aufgaben der Damaskenos-Forschung', in *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 16 [1951] 5-60 at p. 7).

12 M. Geerard lists these prayers under the Damascene's *dubia* (*Clavis Patrum Graecorum* III [Turnhout 1979] item 8081), but that is a common reaction to any liturgical ascriptions.

13 Regarded as genuine by Geerard, *Clavis Patrum Graecorum*, 8070.

14 See M. Roueché, 'Byzantine philosophical texts of the seventh century', *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 23 (1974) 61-76.

15 I refer to the circle of friends – John Moschus, Sophronius of Jerusalem, Leontius of Neapolis and John the Merciful – all of them hagiographers of a 'Byzantine persuasion', discussed by H. Delehaye, *L'Ancienne hagiographie Byzantine* (Brussels 1991) 51-68, though Delehaye does not make the claim I have made, nor do I think he would have agreed with it.

16 For the importance of Palestine for the preservation of Greek culture in the century after the Arab Conquest, see C. Mango, 'Greek culture in Palestine after the Arab conquest' in G. Cavallo, G. de Gregorio and M. Maniaci (eds.), *Scritture, Libri e Testi nelle Aree Provinciali di Bisanzio* (Spoleto, n.d.) 149-60.

17 This is an oversimplification. Emperors sometimes gave financial support to Christians they did not agree with: e.g., Anastasius supported Chalcedonians ('Byzantines'), though his sympathies lay

with those who rejected Chalcedon (see J. Binns, *Ascetics and Ambassadors of Christ. The Monasteries of Palestine, 314-631* [Oxford 1994] 86-7). There are other factors, too: see Binns, 191-9.

18 There is now a critical edition by Bonifatius Kotter in *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos*, I (Berlin 1969), for the *Philosophical Chapters*; IV (1981) 19-67, for *On Heresies*; II (1973), for the *Exposition of the Faith*.

19 See M. Roueché, 'Byzantine philosophical texts', and other articles by the same scholar.

20 See, especially, N. Baynes, 'The thought-world of East Rome' in *Byzantine Studies and Other Essays* (London 1955) 24-46.

21 For an example of this last see J.D. Madden, 'The authenticity of early definitions of will', in F. Heinzer and C. Schönborn, eds., *Maximus Confessor* (Fribourg 1982) 61-79.

22 *In exp. fid.* 12-44 (ed. Kotter, vol. 2, 35-106).

23 For evidence for these rather peremptory assertions about Maximus, and for the apparent relationship between him and John, see my *Maximus the Confessor* (London 1996), and especially the notes to the translation in that book of Maximus, *Ambigua* 10.

24 Cited by N.G. Wilson, *Scholars of Byzantium* (London 1983) 62.

25 See C. Mango, 'The availability of books in the Byzantine Empire, A.D. 750-850' in *Byzantine Books and Bookmen, a Dumbarton Oaks Symposium* (Washington DC 1975) 29-45 (reprinted in idem, *Byzantium and its Image* [London 1984] VII) at pp. 30-1.

26 For details, see Geerard, *Clavis Patrum Graecorum* III, item 8056.

27 Translation modified from that of C.A. Trypanis in *The Penguin Book of Greek Verse* (Harmondsworth 1971) 374.

28 On Christian anti-Jewish literature in the sixth and seventh centuries see V. Déroche, 'La polémique anti-judaïque au VI^{e} et au VII^{e} siècle. Un mémento inédit, les *Kephalaia*', *Travaux et Mémoires* 11 (1991) 275-311.

29 See Ossius' letter to Constantius, cited by Athanasius in his *Historia Arianorum* 44 (ed. Opitz, 2, pp. 207-9), and most recently T. D. Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius* (Cambridge, Mass. 1993) 165-75 ('The Emperor and the Church, 324-361').

30 See *imag.* III. 18-23 (ed. Kotter, vol. 3, Patristische Texte und Studien 17, Berlin 1975, 126-30), earlier sketched out in *imag.* I. 9-13 (ed. cit. 83-6).

31 *Imag.* I. 16 (ed. cit. 89).

32 G.D. Mansi, ed., *Sacrorum Conciliorum Nova et Amplissima Collectio*, vol. 13 (Florence 1867) 356CD (translation in D.J. Sahas, *Icon and Logos. Sources in Eighth-Century Iconoclasm* [Toronto 1986] 168-9).

33 More work needs to be done on this, but there is a little in my article, 'St Denys the Areopagite and the iconoclast controversy' in Y. de Andia, ed., *Denys l'Aréopagite et sa postérité en Orient et en Occident* (Paris, forthcoming).

34 See *The Life of Michael the Synkellos*, tr. M.B. Cunningham (Belfast 1991).

35 Though probably not the earliest: see S.H. Griffith, 'Anastasios of Sinai, the Hodegos and the Muslims', *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 32 (1987) 341-58.

36 See H. Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy* (London 1993) 105-12.

37 Le Coz.

38 G.J. Reinink discusses some possibly earlier 'disputations' between Christians and Muslims in his article, 'The beginnings of Syriac apologetic literature in response to Islam', *Oriens Christianus* 77 (1993) 165-87, but they are not very illuminating about the nature of Islamic belief.

39 Included by D.J. Geanakoplos in his anthology, *Byzantium. Church, Society and Civilization Seen Through Contemporary Eyes* (Chicago 1984) 143.