

“Trinitarian Controversy in the Court of the Caliph”: John of Damascus on the Trinity in the Context of Mission

Daniel Janosik
Southern Evangelical Seminary

Introduction

The doctrine of the Trinity is one of the uncompromising beliefs of Christianity. It is also one of the main doctrines countered by the early Muslim apologists. As the chief financial officer in the Umayyad court, John of Damascus (675-750) witnessed the rise of Islam and the subjugation of Christianity. When he retired from civil service he took on the robes of a priest and monk and spent his last years at a monastery near Jerusalem writing not only great doctrine of the church, but also treatises against Islam. Some scholars even suggest that most of John’s doctrinal works were either penned in order to educate Christians so that they would understand the true doctrine of the Church in contrast to the new doctrine of Islam, or so that they would be able to defend their Christian beliefs and refute the errors of what he called the “heresy of the Ishmaelites.” One of the core issues he focused on was the doctrine of the Trinity. In this paper, John’s essential thoughts on the Trinity, from his great doctrinal masterpiece, the *Orthodox Faith*, will be compared to his two Apologetic works against Islam (the *Heresy of the Ishmaelites* and the *Disputation between a Christian and a Saracen*) in order to explore the way that John used the doctrine of the Trinity to demonstrate the heretical views of Islam. This polemical approach may have been effective in preventing Christians from converting to Islam, but how did it impact the missional efforts of the Christians living under the rule of Islam, especially the successors to John such as Theodore Abu Qurrah? In addition, since the Trinitarian controversy is still very much at the heart of the

Christian-Muslim dialogues of today, what can we learn from John's approach that may help us more effectively reach out to the Muslims around us?

Background

John was born in Damascus, Syria around 675 A.D.¹ He was part of a prominent family in the civil administration of Syria² and succeeded his father as the chief financial officer of the Umayyad Empire during the reign of Abd al-Malik (685-705).³ John resigned from his post in the Umayyad government and retired to a monastery near Jerusalem, perhaps St. Sabas,⁴ and wrote most, if not all, of his theological works while in this post, including his most famous work, the *Fount of Knowledge*.⁵ This is also where He probably died around 750 AD (at the age of 75).⁶

The Trinitarian Beliefs of John of Damascus

John of Damascus' *Orthodox Faith* is the third part of his larger work, the *Fount of Knowledge*, which was written around AD 743.⁷ It contains 100 chapters divided into four books. The first book deals with God in unity and Trinity, the second book deals with God's creation, the third book focuses on Christology and the fourth book discusses a number of theological issues such as faith, baptism, the Eucharist and the resurrection.

¹ Daniel Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam. Revisited (Abr-Nahvain, 23. 1984)*, 106.

² Daniel Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam: The Heresy of the Ishmaelites (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1972)*, 17-19, 29-30.

³ Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam*, 26-29, 42.

⁴ Andrew Louth, *St. John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 6.

⁵ Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam*, 51.

⁶ Frederic Chase, *St. John of Damascus: Writings*, The Fathers of the Church: Vol. 37 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1958), xvii, n. 32.

⁷ Chase, *St. John of Damascus: Writings*, xxv.

In chapter 1 of Book I of the *Orthodox Faith*, John follows the example of Gregory Nazianzen,⁸ as well as the words of the apostle John (John 1:18), in proclaiming that ultimately God is “ineffable and incomprehensible,”⁹ and therefore what is said about His nature is through revelation by the Son, the Holy Spirit and the creation. In Chapter 4, John further notes that while God is without a body, Christ, through the incarnation or the activity of the *oikonomia*, has to have a body that fully identifies him as human. Yet, He is also fully God. Only by having two natures can Christ be fully identified with God, who has no body and does not change, and also fully with man, who has a body and is subject to change.

In Chapter 6, John follows Gregory of Nyssa’s prologue in his Catechetical Discourse¹⁰ and he concentrates on the Word of God. Not only is there one God, but the word of God, the λόγος, is “identical with God.”¹¹ John also emphasizes that it was necessary that the Word had always existed in the Godhead: “For there never was a time when God the Word was not.”¹² This is important because in his critique of Islam, John demonstrates that if God is without his Word in the beginning then there would be a time when he is “mutilated or torn apart.”

In chapter 7 John focuses on the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. Like the Word, the Holy Spirit also is subsistent in the Godhead, but also fully God in his own hypostatic relationship. John develops this thought further in chapter 8, where he intimates a far deeper theme that centers on his concept of the perichoresis

⁸ Georges Florovsky, *The Byzantine Fathers of the Sixth to Eighth Century*, Vol. 9 (Europa: Buchervertriebsanstalt, 1987), 258.

⁹ John of Damascus, *Orthodox Faith (OF)*, 1.1 (Book 1, Chapter 1), 165, found in Frederic H. Chase, trans., *St. John of Damascus: Writings*, The Fathers of the Church, vol. 37. Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 1958.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.6, 174.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1.6, 174.

¹² *Ibid.*, 1.6, 174.

(περιχώρησις)¹³ of God, in which the three persons of the one God merge mystically within each other in a kind of “circle dance” of God’s triune nature.¹⁴ John often cautions the reader that the true essence of God is beyond understanding, but his perichoretic model of the Trinity seeks to give shape to the ineffable by describing the relationship of the three persons of the one God. Regarding this relationship, Robert Letham explains that,

Indeed, the Holy Spirit has the same order and nature toward the Son as the Son has toward the Father. The Son is in the Father, and the Father is in the Son, and so also is the Holy Spirit in the Son and the Son in the Holy Spirit. Thus, the Spirit cannot be divided from the Word. So also the Spirit is in God the Father and from the Father. As the Son comes in the name of the Father, so the Holy Spirit comes in the name of the Son. There is one efficacy and action of the Holy Trinity, for the Father makes all things through the Word by the Holy Spirit.¹⁵

Moltmann captures John’s description of the “circulatory character of the eternal divine life” when he writes that “In the perichoresis the very thing that divides them becomes that which binds them together. The ‘circulation’ of the eternal divine life becomes perfect through the fellowship and unity of the three different Persons in the eternal love.”¹⁶ This image of interpenetration without confusion is developed in more detail later on as is the concept that the Godhead is somehow always in motion, as in a dance, but a dance of begetting, proceeding and yet remaining unbegotten.

¹³ In general, περιχώρησις refers to a recurrence or cyclical movement, such as in a “circle-dance.” Christologically it refers to reciprocity in a relationship, and in regard to the Trinity there is a sense of the interpenetration of the three persons. See Lampe, 1077–78.

¹⁴ See Gerald O’Collins, *The Tripersonal God: Understanding and Interpreting The Trinity* (NY: Paulist Press, 1999), 132; and David Macleod, “Trinity in Scripture,” in John H. III Fish, *Understanding the Trinity* (Dubuque, IA: ECSMinistries, 2006), 56–57.

¹⁵ Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, And Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2004), 214.

¹⁶ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 174-175. See also Harold H. Oliver, *Metaphysics, Theology, and Self: Relational Essays* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2006), 65-69; and Oliver Crisp, *Divinity and Humanity: The Incarnation Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1-34.

The mutual indwelling of the Father and Son is extended so as to include the Holy Spirit in the same coinherence with the other hypostases. Earlier John presents the Holy Spirit as the companion of the Word, the One who makes the Word “manifest.”¹⁷ A little further on John presents the Holy Spirit as the bond between the first and second Persons: “He is the median of the unbegotten and the begotten (Father and Son) and He is joined with the Father through the Son.”¹⁸ Finally, John legitimizes the Holy Spirit as fully God and as One who is “adored and glorified together with the Father and Son as consubstantial and co-eternal with them.”¹⁹ In regard to the Father, John develops the idea of the hypostasis who is uncreated and unbegotten. In regard to the Son, John explores the concept of the hypostasis who is uncreated and eternally begotten.

In this relationship the only *essential* difference between the three persons is that the Father is unbegotten, the Son is eternally begotten and the Holy Spirit eternally proceeds. Although John admits that it is beyond comprehension to truly understand these differences, he does concede that they must be “one simple essence, eminently and antecedently perfect, in three Persons,”²⁰ without being compounded, since that would make them imperfect. The only way this “unity within a community” could exist, then, is for the three Persons to exist in one another, “uncompounded and without confusion.”²¹ Otherwise there would not be the eternal motion that is the still point of the turning world: The unbegotten Father eternally begetting the Son through whom the Holy Spirit is being communicated to the world; who in turn proceeds from the Father and glorifies the Son, and together, both the Son and the Holy Spirit bring glory to the Father, as the

¹⁷ OF, 1.7, 175.

¹⁸ Ibid., 1.13, 200.

¹⁹ Ibid., 1.8, 183.

²⁰ Ibid., 1.8, 185.

²¹ Ibid., 1.8, 185.

three are one and the one God is three in a unity of community that is the dance, the perichoresis, the motion that never ceases and yet is in all as each Person is in one another; and still there is only One, for, as John concludes, “God and His Word and His Spirit are really one God.”²²

This perichoretical relationship emphasizes the idea that God’s Word and Spirit must be inseparable from God; otherwise, if God is without his Word and Spirit then he would be incomplete and therefore less than perfect. This aspect of the Father’s relationship with the Son and the Holy Spirit contributes greatly to John’s chief argument for the deity of Christ against the Saracens. Let us now turn to the way John applies his understanding of the Trinity to the belief system that developed into Islam.

The Trinity in *Heresy of the Ishmaelites*

In this section, John’s explanation of the Trinity in *Orthodox Faith* will be compared to his treatment of the Trinity in his main treatise against Islam, *Heresy of the Ishmaelites*, where John addressed the Saracens’ denial of the divinity of Christ and their absolute rejection of the Triune nature of God. The followers of Muhammad considered belief in a Trinity to be the greatest of all blasphemies, since in their view it associated a created being with the eternal God. They called this sin “shirk,” and those who associated another with God were called “mushrikun.” For example, the Qur’an states in 5:72–73 that, “They do blaspheme who say: ‘Allah is Christ the son of Mary’.... Whoever joins other gods with Allah—Allah will forbid him the Garden, and the fire will be his abode.... They do blaspheme who say: Allah is one of three in a trinity: for there is no god except One God.” Also in surah 9:31 we find that the Ishmaelites were “commanded

²² Ibid., 1.8, 185.

to worship but one Allah: there is no god but he. Praise and glory to him: (far is he) from having the partners they associate (with him).” However, the Qur’an also acknowledges that Jesus Christ is known as both the “Word of God” and the “Spirit of God.” In surah 4:171 we find the words: “O People of the Book! commit no excesses in your religion: nor say of Allah aught but the truth. Christ Jesus the son of Mary was (no more than) a Messenger of Allah, and His Word, which He bestowed on Mary and a Spirit proceeding from Him: so believe in Allah and His Messengers. Say not ‘Trinity’: desist: it will be better for you: for Allah is one God.” These verses are found in portions of the Qur’an with which John seems to have been familiar,²³ and in his response John acknowledges that the Ishmaelites accepted Jesus Christ as God’s Word and Spirit. He then raises a very important question: “Since you also say that Christ is Word and Spirit of God, why do you accuse us of being Associators?”²⁴ As John has so meticulously explained in his *Orthodox Faith*, he also argued in his treatise against the Ishmaelites that God’s Word and Spirit must be inseparable from God. Moreover, if God’s Word and Spirit are outside of God, as the Ishmaelites seemed to imply, then God must be without his Word and Spirit, and therefore, according to John, “mutilated or torn apart.” Thus, while the Saracens accused Christians of being “associators” (*mushrikun*) because they associated Christ with God, John accused the Saracens of being “mutilators” (*koptas*) of God because they ripped God’s Spirit and Word away from him. This argument became one of the most popular ones developed by John and was used for centuries as Christians confronted Muslims in the defense of the Trinity. Perhaps the reason for the success of John’s argument is that it is based on his foundational theological explanations of the

²³ See the chapter on the *Heresy of the Ishmaelites*.

²⁴ Daniel Janosik, *John of Damascus, First Apologist to the Muslims: The Trinity and Christian Apologetics in the Early Islamic Period* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick, 2016), Appendix C: lines 69–70.

nature and roles of the three persons of the Trinity in his *Orthodox Faith* where John takes great care to show that it was necessary that the Word had always existed in the Godhead: “For there never was a time when God the Word was not.”²⁵ Also, unlike human speech, which dissipates in the air, the Word of God is always subsistent, “always existing in Him.”²⁶ John makes it clear that the Word could not be “outside of ‘god,’ but since the Word is always begotten of the Father, he “must be always existing, living, perfect, distinctly subsistent, and having all things that His Begetter has.”²⁷ Thus, the argument found in John’s *Heresy* seems to be reflected in *Orthodox Faith*, and the theological underpinning of the argument in *Heresy* is more developed in *Orthodox Faith*. They work in tandem with each other. We also see this same argument developed in John’s *Disputation between a Christian and a Saracen*.

The Trinity in *Disputation between a Christian and a Saracen*

In his treatise, the *Disputation between a Christian and a Saracen*, John also raises the issue of Jesus being the Word and Spirit of God: “I will ask you this, ‘Before God created the Spirit and the Word did he have neither Spirit nor Word?’”²⁸ This is the same issue he raised in *Heresy* and in *Orthodox Faith*, explaining that “God is not without a Word,” and “there never was a time when God the Word was not.”²⁹ A little further in his *Disputation*, when John is explaining the two natures of Christ, he writes that “the pre-eternal Word of God is one... for indeed, a fourth person has not been added

²⁵ OF, 1.6, 174.

²⁶ Ibid., 1.6, 174.

²⁷ Ibid., 1.6, 174.

²⁸ Janosik, *John of Damascus*, Appendix D: Section 5, lines 18–20.

²⁹ OF, 1.6, 174.

to the Trinity....”³⁰ This reference to a “fourth person of the Trinity” is also mentioned in *Orthodox Faith*, where John writes, “His two natures belong to the one Person and the one subsistence of the Word of God... Thus, I do not add a fourth person to the Trinity—God Forbid!”³¹ Hence, in both John’s *Orthodox Faith* and his *Disputation*, reference to the Word as a “fourth person” is vehemently denied.

These close comparisons found in different works by John provide strong evidence for the inter-developmental production of these ideas. We may say that one source, perhaps his theological writings, provided the foundation for his apologetic works, or perhaps his apologetic works were later refined and developed in his theological works, or perhaps they interacted with each other as different expressions of the same ideas.

The doctrine of the Trinity is one of the uncompromising beliefs of Christianity. In John’s treatment of this subject in his *Orthodox Faith*, he gleaned from the Church Fathers who had preceded him in order to produce a standard explanation of the Trinity for those who would follow. In addition, the overlapping themes suggest that John of Damascus’ apologetic interaction with Islamic theology, as well as non-Muslim heretical views, molded the way he presented the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, as is found in his *Orthodox Faith*. Throughout this process, both aspects of his work seem to have developed in response to the growth of Islamic theology and hegemony. To counter this expansion, John’s apologetic model was developed in order to support his views that Christianity was the true faith and, therefore, superior to Islam. Later, John’s successors, especially Theodore Abu Qurrah, carried his work a step farther by upgrading John’s

³⁰ Janosik, *John of Damascus*, Appendix D: section 8, lines 10–12.

³¹ OF, 3.8, 285.

apologetic approach so that orthodox Christian theology, which had been standardized by John, could deal more specifically with the developing Islamic theology. It is now time to examine John's apologetic approach as well as the way his successors adopted and adapted this approach for their own apologetic ends.

The Need for Apologetics in the Time of John

During the first centuries of Islamic rule, more and more Christians saw that the only opportunity for advancement in society was in converting to Islam. John recognized the need to stem this flow of Christians converting to Islam and constructed simple dialogues to illustrate how Christians could give reasonable responses to the theological issues raised by the Saracens. One of the difficulties in developing an adequate apologetic approach with Islam, however, was that there were so many irreducible differences between the two belief systems.³² This problem was exacerbated in the time of John of Damascus because Christians rejected the teachings of the Saracens without really knowing what they were rejecting, and the Saracens often had misunderstandings of the Christian doctrine that they had rejected.

There was also a difference in approach between Christians who lived within the Islamic world and those who lived outside. Outsiders were often quite polemical and caustic.³³ Within the Islamic world, however, more diplomacy and dialogue was carried out. This was true of John of Damascus as well, especially since he worked for the Caliph himself as the chief financial administrator. Although John considered Islam a heresy, Nazir-Ali concedes that he was concerned about being fair in his treatment of their

³² Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1993), 335-336. Daniel writes that in regard to Christianity and Islam, "There are irreducible differences between non-negotiable doctrines... The Christian creeds and the Qur'ān are simply incompatible and there is no possibility of reconciling the content of the two faiths, each of which is exclusive, as long as they retain their identities."

³³ *Ibid.*, 115-132.

scripture and theological positions.³⁴ John knew the views of the Saracen scriptures and used logic to argue that if Christ is the Word and Spirit of God then either they are all one God or else *širk*³⁵ is committed since they would otherwise be associating partners with God. John's response also demonstrates that he is aware of how the Saracens related the attributes to the divine essence. Through his understanding, John was able to acknowledge commonality of beliefs, especially in the oneness of God. This was an important foundation from which dialogue could then proceed. This approach was also practiced by John's successors. For example, Theodore Abu Qurrah (d. 820), the Bishop of Harrān, explained the Trinity by appealing to the common source for all scripture revealed to the apostles and prophets, which he referred to as the "preserved tablet."³⁶ He also used arguments based on his knowledge of the Qur'ān to argue for Christianity. Like John, Abu Qurrah utilized touchstone points with Islam in order to promote his specific Christian conclusions from a common understanding.³⁷ Timothy I (727-823), an eighth-century Nestorian Patriarch whose theological dialogue with the Caliph (781AD) has survived,³⁸ showed courtesy to the Muslim leader, but there is no hint of compromise in what he says. Nazir-Ali says that "the dialogues are full, frank and fair."³⁹ Besides indicating that the Islamic government was still open to respectful theological discussion

³⁴ Michael Nazir-Ali, *Conviction and Conflict: Islam, Christianity and World Order* (London: Continuum, 2006), 72.

³⁵ Širk is considered the greatest "sin" in Islam and refers to associating others with God, or in this case, equating Jesus with God.

³⁶ Nazir-Ali, *Conviction and Conflict*, 72.

³⁷ See Sidney Griffith, "Muslims and Church Councils; The Apology of Abu Qurrah," chap. in *The Beginnings of Christian Theology in Arabic* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), and Sidney Griffith, "John of Damascus and The Church in Syria In The Umayyad Era: The Intellectual And Cultural Milieu of Orthodox Christians In The World of Islam," *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* Vol. 11, No. 2 (Summer 2008).

³⁸ Robert Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton, N.J: Darwin Press, 1997), 472-475. See also Sidney Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 45-48.

³⁹ Nazir-Ali, *Conviction and Conflict*, 73.

at this time, the dialogue shows that Timothy was aware of the Christology of the Qur'ān and used this knowledge in his argument. These Christian leaders were concerned with the number of Christian believers converting to Islam, but they still maintained diplomacy and decorum in their interaction with the dominant Muslims and they favored dialogue as the mode for exchanging ideas.

The Apologetic Successors of John

Sidney Griffith, in his book, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, writes that the development of Christian apologetics at that time was in tandem with the evolving theology of Islamic religious thought. He maintains that,

In this context, Christians sought to defend the reasonableness of their distinctive doctrines in terms of the same religious idiom as that employed by their Muslim interlocutors and counterparts, who, in accord with the teachings of the Qur'ān, often rejected the central Christian doctrines.⁴⁰

This apologetic approach was unique at the time because it used the scriptures and language of the Muslim religion.⁴¹ Unlike the earlier Greek apologists, the Arab-speaking Christians constructed their arguments in the religious expressions of the Qur'ān and the traditions of the prophet Muhammad, which they were familiar with. Griffith continues, “as a result, the discourse of the Christian apologists in Arabic presents a conceptual profile that cannot easily be mistaken for Christian theology in any other community of Christian discourse.”⁴² Even their apologetic approach involving the two main issues of the Trinity and the Incarnation was patterned after Muslim theological constructs. In regard to the Trinity, the “ontological status of the divine attributes” of God was argued,

⁴⁰ Sidney Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 75.

⁴¹ Sidney Griffith, "Muslims and Church Councils; The Apology of Abu Qurrah," chap. in *The Beginnings of Christian Theology in Arabic* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 273.

⁴² Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 75.

while the arguments for the Incarnation often focused on the “signs of authentic prophecy and the true religion.”⁴³ These were both topics discussed by their Islamic counterparts. It is also of importance to recognize that all the principal genres of the apologetic approaches of that time were “dialogical in form and literary structure.”⁴⁴

It is not a coincidence that John of Damascus also used the dialogical format in some of his apologetic writings. His dialogues were popular and may have influenced the development of this genre down through the following centuries. In fact, Sidney Griffith even says that “In defense of the doctrine of the Trinity, most Christian apologists who wrote in Arabic adopted the strategy first encountered in the Greek works of St. John of Damascus.”⁴⁵ This certainly seems to be the case with Theodore Abu Qurrah, who patterned his own dialogues on John’s *Disputation between a Christian and a Saracen*.⁴⁶

The Patriarch, Timothy I, also seems to echo back to the theological and apologetic works of John of Damascus in regard to some of his beliefs and statements concerning the Trinity. For example, on the second day of the debates the caliph asked Timothy about his belief in God. For Muslims there can only be one God. To associate another with God is considered *širk*, or the greatest of all sins. Thus, when the caliph queried, “You believe in one God, as you said, but one in three,” he was probing the deepest of their theological disputes. Timothy answered, “I do not deny that I believe in one God in three and three in one, but not in three different godheads, however, but in the persons of God’s Word and His Spirit. I believe that these constitute one God, not in their

⁴³ Ibid., 76. See also Griffith, “*Apology of Abu Qurrah*,” 273-274. It is important to note that this format makes sense in the Middle East, but it is not very effective when “translated into the theological idioms of the West.”

⁴⁴ Ibid., 76.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 95.

⁴⁶ Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam*, 100.

person, but in their nature. I have shown how in my previous words.”⁴⁷ Timothy’s explanation of how the three persons of the Trinity relate to one another harkens back to John’s perichoretic description of the Trinity’s co-inherence with each person in a type of “circle dance.” Thus, both John and Timothy respond to the Muslim by emphasizing the necessity of the Godhead always having the Word and the Spirit, for without the Word of God and the Spirit of God, then God could not be God. Therefore, the Word and the Spirit must also be God. There cannot be a time when God did not have his Word or his Spirit and, indeed, God cannot be God without having his Word and his Spirit.⁴⁸

Three Aspects of John’s Apologetic Approach

John’s apologetic approach can be categorized along the following three lines. First John understood the Saracen beliefs so that he could accurately state what they believed. He then countered those beliefs with Christian Scripture and doctrine guided by reason. Finally, he refuted the Muslim beliefs and provided a better rationale for disputed doctrines such as the Trinity and the deity of Christ. In all these arguments John was either trying to show the superiority of Christianity or what he referred to as the “foolishness” of the religion of Muhammad, more for the sake of boosting belief in Christianity in the eyes of his Christian readers rather than offering detailed arguments against the new “heresy,” though he was interested in countering what he considered to be their false beliefs. Another way of categorizing John’s approach is to say that John desired to Understand, Defend, and, if need be, to Refute.

Applications for Today

⁴⁷ A. Mingana, "Patriarch Timothy I and The Caliph Mahdi," in *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue: A Collection of Documents from The First Three Islamic Centuries (632-900 A.D.)*, N.A. Newman (Hatfield, PA: Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute, 1993), 219.

⁴⁸ See also OF 1.6, 174.

If we are truly going to engage Islam in a dialogue that compares core beliefs on a level that can be guided by a mutual respect and a deep desire to know the truth in this post-9/11 world, then it is crucial for us to develop an authentic apologetic that balances respect toward Muslims with boldness in the defense of our beliefs. As John of Damascus taught almost 1300 years ago, Christians first need to understand what Christianity teaches about the Trinity. Christians also need to understand what Muslims believe about doctrinal areas such as the Trinity and the deity of Christ. Armed with this dual understanding, Christians need to be able to defend their beliefs and promote sound theological answers when their beliefs are questioned. In addition, Christians need to be able to refute the misunderstandings that Muslims have concerning the Trinity. This in itself should stimulate dialogue and bring needed correction to the conversation. The same issues that confronted John in his day are still the major areas of controversy today. John led the way in developing an apologetic that was used for centuries after he died. The question that faces us today is “how can we improve in our understanding of Islam in relation to these issues, and how can we better answer their questions?” We can certainly use John as a model, but the ultimate goal is to understand what we believe, defend the faith, and refute error so that Christ can be proclaimed and unbelievers may come to Him as the source of all Truth and the savior of the whole world.

Bibliography

- Chase, Frederic H., trans. *St. John of Damascus: Writings*. The Fathers of the Church. vol. 37. Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 1958.
- Crisp, Oliver. *Divinity and Humanity: The Incarnation Reconsidered*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Daniel, Norman. *Islam and the West*. Oxford: OneWorld, 1993.
- Florovsky, Georges. *The Byzantine Fathers of the Sixth to the Eighth Centuries*. Volume 9. Europa: Bucherverbriebsanstalt, 1987.
- Griffith, Sidney. *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008.
- _____. "John of Damascus and the Church in Syria in the Umayyad Era: The Intellectual and Cultural Milieu of Orthodox Christians in the World of Islam." *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* Vol. 11, No. 2 (Summer 2008).
- _____. "Muslims and Church Councils; The Apology of Abu Qurrah." Chap. in *The Beginnings of Christian Theology in Arabic*. 270-299. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002.
- Hoyland, Robert. *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam*. Princeton, N.J: Darwin Press, 1997.
- Janosik, Daniel. *John of Damascus, First Apologist to the Muslims: The Trinity and Christian Apologetics in the Early Islamic Period*. Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick, 2016.
- John of Damascus. *Disputation between a Christian and a Saracen*, found in Bonifatius Kotter, *Die Schriften Des Johannes Von Damaskos*, IV. New York: Walter De Gruyter, 1981.
- _____. *Heresy of the Ishmaelites*, found in Bonifatius Kotter, *Die Schriften Des Johannes Von Damaskos*, IV. New York: Walter De Gruyter, 1981.
- _____. *Orthodox Faith*. Part Three of *The Fount of Knowledge*, found in Frederic H. Chase, trans., *St. John of Damascus: Writings*, The Fathers of the Church, vol. 37. Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 1958.
- Letham, Robert. *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2004.
- Louth, Andrew. *St. John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Mingana, A. "Patriarch Timothy I and the Caliph Mahdi." N.A. Newman. In *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue: A Collection of Documents from the First Three*

- Islamic Centuries (632-900 A.D.)*, N.A. Newman. 169-267. Hatfield, PA: Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute, 1993.
- Moltmann, Jurgen. *The Trinity and the Kingdom*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993.
- Nazir-Ali, Michael. *Conviction and Conflict: Islam, Christianity and World Order*. London: Continuum, 2006.
- O'Collins, Gerald. *The Tripersonal God: Understanding and Interpreting the Trinity*. NY: Paulist Press, 1999.
- Oliver, Harold H. *Metaphysics, Theology, and Self: Relational Essays*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2006.
- Sahas, Daniel. *John of Damascus on Islam*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1972.
- _____. "John of Damascus. Revisited." *Abr-Nahvain* 23 (1984): 104-118.