

The Perichoretical Apologetic Approach of John of Damascus against Early Islam

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John of Damascus argued against the faulty Muslim view of the Trinity and of Jesus Christ as the Son of God in his works *The Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* and the *Heresy of the Ishmaelites*. He argued that if Jesus were the Word and Son of God, then He was certainly the same as God Himself, for God cannot be without his Word and Spirit. John believed that the mutual indwelling of the three persons of the one God, or the perichoresis, enabled Jesus to represent the Spirit as well as the Word of God. This concept provides a basis for John's view of the unity of the Godhead as well as the three hypostases sharing one ousia "without confusion" and "without separation."

In his development of the concept of the perichoresis, or the "circle dance," John explains that the Godhead is somehow always in motion, as in a dance, but a dance of begetting, proceeding and yet remaining unbegotten. Thus, a full understanding of the perichoresis solves the one and three problem, for the three hypostases are "one in all things save in being unbegotten, the being begotten, and the procession." Therefore, if the Father does not exist, then neither does the Son or the Spirit, for their existence is in one another.

From this foundational presupposition, John develops his apologetic approach which critiques Islam with his famous comparison between "associators" and "mutilators." He points out that even the writings of Muhammad teach that Jesus is the Word and Spirit of God (Qur'an 4:171). Thus, he accuses the Muslims of separating Jesus from God and therefore "mutilating"

God himself, for, if the Father were not in union with the Spirit and the Son from the very beginning, then the Father would have been incomplete, or, in John's words, "mutilated." Therefore, John concludes, even the writings of Muhammad give testimony that God is eternally three in one.

This paper analyzes John of Damascus' view of perichoresis, or mutual indwelling, to demonstrate how this concept provides a firm foundation for understanding how a Triune God could share one essence in three hypostases without confusion or separation. It will also explain how John's understanding of this "community of being" enabled him to construct a powerful argument against the Muslim's rejection of the Trinity. Finally, based on John's apologetic approach, a challenge will be given to Christians to regain a clear understanding of the Trinity so that they will be prepared to give an answer to Muslims who deny the Triune God.

Background on the Meaning of Perichoresis

Following are some reflections on the meaning of *perichoresis*:

- "Mutual indwelling"
- "Immanence and transcendence"
- "Without and within"
- Each person of the Trinity "reciprocally contains the others, so that one permanently envelopes and is permanently enveloped by, the others whom he yet envelopes." (Hilary of Poitiers)¹
- The "circle dance"; the "love dance of the Trinity"
- Also known as coinherence and circumincession (Latin: *circumcessio*)
- Verna Harrison: "A complete mutual interpenetration of two substances that preserves the identity and properties of each intact."²
- Gregory Gorsuch: "Perichoresis expresses the idea that the three persons mutually inhere in one another, draw life from one another, "are" what they are by relation to one another. Perichoresis means being-in-one-another, permeation without confusion."³

¹ Hilary the Bishop of Poitiers (c.310c. 367), in his Concerning The Trinity (3:1)

² Verna Harrison, "Perichoresis in the Greek Fathers," St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly 35, no. 1 (1991): 53-65: 54.

³ Gorsuch, Gregory Scott <1999>. "Perichoresis as a Hermeneutical Key to Ontology." Common Ground. <http://www.commongroundseattle.org/temp_07.shtml>. 1999.

- David Bjork: “Perichoresis contains the image of intimacy and of pure reciprocity that does not result in confusion or loss of identity.”⁴
- C.S. Lewis: “The whole dance, or drama, or pattern of this three-Personal life is to be played out in each one of us.”⁵

Catherine LaCugna writes, “In an attempt to describe the relational structure and unity of the Trinity, John Damascene and other church fathers employed the concept of perichoresis to signify the mutual interanimation and dynamic reciprocity of the divine persons. This relationship can only be understood as an irreducible relational dynamic that simultaneously affirms both individuality and mutuality.”⁶

According to John of Damascus, “The abiding and resting of the Persons in one another is not in such a manner that they coalesce or become confused, but, rather, so that they adhere to one another, for they are without interval between them and inseparable and their mutual indwelling is without confusion. For the Son is in the Father and the Spirit, and the Spirit is in the Father and the Son, and the Father is in the Son and the Spirit, and there is no merging or blending or confusion. And there is one surge and one movement of the three Persons. It is impossible for this to be found in any created nature.”⁷

In a sense, then, there is both unity and diversity in the community of the Trinity.

Background on John of Damascus

John was born in Damascus, Syria around 675 A.D.⁸ He was part of a prominent family in the civil administration of Syria⁹ and succeeded his father as the chief financial officer of the

⁴ David E. Bjork, "Toward a Trinitarian Understanding of Mission in Post-Christendom Lands," *Missiology* 27, no. 2 (April 1999), 231-44: 235.

⁵ Lewis, C. S. *Weight of Glory*. New York, NY: Collier Books, Macmillan Publishing Company, 1996, 153.

⁶ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity & Christian Life* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishing, 1992), 270-1.

⁷ Frederic H. Chase, *St. John of Damascus Writings*, *Orthodox Faith* 1.4, 202.

⁸ Daniel Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam. Revisited (Abr-Nahvain, 23. 1984)*, 106.

⁹ Daniel Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam: The Heresy of the Ishmaelites (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1972)*, 17-19, 29-30.

Umayyad Empire during the reign of Abd al-Malik (685-705).¹⁰ John resigned from his post in the Umayyad government and retired to a monastery near Jerusalem, perhaps St. Sabas,¹¹ and wrote most, if not all, of his theological works while in this post, including his most famous work, the *Fount of Knowledge*.¹² This is also where He probably died around 750 AD (at the age of 75).¹³

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 743.¹⁴ 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.

In chapter 1 of Book I of the *Orthodox Faith*, John follows the example of Gregory Nazianzen, as well as the words of the apostle John (John 1:18), in proclaiming that ultimately God is "ineffable and incomprehensible," and therefore what is said about His nature is through revelation by the Son, the Holy Spirit and the creation.¹⁵ 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

¹⁰ Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam*, 26-29, 42.

¹¹ Andrew Louth, *St. John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 6.

¹² Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam*, 51.

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ Chase, *St. John of Damascus: Writings*, xxv.

¹⁵ Georges Florovsky, *The Byzantine Fathers of the Sixth to Eighth Century*, Vol. 9 (Europa: Buchvertriebsanstalt, 1987), 258.

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.

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 of Book 1, John follows Gregory of Nyssa's prologue in his Catechetical Discourse¹⁶ 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."¹⁷ 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."¹⁸ 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 (περιχώρησις)¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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 as one of "constant movement in a circle that implies intimacy, equality, unity yet distinction, and love." This image of interpenetration without confusion seeks to convey the concept that the Godhead is somehow

¹⁶ Ibid., 1.6, 174.

¹⁷ Ibid., 1.6, 174.

¹⁸ Ibid., 1.6, 174.

¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ 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.

always in motion, as in a dance, but a dance of begetting, proceeding and yet remaining unbegotten. John gives an example of how these three persons, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, could all be involved together in the act of baptism, which would involve a moving of the one God through the life of the believer.

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.²¹

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.”²² In regard to the Father, John develops the idea of the hypostasis who is uncreated and unbegotten.²³ In regard to the Son, John explores the concept of the hypostasis who is uncreated and eternally begotten.²⁴

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,”²⁵ without being compounded, since that would make them imperfect. The only way

²¹ Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, And Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2004), 214.

²² OF, 1.7, 175.

²³ Ibid., 1.13, 200

²⁴ Ibid., 1.8, 183.

²⁵ Ibid., 1.8, 185.

this “unity within a community” could exist, then, is for the three Persons to exist in one another, “uncompounded and without confusion.”²⁶ 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 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.”²⁷

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 and the deity of Christ to the belief system that developed into Islam.

The Trinity and the deity of Christ in *Heresy of the Ishmaelites*

In his treatise called the *Heresy of the Ishmaelites*, John addresses 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

²⁶ Ibid., 1.8, 185.

²⁷ Ibid., 1.8, 185.

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 the third of three: for there is no god except One God.” Also in surah 9:31 we find that the Ishmaelites were “commanded 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. And do not say “Three”; desist – it will be better for you: for Allah is one God.” 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?”²⁸

John reasons that if God’s Word and Spirit are taken away from Him, then He is less than God. Indeed, if there were a time when God did not have his Word or his Spirit, John argues, then God would have been incomplete. If God then attached himself to the Word and the Spirit, something would have been added to him and therefore he would have been changed. However, change is something that only a creature can experience, not the Creator. Thus, in order for God to have always been the Creator rather than a created being, he must have always had his Word and his Spirit, which necessitates the eternal nature of his Word, Jesus Christ.

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”

²⁸ 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.

(*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 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.”²⁹ Also, unlike human speech, which dissipates in the air, the Word of God is always subsistent, “always existing in Him.”³⁰ 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.”³¹

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 the Trinity.

Armed with this 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.

²⁹ OF, 1.6, 174.

³⁰ Ibid., 1.6, 174.

³¹ Ibid., 1.6, 174.

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.

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