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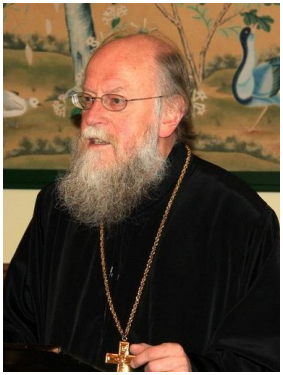
Byzantine Attitudes to Islam

Abstract

For the West, Islam has generally been seen either as a classic example of unbelief (the 'infidel') or as an exotic and dangerously attractive culture, both forms of 'orientalism', largely deriving from ignorance. In contrast, in Byzantium Islam was much closer and much better known; many Christians of the Byzantine tradition lived with Muslims as their neighbours, and politically for Byzantium the Muslim Empire was a partner it was necessary to live with, despite the recurrent desire of the Muslim Empire to extend its reign to Constantinople itself. This paper looks at three examples of engagement with Islam: first, John Damascene, the first Christian to write about Islam; secondly, the



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medieval romance, *Digenis Akritas*, in which Muslim and Christian engage with each other; and thirdly, Gregory Palamas, who spent a year in house arrest under the Ottomans. This bears out an attitude to Islam, based on some, though not necessarily extensive, knowledge, combined with a reluctant willingness to live in some sort of harmony.

Keywords

Byzantine Empire, Byzantine Theology, Islam, John Damascene, Digenis Akritas, Gregory Palamas

1 Introduction

The story of Islam and the Byzantine Empire is one of the gradual destruction, or absorption, of Byzantium by Islam. The sixth century had seen in the Justinian's empire something of the restoration of the dream of a Christian Roman Empire, which we call the Byzantine Empire. The next century saw the rise of Islam, and the rapid loss to the Arab armies of the Eastern provinces of the Empire and then the provinces of North Africa. Even as early as this, the goal of the Muslim Arabs was to take the city of Constantinople, New Rome - Rum, the Arabs called it - but by the early eighth century this goal had been abandoned, at least as an immediate aim. In the following centuries the Byzantines recovered something of their losses, but did not seriously alter the political geography of the Middle East. The next stage in the advance of Islam occurred in the eleventh century, as the Byzantine Empire seemed to unravel after the death of Basil II: in 1071 the Seljuk Turks under Alp Aslan secured a major victory against the Byzantines at Manzikert, in which the Emperor himself, Romanos IV Diogenes, was taken prisoner,

and in the wake of that victory, as a result of Byzantine political disarray, the Seljuks established themselves in Asia Minor. Again the Byzantines regained some of the territory lost, but after the fall of Constantinople to the Western crusaders in 1204, there took place the rise of the Ottoman Turks and a gradual process of attrition, as the Ottomans conquered what remained of the Byzantine Empire, ending - symbolically, at any rate - with the capture of Constantinople and the death of the last Emperor, Constantine XI Palaiologos, in 1453.

Given this long process of subjugation to Islam by the Byzantine Empire, one might expect that Byzantine attitudes to Islam would be uniformly hostile. In fact, it is not as simple as that. The process just sketched in outline was a long process, lasting just over 800 years, and in that period Byzantines and Muslims learnt to live side by side, both politically and, in the conquered territories, as neighbouring communities, or even as neighbours. In the countries of the Middle East, Christians of Byzantine descent and Muslims came to share, and still do, to some extent, holy places and even revere the same saints and holy men. Politically, the Byzantine Empire learnt to live with its Muslim neighbour, particularly after 750, when the capital of the now Abbasid Empire was established in Baghdad, and the focus of the Arab empire turned away from Constantinople towards the East. So far as the Byzantines were concerned, the Abbasids were people to negotiate with. This was one of the things about the Byzantines that upset the crusaders. Whereas for the Western crusaders the Muslims were simply the infidel, to be destroyed, or driven from the Holy Land, by force of arms, for the Byzantines they were political neighbours, to be negotiated with. On the other hand, so far as Christians living in the Middle East were concerned, the crusaders seemed often enough to make little distinction between them and their Muslim neighbours: both suffered at the hands of the Western ar-

mies that sought to liberate the Holy Land for Christians. The sacking of Constantinople by the crusaders in 1204 during the Fourth Crusade was the cause of enduring hatred for the West on the part of the Byzantines. Even though the West offered the only hope for the Byzantines against the encroaching Ottoman Turks, as the Emperors well understood, for many Byzantines the Western Christians seemed even worse than the Turks - 'Better the Muslim turban … than the Latin mitre!'

Byzantine attitudes to Islam - and the attitudes of Byzantium's successors, the Christian nations that emerged in modern times from the Ottoman yoke, as well as the Russian empire that had its own direct experience of Islam - are complex, certainly in comparison with Western attitudes to Islam. For the West, Islam has been a remote threat from the East, and Western attitudes have oscillated between antagonism and attraction; Islam has been the oriental 'Other', a more or less incalculable threat to be opposed outright, or the mysterious Orient - also the 'Other' - the source of forbidden attraction, as Edward Said eloquently argued. Byzantine attitudes were more complex - and also more realistic, based on knowledge of Islam, both a grasp of the nature of the religion and also an acquaintance with the human beings who embraced that religion. The different perspective the Byzantines and their modern successors had - and have - on Islam must be worth attention as the West once again tries to come to terms with the religion of the Prophet and his followers.

In this lecture, however, I must be very selective, and I have chosen three topics that take us from Byzantium's initial encounter with Islam - in Damascus, the capital of the first Muslim Empire, the Umayyad - to an encounter with Muslims less than a century before the final extinction of Byzantium at the hands of the Ottomans. My first topic is St John Damascene, whose knowledge of Islam was gained first hand in the court of the

Caliph at Damascus, where he served for a time as a civil servant concerned with fiscal affairs. My second is the great Greek epic poem, *Digenis Akritas*, which tells of relations between Byzantines and Muslims on the frontier between the two empires in the eleventh century. My third is St Gregory Palamas, who spent a year as a prisoner of the Turks in 1354-5 and engaged in conversation with one of the mullahs he met there. We have, then, two theological encounters with Islam - from the beginning and the end - and in between a more popular account of relations between the two religions as reflected in a mediæval Greek poem.

2 St John Damascene

John Damascene gives us the first informed account of Islam, earlier in fact than any Muslim accounts, except for the traditions represented in the Qur'an. He gained this knowledge at first hand, as a civil servant in the court of the Caliph in Damascus, where he succeeded his father and grandfather, who had been in charge of fiscal matters in the region governed from Damascus, initially under the Byzantines, then under the Persians between 614 and 630, and finally after a brief period serving the Byzantines again, under the Muslim conquerors. John remained at the caliphal court probably until about 705, when the civil service was finally Islamicized; he then retired and became a monk in or near Jerusalem (by tradition, the monastery of Mar Saba in the Kedron Valley). As a monk, John became a considerable theologian, whose influence has been enormous, both within the Byzantine tradition, and in the West, where, from the thirteenth century, he provided access to Greek patristic traditions for the Schoolmen and their successors. He was also a fine liturgical poet, composing many works, especially

canons, for the Byzantine liturgy, his more famous work being the Easter Canon, Ἀναστάσεως ἡμέρα, 'The Day of Resurrection'.

There are two accounts of Islam ascribed to the Damascene. One is his account of Islam in the last chapter of his work in a hundred chapters *On Heresies*, the other what looks like a collection of notes for a disputation between a Christian and a Muslim, or Saracen, as he calls him, which in its present form is probably not from his own hand, but maybe represents a record of his oral teaching, compiled by another.

The last chapter of *On Heresies* presents Islam in somewhat apocalyptic terms: it is the last of the heresies, the forerunner of Antichrist. The religion is presented as politically dominant. John calls the Muslims Ishmaelites, Hagarenes, or Saracens, the last two of these terms being long-established Greek designations for the Arabs. For John all these titles refer to the origin of the Muslims as the descendants of Ishmael, Abraham's first son by his woman servant Hagar, who was cast out with her son by Sarah, Abraham's wife, after the birth of the child (cf. Gen. 16): Ishmaelites is derived from the name Ishmael; Hagarenes from Hagar; Saracens from Sarah - only the first of these is historically plausible. The Muslims then are presented as parallel to the Jews: descendants of Ishmael, as the Jews are descendants of Isaac. This idea of Islam as a kind of Arab parallel to Judaism has a certain plausibility, and would explain the ambivalent attitude of Islam to Judaism as a kind of sibling rivalry, but it is not the view of the Qur'an which presents Islam as a universal, prophetic monotheism. It is, however, close to the form Islam took under the Umayyads, who seem to have thought of Islam as essentially a religion for Arabs. John sees Islam as the religion fashioned by Muhammad for the idolaters - worshippers of the morning star and Aphrodite - whom he converted, a religion made up from the Old and New Testaments and from Christian

heresy. John knows of Muhammad's claims to have received revelations from heaven, which he dismisses as 'laughable'. Muhammad's religion consists, according to John, of belief in one God. Muhammad knows of Christ, who is the Word of God and His Spirit, but he is created and a slave. He was virginally conceived and born of the Virgin Mary, but was not crucified, nor did he die, but was assumed into heaven by God, 'because He loved him'. John criticizes the revelations Muhammad claims to have received, on the grounds that they lack witnesses. He knows how Muslims view Christians: as 'associators' (*hetiari-astai*), who impugn God's unity by associating Christ with Him, and as idolators 'who worship the Cross'. The former of these charges is found in the Qur'an, the latter in one of the hadiths, or traditions deriving from the Prophet. John also knows the 'scriptures' (*graphai*) of the Muslims, and discusses four of them, which he calls 'The woman', 'The camel of God', 'The table' and 'The cow'. Three of these - the first and the last two - are suras of the Qur'an; 'The camel of God' is not found in the Qur'an, but some of the stories that John relates from it are found in other suras. John does not seem to know of any book such as the Qur'an. It could be that John represents a stage in the formation of the Islamic tradition before the Qur'an emerged as such, when individual suras were circulating, but to pursue that would be to stray from our topic. John cites these suras mainly to criticize aspects of Muslim teaching and practice, principally the law of marriage, which he says encourages polygamy and divorce. He ends his account of Islam abruptly with a short list of Muslim customs, mentioned without comment: circumcision, rejection of the Sabbath and baptism, their dietary laws, and absolute prohibition of alcohol.

The *Disputation between a Christian and a Saracen* is rather different, being mainly concerned with philosophical issues, but what is striking about it is that it is concerned with, to quote A.-

T. Khoury, the author of the principal work on the Byzantine theological engagement with Islam, 'the central problems that occupied Muslim theological reflection at the beginning of the eighth century',[1] especially questions of providence and human freewill and the nature of the Qur'an, whether it is created or uncreated. John handles these questions skilfully, and takes a certain delight in arguing his Muslim opponent into a corner, especially concerning the uncreated nature of the Word and Spirit of God, denial of which (in relation to the Qur'an) could, John argues, put the life of his interlocutor at risk.

Two things strike one about John's presentation of Islam. First, his consistent tone of scorn and mockery. These works can only have been intended for Christian eyes. We need to remember, however, that John had nothing of our sense of Islam as a 'world religion', the inspiration of extraordinary cultural achievements. For him it was simply an Arab simulacrum of Judaism, crudely based on Christian and Jewish sources. For all that - and this is my second point - John's account of Islam is accurate. He sees a monotheistic religion of prophetic inspiration, which finds the central error of those who reject its radical monotheism as a manifestation of *shirk*, associating with God something other than God and therefore created. He is also well aware of the issues debated by early Islamic theologians: those concerned with divine providence and human freewill, and the uncreated nature of the Word of God as found in the Qur'an. I think, indeed, we perhaps find reflected in John's works a plausible account of inchoate Islam, before the formalization of the Qur'an. John's accuracy meant that later Byzantine theologians hardly needed to revisit Islam in the light of further knowledge:

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1 A.-T. Khoury, *Les Théologiens byzantins et l'Islam: Textes et auteurs (VIII^e^-XIII^e^ siècles)*, 2nd ed., Louvain: Éditions Nauwelaerts/Paris: Béatrice-Nauwelaerts, 1969, p. 71.

something borne out by Khoury's book to which I have already made reference.

3 Digenis Akritas

Digenis Akritas is a mediæval Greek epic poem, often compared to, or mentioned in the same breath as, Western mediæval poems such as the *Chanson de Roland* or *El Cantar de mio Cid*. This comparison might suggest that *Digenis Akritas* is poem about a Christian warrior fighting against Muslims - as is the case with the *Chanson de Roland* or *El Cid* - for even though it is known that the historical El Cid, Rodrigo Díaz, was a mercenary who fought for both Christian and Muslim masters, there is no trace of such ambivalence in the poem of the Cid, which presents him unambiguously as a Christian champion. *Digenis Akritas* might be expected to fit this pattern. The hero is found in the right place and the right time; the poem is set on the border between the waning Abbasid Empire and the Byzantine Empire in the eleventh century at the end of the Macedonian dynasty, when Byzantium had begun to expand into North Syria; the second of his two names (rarely found together in the poem, except in the title) means 'frontiersman' or 'borderer'. Indeed, the monk who added a prologue to the poem says that the poem is about one

 who achieved victory over the opposing
Agarenes and Ishmaelites
Scythian barbarians ravening like dogs.[2]

However, the monk who wrote the prologue seems only to have known about the poem, and not read the poem carefully him-

[2] Text and translation taken from *Digenis Akritas*, edited and translated by Elizabeth Jeffreys, Cambridge Medieval Classics 7, Cambridge University Press, 1998. Here Book I (Grottaferrata Text), lines 27-9, pp. 4f.

self, for the hero of the poem, the borderer, whose name was Basil, is not at all depicted as a Christian warrior fighting against Islam. Far from it. Basil's other epithet, *digenis*, means 'of twin race' or 'of double descent', for he was the son of a Muslim emir and a high-born Byzantine girl, whom the emir had taken captive in a raid in which her father was killed, and whom he came to marry, while he himself embraced Christianity. The poem explores the borderland between Christianity and Islam, both literally and metaphorically. It is Christian poem, certainly, but its attitude to Islam is not without respect. The Muslim warriors, when they are mentioned, such as the emir and his followers, are depicted as noble and brave fighters. Early on in the poem, there is battle over the abducted girl, the future mother of Basil Digenis, between her brothers and the emir and his army. The account depicts the emir in a good light. Instead of engaging in a hopelessly one-sided battle - an army against five brothers - the emir offers one-to-one combat: himself against one of the brothers. The youngest brother draws the lot, and the theme of David and Goliath seems to be invoked, but the companions of the emir point out the prowess of the young brother:

'Do you see the expert spurring,
the parrying with the sword, the wielding of the spear?
All these reveal experience and bravery.
See then that you are not careless in striking the youth.'[3]

In fact, in half-evoking and then laying aside the *topos* of David and Goliath, the poem presents the emir and the brother as virtual equals.

The emir and the girl marry and Basil 'of twin race' is their son. The rest of the poem concerns his exploits, as much amorous as warlike, though he has a fearsome reputation as a fighter. But

3 *Digenis Akritas*, I, ll. 157-60 (pp. 12 f.).

the fact that he is 'of double descent', *digenis*, is as much as anything a source of pride in the eyes of the poet. Nor are the Muslims, when they appear, depicted as 'ravening dogs', as the prologue promises. It is, of course, a Christian poem, and so a good Muslim is a potential convert - as is the case with the emir - but the Muslims are not despised.

4 St Gregory Palamas

The last century of Byzantium saw a society torn by division; there was civil war and bitter dispute over the imperial throne. The threat of the Ottomans hung over the dying society, and the only hope - support from the West - further divided the Byzantines. Despite all this, this last century of Byzantium saw a final Byzantine renaissance; art and culture flourished, and also dispute about them. The dispute that most racked the Byzantine world concerned the claims of some of the monks of the monastic community of Mount Athos, the peninsula reaching out into the Aegean north of Thessaloniki, to see God himself in their prayer. A central figure in this controversy, the so-called hesychast controversy, was St Gregory Palamas, a monk of mount Athos, who became Archbishop of Thessaloniki in 1347. It was his defence of the hesychasts that won the day. Despite sharp controversy, Palamas was vindicated by synods at Constantinople in 1347 and 1351, and nine years after his death, that is, in 1368, he was declared a saint. It is neither St Gregory Palamas' place in the monastic life of Byzantium or in the hesychast controversy, nor his role in the politics of an empire riven by civil war, that concerns us here, but rather an event that took place towards the end of the life, in 1354, when he was on his way to Constantinople. 1354 is something of an emblematic date in the history of the Byzantine Empire: it was the year in which the

emperor John IV Kantakouzenos abdicated and became a monk; it was the year in which the first Greek translation of St Thomas Aquinas - of his *Summa Contra Gentiles* - appeared; it was also the year in which Gallipoli - Kallioupolis - on the European side of the straits of Dardanelles, having been devastated by an earthquake, was taken by the Turks, thereby establishing a foothold in the Western, European, part of the Byzantine Empire. It was also the year in which Gregory Palamas was taken prisoner by the Turks. On his way to Constantinople, after having passed the isle of Tenedos they encountered bad weather and decided to put into Gallipoli, knowing neither that it had been devastated by earthquake, nor that it was in the possession of the Turks. Palamas was placed under arrest and spent a year a prisoner of the Turks. During this period he was allowed to travel, under escort, through the Turkish-held Asian coast of the Sea of Marmara, and was there welcomed by the Christian communities he encountered. At one point he found himself in Nicaea, modern Iznik, at the monastery of St Hyacinth, a beautiful spot, Gregory tells us, with a well situated among a number of trees, where he found a gentle breeze, peace and shade. There he witnessed a funeral taken by a Muslim mullah, which provided the occasion for a conversation between them. Gregory Palamas tells us about this encounter in somewhat different accounts in two letters.[4] The longer of these two letters, the one to his Church in Thessaloniki, gives an account of Islam, before getting on to the account of the meeting with the mullah. Gregory gives a not inaccurate account of Muslim beliefs about Christ, concentrating on its departure from Christian Orthodoxy,

[4] The letters can be found in Grigoriou tou Palama, *Suggrammata*, ed. P.K. Christou, vol. 4, Thessaloniki 1988, pp. 120-47 (letter to his own Church, pp. 120-41, and the shorter letter 'when he was seized', pp. 142-7).

though expressing all this in unflattering terms. Muslims are an 'impious, God-hating and thoroughly foul race', whom God has consigned to perdition.[5] Interestingly he compares them, not to Ishmael, but to Esau.[6]

Despite this, the conversation with the mullah is respectful. After the funeral has taken place, Gregory asks about the prayers the mullah has offered. He explains that they have prayed to God for the forgiveness of the faults of the departed. That is good, says Gregory, for the judge certainly has power to grant forgiveness. But according to us Christians, Gregory continues, the judge of the whole human race is the Christ who is to come: that is why we pray to him. The mullah replies by observing that Christ is a slave of God. Gregory responds by saying to the mullah that you Muslims also believe that Christ will come to judge the living and the dead, and Gregory proceeds to cite passages from the Old Testament referring to Abraham as our forefather, ὁ ὑμέτερος προπάτωρ, that is, the forefather of both Christians and Muslims. The mullah then changes tack and asserts that the Turks accept the 'four books sent down from God'. These 'four books' seem to be the Pentateuch (that is, the Jewish Torah), the Psalter, the Gospels and the Qur'an - but, he continues, you Christians do not accept our prophet, nor the book that itself came down from heaven, that is, the Qur'an. Gregory then raises the question of witnesses: without witnesses - and there are no witnesses to the revelation of the Qur'an, a point made by Christians from the time of John of Damascus - it would not be right to accept such revelations, and he goes on to speak of Moses and Christ, and contrast them, and their revelations which were attested by witnesses, with Muhammad. The mullah then goes on to cite a supposed passage from the Gos-

5 Gregory Palamas, *Ep. ad ecclesiam* 8 (Christou, IV, p. 124, ll. 7-8).
6 Ibid. (p. 125, l. 11).

pels, omitted by Christians, that bears witness to Muhammad: 'From the rising of the sun to its setting, as you can see, the Conqueror goes forth', which is possibly a conflation of Malachi 1:11 ('From the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations') and Matthew 24:27 ('For as lightning comes from the rising of the sun to its setting, so will the coming of the Son of man be'). Gregory counters this in two ways. First, he denies that the Christians have cut out any passages from the Scriptures. Secondly, and more interestingly, he argues that a conqueror who comes from east to west is not a sign of the 'good God'. There have been other conquerors from the East - he mentions Alexander the Great - but more fundamentally the victory of the good God is not one won by force of arms, but by persuasion. At this point, Gregory Palamas has waxed so eloquent as to annoy some of the Turks and the conversation is brought to an end, not however before both sides to the conversation have agreed that they might find some agreement in what they have discussed.

5 Conclusion

What conclusions about Byzantine attitudes to Islam may we draw from the three topics we have briefly explored? First of all, we can say that the Byzantine attitude to Islam cannot be reduced to an implacable hatred for the Muslims, for all that the Byzantines suffered at the hands of Islam, and certainly returned that suffering with hostility. First of all, there is discussion: John Damascene's notes preserved as the *Disputation* clearly envisage the possibility of discussion, and even his chapter in *On Heresies* outlines Muslim objections to Christianity and a Christian response, while Gregory's letters give an account of a conversation that took place between himself and a mullah.

Discussion entails the possibility of some common ground. Secondly, there is evidence of some admiration for the Muslims, both as brave warriors and as intellectual partners, and maybe even, equals. Gregory Palamas elsewhere compares his Muslim interlocutors favourably with the Christians with whom he found himself in controversy. But it has to be admitted that this does not go very far. There is no suggestion that Gregory Palamas might actually learn anything from his conversation with the mullah, and so far as the poem *Digenis Akritas* is concerned, the best of Muslims, Basil's father, the emir, is one who is prepared to embrace Christianity, and even is represented as persuading his mother and some of his family to follow him in his conversion to the Christian faith. A good deal of this can be traced to St John Damascene, whose early estimate of Islam remained the basis for all later Byzantine attitudes. The Damascene was both well-informed *and* dismissive, even mocking and scornful. In some ways the accuracy of John's account of Islam and its attitudes to Christianity hindered the cultivation of any more positive attitude, for there is little to criticize in what John had to say. John knew what he was talking about; he could evidently read the suras of the Qur'an in Arabic, and was well acquainted with the theological disputes among the early Muslim theologians, his contemporaries. He provides little opportunity for later Byzantine Christians to re-visit Islam and take a more positive attitude towards it.

From our perspective this amounts to a somewhat melancholy tale. Though Byzantine Christians and Muslims could live together at a human level, negotiate and even argue, they knew one another well enough not to have to re-draw the lines of demarcation. It is, it seems to me, another illustration of one of the features of what differing Christians have come to call - rather oddly - 'ecumenical' dialogue, that greater understanding of each other's position does not necessarily lead to deeper

agreement. Indeed, sometimes the opposite holds: the more we understand one another, the more deeply we are convinced that our differences are indeed fundamental. If there is a changing climate today, it has probably less to do with a deeper understanding of the different faiths, than with the way in which different faiths find a sense of solidarity as they face a common horizon of unbelief and indifference. The closest parallel to that in the Byzantine experience was preference sometimes expressed for the Turkish turban over the Latin mitre. The Byzantine attitude to Islam, which lies behind all Christian experience of Islam, has not much to teach us in our very different context, save that, and this may be no small thing, that it is possible to live with, and even have a stubborn respect for, those with whom we cannot agree.