

The Lost Legacy of the Eastern Christianity: An Arab Contextual Theology Under the
Abbasid Caliphate for Modern Missionaries and *Dhimmi* Church No.1

FROM DAMASCUS TO BAGDAD
CHRISTIAN VIEWS OF ISLAM IN THE EARLY AGE

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During the early Islamic era, Christian communities both inside and outside of Islamic territory responded to Islam in various ways. Christian responses toward Islam went through a series of changes during that time. The initial response of non-Chalcedonian Christians such as Nestorians and Monophysites were quite positive and welcoming, while Chalcedonian Byzantine Christians' view of Islam was more negative. Among Byzantine Christians, the first prominent figure who responded to Islam was John of Damascus, the last Eastern Church Father. His view of Islam as "Christian heresy" became an orthodox tenet among Byzantine Christians and succeeding western Christians.¹ Meanwhile, the non-Chalcedonian communities such as the Nestorians and Monophysites survived many years of Muslim rule and eventually evolved their own distinctive view of Islam. Patriarch Timothy was a prominent figure who engaged a dialogue with his Muslim ruler, Caliph Mahdi. His response to Islam was more respectful and conciliatory than that of John of Damascus.

The time span between John of Damascus and Mar Timothy was about half a century, and there were significant differences between their geographic and political contexts. John of Damascus was under Umayyad in Damascus, while Mar Timothy was a Patriarch of the Eastern Church in Bagdad under Abbasid rule. These geographical and political transitions were reflected in Christian responses to Islam. Whereas John of

¹ Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam*, Jews, Christians, and Muslims from the Ancient to the Modern World (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 41.

Damascus's response to Islam was more "confrontational," Mar Timothy's was more "conciliatory."²

This paper is to trace the change of Christian response toward Islam from the early stage to Patriarch Timothy I. The primary research concern is a comparative study of the Christian understanding of Islam between John of Damascus and Mar Timothy of Bagdad and examination of its significance for the modern Christian-Muslim relations.

1. Initial Christian Response to Islam

When Muhammad died in 632, a decade after the *Hajira* -emigration to Medina, Islam was firmly established in Arabia. The battle at Yarmuk River in 636 was decisive for the defeat of the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius. The Muslim victory at Nihawand (in Iran) in 641 ended the Sassanid dynasty. By 651 Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Iraq, and Persia were under the Arab Caliphate, and eventually, the Byzantine Empire lost half of its territory to the Muslim Caliphs.³

How were Christians situated at the time of advent of Islam? Browne describes,

... Heraclius began a campaign of intolerance which was the ruin of his Empire. His first action was to drive the Jews from Jerusalem, and to sanction a general massacre of them, according to some authorities not only in Palestine and Syria but also in Egypt and Asia Minor. For several years he had been maturing a plan for bringing about a reconciliation of the Monophysites and Nestorians with the Melkites on a new

² Clinton Bennett, *Understanding Christian-Muslim Relations: Past and Present*. London: Continuum, 2008. Bennett analyzes the Christian-Muslim relations by two main categories of confrontational and conciliatory.

³ Mohammad A. Rauf, *A Brief History of Islam: With Special Reference to Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Oxford University Press, 1964), 26 ; Hugh Goddard, *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations* (Chicago: New Amsterdam Books, 2000), 34.

basis of uniformity... Heraclius put forward a new doctrine known as Monothelitism, which spoke of one will in Christ instead of speaking of one or two natures... But it failed completely of its object, Cyrus was sent to Egypt as Patriarch to enforce the new doctrine, ... In order to enforce its acceptance Cyrus started a most terrible persecution of the Copts... Thus it came about that his plans for achieving religious unity in the Empire resulted in stirring up in the hearts of the Syrians and Copts such hatred for himself and the Romans as was never forgotten. There is no doubt that this feeling of violent antagonism to the Empire and its ruler made the task of the Arab invaders easier.⁴

The Christians who were under the Islamic expansion mainly belongs to the Chalcedonian Melkites, or the non-Chalcedonians such as the Monophysites and Nestorians. In the early stage, Christian view of Islam were diverse. In the initial stages of Christian-Muslim interaction, most of the Christians who responded to Islam were Eastern Christians. Though number of Melkites' reflections appears as familiar with the Eastern Christians, still their tone was gloomier, reflecting on an apocalyptic perspective on Islam. While the Syrian and Coptic Monophysites regarded "the coming of Islam as a deliverance from imperial oppression," other most Christians of Melkites saw the seventh-century Muslim invasions as "divine judgment or signs of the end time," but few interpreted the faith of Muslims as "continuity with Old Testament forms of piety and even with Abraham."⁵

But these views were not permanent, rather complemented and "largely replaced by others as they became better acquainted with their new rulers" and the faith of Islam.⁶ The first interpretation of Islam was changed when Christians began to see it "in some way a judgment of God, a movement whose purpose was to bring judgment on people who had

⁴ Laurence E. Browne, *The Eclipse of Christianity in Asia: From the Time of Muhammad till the Fourth Century* (London: Cambridge University Press. 1933), 26-27.

⁵ David Thomas and Barbara Roggema, *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History, Volume 1 (600-900)* (Boston: Brill, 2009), 5.

⁶ Ibid.

erred.”⁷ Moffett remarkably depicts the general picture of the first Christians in the Syria under the Arabs:

There is considerable evidence that the Nestorians in Persia welcomed the Arabs as liberators from Zoroastrian oppression and that the Arab conquerors in turn found it more to their advantage to segregate and use the Christians than to exterminate them. Gibbon’s unforgettable metaphor of Christians facing “a Muhammad with the sword in one hand and the Koran in the other” is doubly misleading. To Muhammad the “holy book” was the Bible; the Koran (al-Qur’an) appeared only after his death. And a better metaphor than the “sword,” as far as Muslim-Christian relationships were concerned, would be a net, for after the conquest Christians found themselves caught in the web of Islam but not usually under its sword. The net, if not always comfortable, was at least safer than the sword.⁸

Under this net of Islam, Christian’s interpretation of Islam soon went through series of changes as Christian community experienced sequent challenges through the evolvement of Islamic expansion and Islamicization of the subject people progressed gradually during the Umayyad period (661-750).⁹ It appeared that Islam is more than a fulfillment of scriptural promises, and Christians began to see that Islam as the part of God’s will with a mission to correct the corrupted message of Christian community at that time. The brief bibliographic history of Christian view on Islam can be categorized into several by the writings of Christians during early Islamic era

Conciliatory and Positive Remarks on Muhammad and Islam

⁷ Hugh Goddard, *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations* (Chicago: New Amsterdam Books, 2000), 37.

⁸ Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia Volume 1: Beginnings to 1500* (New York: Orbis Books, 2003), 325.

⁹ Gustave E. von. Grunebaum, *Classical Islam: A History 600-1258*, trans. Katherine Watson (London: George Allen and Unwin LTD, 1970), 64.

In the early stage, the first Christian's interpretation of Islam's advent was the fulfillment of the Ishmaelite promise. Christians attempts to see the advent of Islam through the window of Old Testament. Goddard describes,

In the wake of the initial impact of the Muslim community upon the Middle East, the first Christian reaction to this new phenomenon was to interpret in terms of certain statements of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible which seemed highly pertinent to some of the development of the 630s/10s and 640s/20s. In particular, some of the statement of the Book of Genesis at the start of the Old Testament seemed to offer some kind of key to explain what was happening, as it was there that an attempt was made to allocate significance to the two sons of Abraham- Ishmael... In the course of narrative, it is stated that certain promises were made by God to Ishmael (Gen.21:12-13; 21:18)...When, therefore, the Islamic community burst onto the scene, one interpretation which was put onto its appearance was that it was the fulfillment of these scriptural promises.¹⁰

The first Christian response to the looming Advent of Islam was to interpret it in terms of Old Testament prophecy. It was prospected that the promises to Abraham and Ishmael were fulfilled by the advent of the monotheistic religion of Muhammad.(Genesis 21:12-13; 18) Armenian bishop *Sebeos* claimed that Ishmaelites set out from the desert toward the land of Jerusalem to realize the promise made to Abraham and Ishmael.¹¹

Other positive remarks on Islam appeared in couple of writings of Christians in this period of time. *Isho 'yahb* III of Adioabene(580-659), studied at the theological school of Nisibis, became patriarch of the Church of the east in 649, he was respected by the Muslim leaders. In his Letter 14 to Simon of Rev. Ardashir, ascribes "the Arab dominion over the

¹⁰ Hugh Goddard, *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations* (Chicago: New Amsterdam Books, 2000), 35.

¹¹ Ibid.

world to God's providence."¹² In his letter, he takes positive attitudes towards the Arabs, believing that to whom "God has at this given rule over the world," to them and appreciating Muslims who "praise our faith, honor the priests and saints of our Lord, and give aid to the churches and monasteries."¹³ His view on Islam as "God's providence" is remarkable, as this view will appear in the modern conciliatory scholars.

Another notable remark on Islam as 'half way to truth' appeared in the *disputation* between a monk of a Bet Hale and an Arab notable which was written about 720s as Christian apologetics in the form of questions and answers. Interestingly the Monk alleged that Sergius Bahira was a religious teacher of Muhammad, and that Muhammad "brought the Arabs half-way to the truth."¹⁴ In the *disputation*, the differences between Christianity and Islam is minimized while maintains the conviction that the whole truth can be only found in Christianity.¹⁵ Although its apologetic arguments can be found in the Melkites, John of Damascus and Abu Qurra, its peculiar East-Syrian view of Islam is maintained with the "positive appraisal of Muhammad as a pious man who tried to convert his people to monotheism."¹⁶

Muhammad as False Prophet and Islam as a Sign of the End Time

¹² Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam (Jews, Christians, and Muslims from the Ancient to the Modern World)* (Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2012), 44.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Thomas, 270-271.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

One of the earliest references to Islam in Greek source is *Doctrina Jacobi* which is “an anti-Jewish treatise composed in Africa in 634 against the Heraclius’ order to compel all Jews to convert to Christianity.”¹⁷ It mentions about a prophet, who was from Saracen claiming that he had “the keys of paradise.”¹⁸ The author points out that the new prophet must be false, because “prophet do not come armed with a sword,” while he see Arab conquest “as a sign of the coming end of times and the Arabs are depicted as violent and creating anarchy.”¹⁹ The religion of Arabs was depicted as “bloodshed, Antichrist, and the sensual nature of paradise.”²⁰ The occupation of Jerusalem and subsequent pillage and devastation arouse the Apocalyptic and starker view of Islam. The Apocalypse of Pseudo-Ephrem probably was written between the years 140-180 by a Chalcedonian. The apocalypse stems from the time before the Muslim invasion, but a chapter concerning the Arabs was added to the original text.²¹ The chapter on the Arabs interprets the rise of Arabs as “the messengers of the Antichrist,” and the rise of Arabs will unleash “Gog and Magog” and bring out “the re-establishment of the Roman Empire,” and eventually lead to “the coming of the Antichrist and the end of time itself.”²² This is likely the oldest Syriac apocalyptic writing regarding to the Arabs, and makes a comment on the moral responsibility of Christians for Arab invasion: “the Arabs are sent because of the sins of the Christians.”²³

¹⁷ Ibid., 117.

¹⁸ Ibid., 118.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Griffith, 25.

²¹ Thomas, 160.

²² Ibid., 161.

²³ Ibid.

Similar apocalyptic voices can be heard in *The Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* (Syriac) written by a pseudonymous Syrian monk, to prove that Christian Roman empire was the fourth and last kingdom according to the Daniel's apocalyptic scheme.²⁴ Notably, he depicts the rule of Ishmaelites as "a temporary chastisement and not a state of affairs destined to persist," in analogy of Midianites over Israel in the time of Gideon in the Book of Judges.²⁵ *The Apocalypse* anticipates that Muslim regime will "lead many (false) Christians to apostasy and consequently acts as a force to separate the sheep from the goats."²⁶ The author reflects the general apocalyptic view that the Rome as the fourth kingdom will rise and will inaugurate the last period of world history and put an end to Muslim rule.²⁷ The perspective on Islam in the apocalyptic writings reflects the historical background in the time of Umayyad Caliph 'Abd al Malik who greatly increased the tax upon Christians "as a result of the Caliph's fiscal reform of 691-692," and more surprisingly "claimed the Muslim's right to Jerusalem and built the Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount."²⁸ These historical developments changed the view of Islam and the apocalyptic Christians were persuaded to see the prosperity and success of Umayyad caliphate as a temporary phenomenon rather than a permanent in divine plan. Afterward, apocalyptic view on Islam widespread in the Byzantine and in the West and shaped profoundly the Christian-Muslim relations.

²⁴ Ibid., 164.

²⁵ Ibid., 164-165.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ian Gillman and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, *Christianity in Asia before 1500*. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), 66.

²⁸ Thomas, 166.

God's Judgment

In addition to fulfillment of Scriptural promises, Non-Chalcedonian Christians substantially understood advent of Islam as God's judgment on the error of Byzantine Christians, and equally from the Byzantine perspective as God's judgments on heretics of Monophysites and Nestorians. However, the Arab triumph was seen "as a temporary one, to punish the Empire for such faults as sexual license,... and Christian hopes were focused on the recapture of Jerusalem."²⁹ Severus ibn al-Muqaffa (Bishop of el-Ashmunein) wrote accounts on the Arab Conquest of Egypt, in 642. He depicts the advent of Islam as the punishment for corrupt faith of Romans in *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic church of Alexandria*.

And in those days Heraclius saw a dream in which it was said to him: "Verily there shall come against thee a circumcised nation, and they shall vanquish thee and take possession of the land." ... Muhammad; and he brought back the worshippers of idols to the knowledge of the One God ... And he took possession of Damascus and Syria, and crossed the Jordan, and dammed it up. And the Lord abandoned the army of the Romans before him, as a punishment for their corrupt faith, and because of the anathemas uttered against them, on account of the council of Chalcedon, by the ancient fathers.³⁰

Similarly, Sophronius, the Patriarch of Jerusalem saw Arab invasion and occupation of Jerusalem as divine judgment. Sophronius was known as the patriarch of Jerusalem (634-638), who after the lengthy Arab siege (636-637), led to surrender Jerusalem to Arab conqueror. In 638 he completed compact with Caliph 'Umar to avoid violent conquest and

²⁹ Gillman, 66.

³⁰ Sawirus ibn al-Muqaffa, *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria*, trans. Basil Evetts, pt. I, ch. 1, from *Patrologia Orientalis*, Vol. I, (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1904), 489-497; reprinted in Deno John Geanakoplos, *Byzantium: Church, Society, and Civilization Seen Through Contemporary Eyes*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 336-338; [book on line]; available from <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/642Egypt-conq2.asp#Al-Baladhuri>; internet; accessed on 15 Feb. 2014.

pillage on population and holy places of Jerusalem.³¹ Thomas comments on significance of his life and works in Christian-Muslim relation.

Sophronius represents the kind of Christian priest and ascetic that the Qur'an praises (Sura 5:82) for humility, and the type of person who Muslim traditions suggest influenced Muhammad during his formative years. The life and works of Sophronius provide significant information and comment on the context of the emergence of Islam the first wave of the Arab, and the earliest meetings between Christians and Muslims.³²

In the response to the Arab conquer as divine judgment, Sophronius called fellow Christians for repentance to be freed from the Muslim yoke.³³ In his 'Synodical Letter' (634) Sophronius made references to the Saracens "who have now risen up against us unexpectedly and ravage us with ... impious and godless audacity," and in his conclusion, he wishes that "strong and vigorous scepter" of the Christian emperors may quickly "break the arrogance of all the barbarians and especially of the Saracens" and "quell their mad insolence."³⁴ On Christmas sermon in 634 delivered his sermon at the Church of the *theotokos* in Jerusalem, he spoke of the siege of Jerusalem by Arabs and lamented that they could visit Bethlehem to celebrate the birthplace of Christ.³⁵ In his sermon on *Holy Baptism* or *Epiphany*, on the occasion of the feast of the baptism of Christ in 637, he depicted "the predicament of the Christians in the hands of the vengeful and God-hating Saracens."³⁶ He questioned, "Why so many wars have been waged against us... Why has there been so much destruction and plunder?" In his sermon, he answered that sufferings were caused by the sins of the

³¹ Thomas, 121.

³² Ibid.

³³ Gillman, 66.

³⁴ Thomas, 123.

³⁵ Ibid., 125.

³⁶ Ibid., 126.

Christians: “We are ourselves, in truth, responsible for all these things and no word will be found for our defense.”³⁷ A Christian account depicted the siege of Jerusalem.

The godless Saracens entered the holy city of Christ our Lord, Jerusalem, with the permission of God and in punishment for our negligence, which is considerable, and immediately proceeded in haste to the place which is called the Capitol. They took with them men, some by force, others by their own will, in order to clean that place and to build that cursed thing, intended for their prayer and which they call a mosque.³⁸

His lamenting and confessing description on the siege of Jerusalem is colored by the view of Islam as the tool of God’s punishment on sins and spiritual negligence of Christians.

Meanwhile non-Chalcedonians’ view of Islam differed substantially from the Melkites as it interprets the Islamic invasion as divine deliverance from cruel persecution of Byzantine Empire. A Syrian Monophysite, Michael claimed, “The God of vengeance,” by raising the children of Ishmael from the south, “delivers us from the hands of Romans” and frees us “from the cruelty of the Romans, their wickedness, anger, and ardent cruelty toward us and to find ourselves in peace.”³⁹ Eastern Christians both Monophysites and Nestorians are common in their view that the advent of Islam is punishment of God upon the Romans who enforced their Chalcedonian beliefs and persecuted them. Indeed, Byzantine authorities enforced harsh treatment of Nestorians and Monophysites in Syria and Egypt. Accordingly

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Hoyland, Robert G. *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam*. Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam, 13. (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1997), 63; quoted in Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 26-27.

³⁹ Goddard, 37.

the non-Chalcedonian Eastern Christians welcomed Muslim rulers, seeing them “as liberators from the cruelty of the rule of Byzantine emperors and ecclesiastical authorities.”⁴⁰

In the final analysis there were diverse views on Islam during the first period of Islamic advent. Goddard summarizes three main types of Christian interpretation of Islam before the ninth century: “fulfillment of God’s promises to Abraham and his son Ishmael”; divine judgment on “Christians who accepted the Christological definition of the Council of Chalcedon”; and “the Christian heresy.”⁴¹

Though there were considerably positive appraisals of Islam and Muhammad, obviously the Christians of all communities regarded the conquest of Arabs as a disaster and blamed the sins and deviation of the adverse Christians whose heretic teachings caused the disaster brought by Islam.⁴²

2. John of Damascus (675-749): Islam as Heresy

Christians who kept royalty to Chalcedonian beliefs and were adherent to the Byzantine liturgy, even under the rule of Muslims, developed different view on the advent of Islam. John of Damascus (675-749) is a prominent figure to represent this view. John, his Arabic name was al-Mansur (the victor), was son of Sergius who was in a high office under Umayyad Caliphate (661-750). John succeeded his father and remained in the office during

⁴⁰ Ibid., 38,

⁴¹ Ibid., 41.

⁴² Griffith, 28

Umayyad caliphate, then withdrew himself allegedly to the monastery of St. Sabas near Jerusalem where he spent his rest of life. It is known that John's grandfather Mansur surrendered the city of Damascus to Muslim Caliph and the family of Mansur continued to serve under the Caliphate administration. It is ironic that in spite of his family's close link to Muslim Caliph, John's view of Islam is heavily confrontational. His confrontational view of Islam will be explained in his socio-religious milieu and his personal doctrinal conviction.

Umayyad caliphs moved their capital from Medina in Arabia to the city of Damascus where John was grown up and Greek and Syriac Christians outnumbered the Arabic – speaking Muslims.⁴³ Griffith points out that the Arabicization and Islamicization was the two main socio-religious challenges that John of Damascus faced.

It was during the Umayyad period, and particularly during the reigns of the caliph Abd al-Malik (685.–705) and his sons and successors that the twin social processes of Arabicization and Islamicization began in earnest in the territories of the Levant which the Muslim Arabs had conquered and occupied in the generation prior to John's birth. These were also the territories of the Roman Empire.'s three ecclesiastical patriarchates, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem. The Umayyads mounted a concerted campaign to claim the occupied territories for Islam, and it was during their reign, in the years around the turn of the eighth century, when "Syria underwent a reorientation by 180 degrees in strategic and geopolitical terms." that the local Christian communities themselves first registered their awareness that the invading and occupying Arabs had established a new religious hegemony in the land.⁴⁴

In line with this religious campaign, Caliph Abd al Malik constructed the Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, and the Great Umayyad Mosque of Damascus was built on the ruins of the church of St. John the Baptist by Caliph Al-Walid (705-715) to

⁴³ H. 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* 11, no. 2 (Summer, 2008): 208.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 208-209.

exhibit the physical hegemony of Islam over the Christian sites along with Arabic road signs and employment of Arabic instead of Greek for public records.⁴⁵ Griffith posits the eighth century Christians in the response to the social and religious challenges of Islam in “the twin social processes comprising the Arabicization and the concomitant Islamicization.”⁴⁶ In the time of John, this socio-religious context was aggravated by Christians’ iconophobia under Muslim’s pressure and iconoclasm controversy among Christian groups.

St. John of Damascus and his Arabic-speaking heirs, like Theodore Abu Qurrah (c. 755 – c. 830), were the spokesmen who upheld the ‘Melkite’ tradition. They wrote in reaction not only to the largely Syriac-speaking ‘Jacobites’ and ‘Nestorians’, but also against the multiple religious challenges of the era in Syria/Palestine, including those coming from Muslims and Manichees, as well as from new movements among the Christians themselves, such as an enthusiasm for iconophobia which arose among some Christians living under Muslim rule in the eighth century. When iconoclasm was then adopted as an imperial policy in Byzantium in the early eighth century, it exacerbated the embarrassment of orthodox Christians living under the Muslims, especially in the Holy Land.⁴⁷

The initial Christian responses to Arab invasion were based on the presumption that Arab invasion would be sporadic and temporary. During this initial stage, Christians perceived Arab invasion primarily as military challenges. However, Arabs didn’t return to their lands, but established Islamic Empire upon the former Christian Byzantine land. Then Christians began to understand Arab’s religious aspiration and saw it as religious challenges. Accordingly, Christians under Arab caliphate rulers took seriously Islam as religious counterpart and started to respond more in the theological terms with informed knowledge to Muslim counterparts. Gillman describes the *Modus Vivendi* (way of living) developed for Christians in Umayyad period.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 209-210.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 210-211.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 219.

In general the Christians were regarded as a *milla*, or religious sect, and were required to pay special tribute taxes, not least in lieu of military service. They were given the right to keep (most of) their churches, but, ostensibly, were not permitted to build new ones. Tax reforms instituted by ‘Umar II (AD 717-720) encouraged conversion to Islam, but churches and monasteries remained exempt from such taxation. However, he insisted that Christians and Jews wear distinctive garb, and he excluded them from public office.⁴⁸

In this religious pressure from Islamic authorities, John of Damascus appeared as one of prominent figure who took Islam as a serious religious challenge and wrote to address it and prepare fellow Christians for apologetics.

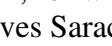
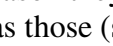


John’s writings were produced in this socio-religious context, in order to defend his convincing orthodox faith against inwardly Christian heretics and Islam from out of Christian community. He left a treatise concerning Christian heresies in which he devoted the last section to Islam and beside a *Dialogue with a Saracen* as a manual for Christians in their arguments with Muslims. In his writing *De Haeresibus* he identified one hundred heresies and Islam was the last in the list.⁴⁹ In *Disputatio* he gave a manual to instruct Christians for polemic in a discussion between a Christian and Muslim. His knowledge and attitude relate to Islam is renown as traditional confrontational approach among Christian world and has been employed as orthodox apologetic toward Islam in succeeding time.

Islam as Ishmaelite Heresy

⁴⁸ Gillman, 69.

⁴⁹ Clinton Bennett, *Understanding Christian-Muslim Relations: Past and Present* (London: Continuum, 2008),66.

John employed the epithet “a deceptive superstition of the Ishmaelites,” and “the fore-runner of the anti-Christ.” to identify Arab Monotheism in beginning of the section on Islam in *De Haeresibus*.⁵⁰ John writes,

There is also, prevailing unto now, the deceptive error of the Ishmaelites, a fore-runner of the anti-Christ. It takes its origin from Ishmael who was born by Hagar to Abraham; for which reason they are called Hagarenes and Ishmaelites. But they call themselves Saracens, as those (sent away) empty by Sara,   because of that which was said by Hagar to the angel. “Sara sent me away empty,  .

These then, served idols and worshiped the morning star and Aphrodite, whom they also named in their own tongue “*Chabar*,” which indeed signifies “great.” Accordingly until the time of Heraclius they openly served idols. From that time and until now a false prophet arose for them surnamed Mamed, who having happened upon the Old and New Testament, in all likelihood through association with an Arian monk, organized his own sect. And when by pretence of godliness he had gained the favor of the people, he declared that a scripture had been brought down to him from heaven. Wherefore when he had inscribed in his book certain things worthy of ridicule, he gave it to them as an object to be revered.⁵¹

John sees Islam as “the deceptive error of the Ishmaelites”⁵² in allusion to the heresy with the illustration: Muhammad formulated “his own sect” arbitrarily upon the Old and New Testament; Muhammad was influenced by association with an Arian monk. Although John did not employ the exact term “Christian heresy,” it is interpreted that John sees Islam as ‘Christian heresy’ on the basis of its heretical Christology.⁵³

However, according to John Islam is colored not only by heretical elements and but also paganism. Ishmael is taken as the blood origin of the Muhammad and his early followers.

⁵⁰ John of Damascus, *On Heresies*, ed. N.A. Newman, *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue: A Collection of Documents from the First Three Islamic Centuries (632-900 A.D.)* (Hatfield, Pennsylvania: Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute, 1993), 139; Goddard, 38.

⁵¹ John of Damascus, *On Heresies*, 139.

⁵² Ibid. *Skeia* implies figuratively spiritual darkness or error. Latin text uses “*superstatio*.”

⁵³ Bennett, 70.

The terms employed to refer to Muhammad and his followers in John's writings are Hagarenes, Ishmaelites, and Saracens. John's usage of the terms with reference to Muslims is paralleled with the historical observance that in Canon law between 650 to 1000 Christian authorities regularly refer to Muslims as 'Saracens,' 'Hagarenes,' and 'Arabs' while the terms 'pagans,' 'gentiles' are used to refer to other religious communities including Muslims.⁵⁴ In contrast to the John's allusive usage the term of "Ishmaelite heresy," Orthodox Christian authorities regarded precisely Muslims as 'pagans,' "neither as Jews nor heretical Christians."⁵⁵ Apart from the orthodox Christian authorities' view, John's classifying Islam as 'heresy' listed in his *De Haeresibus* was unique and unparallel with Orthodox's view of pagan Muslims. Consequently it is supposed that John was accused as "Saracen-minded" by contemporary Byzantine orthodox Iconoclasts in Constantinople.⁵⁶

Overall, John's allegation of Islam as heresy is well grounded by substantial elements. Firstly the ancestry lineage of the Ishmaelites suggests the influence Abrahamic monotheism. Secondly, Muhammad was influenced considerably by his contacts with Christians and Jewish community. Thirdly from association with Arian monk and other heretics, Moh Muhammad supposedly derive the Docetic teaching for Christology denying divinity of Christ and his real crucifixion on the cross. The story of encounter between Muhammad and Bahira the monk is appeared and supported by various sources in both Christian and

⁵⁴ David M. Freidenreich, "Muslims in Canon Law, 650-1000" in *Christian-Muslim Relations A Bibliographical History*, Vol. 1 (600-900) ed. David Thomas and Barbara Roggema (Boston: Brill, 2009), 84.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 90.

⁵⁶ Griffith, Sidney H., *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam (Jews, Christian, and Muslims from the Ancient to the Modern World)* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 40-41.

Islamic.⁵⁷ According to the legend, young Muhammad encountered a Christian monk named Bahira during the Caravan trip in south of Damascus and informed that he would become a prophet.⁵⁸ Islamic sources interpret the legend mainly “to confirm Muhammad’s prophethood”⁵⁹ and Bahira as one of “‘true Christians,’ whose faith was unaffected by the tainted scripture and the manmade doctrines of the Church”⁶⁰ and he recognized the prophethood of Muhammad. While Christian sources suggest mainly that he taught Muhammad about God and religion.

Though heretical influence on Muhammad is convincing, historicity of direct relation between Docetic and Muhammad is questionable. In disagreeing with Docetic influence on Islamic Christology, Browne suggests that Muhammad’s denial of Christ’s divinity would arise from the belief that “God would not have allowed a prophet to die such as a shameful death.”⁶¹ Even though Browne’s suggestion is persuasive, John’s remark on Islam as “Ishmaelites heresy and a fore-runner of the anti-Christ’ is well supported by the biblical notion of 1 John 4:1-3 and Mathew 24:24 which John supposedly used to evaluate Islam. Goddard suggests that John’s notion of ‘Islam as anti-Christ’ should be understand in the reference to heretic who deny that Jesus came in the flesh, is perfect God and perfect man. (1

⁵⁷ Suleiman A. Mourad, “Christian and Christianity in the *Sira* of Muhammad” *Christian – Muslim Relations A Bibliographic History vol.1 (600-900)* ed. David Thomas and Barbara Roggema (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 62. Mourad cites various Muslims sources: Ibn Hisham, *Sira*, I, p.147/*The Life of Muhammad*, pp.79-81; Ibn Sa’d, *Kitab al-tabaqat al-kubra*, Beirut, 1958, I, pp.120-21; al Tabri, *Ta’rikh*, i, pp.519-20/*The History of al-Tabari*, vi, pp.44-46; al-Baladhuri, *Ansab*, I, pp.96-97.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Barbara Roggema, *The Legend of Sergius Bahira: Eastern Christian Apologetics and Apocalyptic in Response to Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 151.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 37.

⁶¹ Browne, 20.

John 4:2-3).⁶² For John of Damascus, Muhammad and Islam qualified to be called as heresy and anti-Christ according to scripture.

Although John sees the Islam as one of Christian heresy, John has gone even further to trace the pagan influence on Islam. “*Chabar*” was suggested as the name of morning star and Aphrodite those Ishmaelites worshiped until Muhammad rose. Interestingly John alleges that the Azan, the calling for prayer (*salat* in Arabic or *Namaz* in Persian) started with “*Allah Akbar*- God is great” is derived from the name of the pagan god. John’s allegation that the Islam is derived from the paganism would had been bold and even risked his own life since it could be punished as blasphemy against Islam and Allah. John’s bold allegation regarding pagan origin of Islam can be understood in considering situation that John “wrote in pastoral concerns for whole ‘Melkite’ church” in Greek as which “was the liturgical and scholarly language of choice for all the members of his church during his lifetime”⁶³; he allegedly wrote it in the Saba Monastery or in Jerusalem as a priest after he withdrew from the caliphate office.⁶⁴

His negative assessment of Islam with informed knowledge has provided the apologetic resource for arguments on Islam and has contributed to confrontational view of Islam for succeeding Christians in debates with Muslims.

⁶² Goddard, 40

⁶³ Griffith, John of Damascus, 229-230

⁶⁴ Ibid., 232. Griffith observes that recent inquiry casts some doubt on the historicity of traditional claim that John inhabited in *sabas* Monastery, and considers it is confirmable that Patriarch John V “ordained John of Damascus a priest in Jerusalem” and he wrote theological tracts in Greek to “meet the needs of the local church of Jerusalem as well as the wider network of ‘Melkites’ in the caliphate.”

Prophethood of Muhammad and Invalidity of the Qur'an

John's harsh description of Muhammad as "false prophet" and "forerunner of Antichrist" is noteworthy. John even shed a strong light on the Muhammad's immorality. John comments on *surat* on "the Woman" as "foolish sayings." John criticizes that Muhammad permits a man to take openly four wives and a thousand concubines, and divorce whomever he pleases.⁶⁵ Then he gave Muhammad's exemplary account of taking Zeid's wife.

Mamed had a co-worker named Zeid. This man had a beautiful wife whom Mamed desired. When they were seated together, Mamed said, "O thou, God has commanded me to take your wife." And he replied; "Thou art an apostle; do as God has said to you; take my wife." Or rather, that we may tell it from the beginning, he said to him; "God commanded me that you should divorce your wife." And he divorced her. After many days he said; "But God commanded that I should take her." Then when he had taken her, and when he had committed adultery with her, he made such as law: "Let him who desire it, divorce his wife. But it after the divorcement he shall return to her, let another marry her. For it is not lawful (for him) to take her, unless she shall have been married by another (Qur'an 2:230). And if indeed a brother divorce her, let his brother, if he be willing, marry her." In the Scripture itself he declares such things; "Till the ground which God has give you, and beatify it; and do this things and in such manner," –not to say, as he does, things altogether shameful.⁶⁶

John presents solid arguments on the invalidity of Muhammad's prophethood in the section of *The Discussion of a Christian and a Saracen*. His argument points out the lack of the miracles and signs of Muhammad.

For Moses and Christ did not became worthy to be received (simply) because they were preaching and teaching as you have assumed, so that Muhammad also should be believed because of his preaching and teaching; but consider the record concerning each which is trustworthy. [Here follows an account of the miracles of Moses' staff and the hand in his bosom (Ex.4:1-8).] And God said to him, "If they will not believe

⁶⁵ John of Damascus, *On Heresies*, 142. In Qur'an Surat *An-Nisā'* (The Women) *Allah* 4:3 allows four wives; In Surat *Aṭ-Ṭalāq* (The Divorce) 65:1 *Allah* allows husband to divorce from his wife by declaring "I divorce you" three times.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

the first sign, nor the second, make the water blood.” And so after Moses had been sent, he did (thus); and his words were confirmed by his works....Christ come confirming in Himself his mission from God; (for) testimony was borne (to Him) not only by the prophecy of Moses; but He established Himself by signs, wonders and mighty works after that prophecy... this one, who was foretold by Moses, who by so many and such signs has demonstrated that He came from God, declared to His disciples, saying, “The law and the prophets (were) until John the Baptist. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” Where then is your prophet? That is not obscure.⁶⁷

John’s arguments are primarily laid on the biblical definition of prophethood. And he presents the evidence of signs and miracles performed by Moses and Christ to prove validity of their prophethood. Then he sharply compares Moses and Christ with Muhammad who didn’t demonstrate any miracles and signs, and directly questions the prophethood of Muhammad. John’s questioning validity of Muhammad’s prophethood due to the lack of signs and miracles appear repeatedly in succeeding Christian apologetic debate with Muslim counterparts. For example, John’s remark on Muhammad reappeared in the events of Martyrs of Cordoba with the form of eschatological expectations in mid of ninth century.

Besides questioning the validity of Muhammad’s prophethood, John refutes authenticity of Qur’an.

This, we say, we know: but in what manner did this scripture come down to your prophet, we ask. They answer that at a time when he fell asleep the scripture came down upon him... again we ask, “How is it that when he commended us in your scripture to do nothing or receive nothing without witness, you did not inquire of him ‘First, do you yourself show through witnesses that you are a prophet and that you have forth from God; and what scripture testifies of you? They keep silent, having been put to shame...for the one who delivered this scripture to you has no verification from any source, nor is any previous witness to him known; yet while he was sleep, he received this (scripture).”⁶⁸

⁶⁷ John of Damascus, *The Discussion of a Christian and a Saracen*, 151-152.

⁶⁸ John of Damascus, *On Heresies*, 140.

He refutes directly the Muslims' assertion that Muhammad received the Qur'an when he sleeps in the absence of witnesses. For John, the notion of transmitting Qur'an to Muhammad without witnesses and verification from outer sources is against principle of the revelation itself. John's stark assessment on Ishmaelite scripture as foolish, worthy of ridicule and lack of verification is undeniable.⁶⁹

To sum up, John's tone toward Islam and Muhammad is heavily apologetic and polemic since the treatise was written to refute Christian heresies and defend orthodox faith. Muhammad's prophethood is rejected by John accusing him as "false prophet" who had formulated his doctrine in "association with an Arian monk."⁷⁰ In the response to Ishmaelite heresy employing with direct attack and refutation, John shows neither respect nor conciliatory attitudes toward Muhammad's prophethood and validity of Qur'an.

Trinity and Divinity of Christ

John identifies the Ishmaelite heresy regarding Christ in a lengthy passage.

He says there is one God, maker of all things, not begotten nor begetting (Qur'an 112:3). He says that Christ is a Word of God and His Spirit (Qur'an 4:169), but created (Qur'an 3:52) and a servant (Qur'an 43:59) and that He was born without seed from Mary, the sister of Moses and Aaron (Qur'an 19:29). For the Word of God and the Spirit came in unto Mary and she bore Jesus (Qur'an 4:169; 19:16-21), a prophet and a servant of God (Qur'an 4:156); and the Jews unlawfully determined to crucify Him, and when they seized Him, they crucified Him in appearance only (Qur'an 4:156) because He loved Him. And this he says that, when Christ had come up (Qur'an 5:116) into the heaven, God asked Him saying: "O Jesus, did you say, 'I am the Son of God and God?'" and Jesus answered, "Be gracious unto me, Lord; You know that I said not so, nor did I count myself above being Your servant (Qur'an 4:170); but erring men wrote that I said this things, and spoke falsely against me and

⁶⁹ Ibid.,143-144

⁷⁰ Ibid., 139.

have been deceived.” And God answered and said to Him, I know that you did not say these things.”⁷¹

He refutes the errors of certain Qur’an verses: Christ is “only a messenger of Allah, and His word which He conveyed unto Mary, and a spirit from Him”(4:171), but “created” (3:59) and “a servant” (43:59); His mother Mary was the sister of Moses and Aaron (19:27-28); Jews “they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him” but in appearance only (4:157), for Allah “took up unto Himself” into heaven (4:158).⁷²

In *The Discussion of a Christian and a Saracen*, John guides contemporary Christians in their arguments with Muslims on the theme of Christology in the format of dialogue.

If you are asked by a Saracen: ‘What do you call Christ? Say to him, “The Word of God;” nor think that you say amiss, for He is called in Scripture, the Word and the Arm of God and the Power of God and many such things. Moreover do you in turn ask him, “What is Christ called by your scripture?” Then he too will be eager to ask you another question, seeking thus to escape you. But by no means do you reply to him until indeed he has answered that which you will have asked him. For necessity will compel him to answer you by saying, “By my Scripture he is called the Spirit and the Word of God.” Then again ask him, “By your Scriptures the word said to be created or uncreated?” if he will say, “Uncreated,” say to him, “Behold you agree with me. For everything not created, but (existing) uncreated, is God.” If, however, he will have said that the Word and the Spirit is created, then inquire; “Who created the Word and the Spirit?” for if compelled by necessity he will reply “God Himself created (the Word and the Spirit),” then do you again say, “Therefore before God created the Spirit and the Word, He had neither Spirit nor Word.” When he hears this, he will flee from you since he has no answer.⁷³

Interestingly John guides Christians how to use the arguments with informed knowledge of Qur’an and theological notion of the Word. It is not doubttable that John has an accurate knowledge of the Qur’an which refer to Christ as “the Word and the Spirit of God” and masterly know how to use it to verify divinity of Christ as the Word of God. As Bennett

⁷¹ John of Damascus, *On Heresies*, 139.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ John of Damascus, *The Discussion of a Christian and a Saracen*, 144.

observed, John's accurate knowledge of Islam is appeared in his text in a positive way, alongside he addresses the main theological topics such as crucifixion, divinity of Christ as Word.⁷⁴

However, John seems to be satisfactory with verifying the divinity of Christ as the Word of God and the Spirit of God and doesn't attempt to articulate the orthodox doctrine of trinity by distinguishing the Word of God and the Holy Spirit. As John's arguments are primarily focusing Christology in the dialogue with Muslims, it is supposed that for John, articulating Trinitarian orthodox formulation would not appropriate and might be even distractible.

John took seriously Muslims' accusation against Christians as "*Hetariastai*" (Associators, *Shirk* in Islamic term) who sets Christ as an associate beside God when they say that Christ is Son of God.

Again we say to them: "Since that Christ is Word of God and Spirit, how is it that you revile us as *Hetariastai*? For the Word of God and the Spirit are not separated from the one in whom they are by nature. If therefore His Word is in God, it is evident that the Word is also God. But is the Word is outside of God, and then according to you God is without reason and without life. And so, fearing to provide an Associate for God, you have mutilated Him. It was better for you to say that He has an Associate than to mutilate Him and to treat Him as stone or wood or some insensible thing. Wherefore you speak falsely of us when you call us "*Hetariastai*"; but we call you *Koptai* (Mutilators) of God."⁷⁵

He responds Muslims' accusation on Christians who set Christ as equal to God with counter accusation on Muslims. Reversely John accuses Muslims of being "*Koptai*"-mutilators of God who mutilates God by denying the divinity of the Word-Christ and consequently God become like stone or some insensible thing "without reason and without life."

⁷⁴ Bennett, 75.

⁷⁵ John of Damascus, *On Heresies*, 141.

John's notion of Islam as "Ishmaelite heresy" regarding trinity and Christ's divinity had earlier been alluded by a monk in the monastic communities of Sinai, Anastasios of Sinai. In his work *Hodegos* (The Guide) in Greek, Anastasios refers to the "false notions of the Arabs," erroneous Islamic ideas concerning Christian faith.⁷⁶ Anastasios comments,

Because, prior to any discussion at all, we must condemn however many false notions about us the opponent has, as when we set out to converse with Arabs we have first to condemn anyone who says, "Two gods," or anyone who says, "God has carnally begotten a son," or anyone who makes prostration as to God, to any creature whatever, in heaven or on earth. Likewise, in regard to the rest of the heresies, it is necessary first to condemn however many false opinions about the faith they have. For, giving heed to these things, they accept the rest more eagerly.⁷⁷

Anastasios' comment on Islam shows that Islamic false notions about Christian faith mainly presented two themes: "two gods" and "carnal birth of Christ." First false notion of two gods is about "Jesus and Mary as two gods." In the Qur'an texts, the Islamic view of Jesus, his mission and Jesus' mother is depicted in the scene of judgment before God where Jesus stands in: God said, "O Jesus, son of Mary, did you tell people, 'Take me and my mother for two gods instead of God?'" (Sura 5:116).⁷⁸ Anastasios condemns this false notion of "two gods" which misunderstood Christians' belief that Jesus is God, the Son of God, and Mary is the mother of God.⁷⁹ The second false notion about Christian faith is the God's involvement in the carnal generation of Christ. In Qur'an 6: 101 assumes false notion that God has a female consort: "The Creator of heaven and earth— how does He have offspring? He did not

⁷⁶ Sidney H. Griffith, "Anastasios of Sinai, the *Hodegos* and the Muslims," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 32 (1987): 341– 358; quoted from Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 28.

⁷⁷ Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 29.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 30

have a female consort. He created everything.”⁸⁰ The Islam’s false notions about Christian faith condemned by Anastasios come up repeatedly in Christian apologetics on Islam in later time.

Prior to John of Damascus, Syrian bishop Jacob of Edessa (708) wrote about the Islam’s confusion between the Word and the Spirit.

The Muslims, too, although they do not know nor wish to say that this true Messiah, who came and is acknowledged by the Christians, is God and the son of God, they nevertheless confess firmly that he is the true Messiah who was to come and who was foretold by the prophets; on this they have no dispute with us.... They say to all at all times that Jesus son of Mary is in truth the Messiah and they call him the Word of God, as do the holy scriptures. They also add, in their ignorance, that he is the Spirit of God, for they are not able to distinguish between word and spirit, just as they do not assent to call the Messiah God or son of God.⁸¹

He points out that Muslims’ confusion in distinguishing the three persons in Trinity and this ignorance causes Muslims to deny divinity of Christ.

John of Damascus’s view of “Ishmaelite heresy” was alluded by his precedent Christians. Prior to John of Damascus, view of Islam was already being evolved among Melkites Anastasios and Syrian Jacob of Edessa. Eventually the view of “Islam as heresy” was fully developed in St. John of Damascus’ works and became a source for apologetics against Islam in coming generations.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

3. Mar Timothy (780-823 A.D.): Muhammad in the Path of Prophets

John's harsh tone regarding Muhammad's prophethood and Islam was diluted and softened in Patriarch Timothy's conciliatory dialogue with the Caliph Mahdi. Mingana suggests that the dialogue between the Patriarch and the Caliph Mahdi was conducted in 781 originally in Arabic language, and the primary intention of Patriarch Timothy was to give an account of his answers to Caliph's questions.⁸² The dialogue of Mar Timothy and the Caliph Mahdi is regarded as an exemplary dialogue of Nestorian-Abbasids.⁸³ As a subject to the Muslim Caliph, Mar Timothy presented his view of Islam in a dialogue format, face to face with his Muslim ruler Mahdi. In addition to Timothy's physical position, his employment of conciliatory approach toward Islam can be explained in his political and theological context as well.

Moffett employs the word "net" to describe the experience of Christians under Islam can be embodied through the *Dhimmitude*.⁸⁴ Browne writes,

With the completion of the Arab conquest, the Christians, together with the Jews and Zoroastrians, entered into the position of protected subject people of *dhimmis*, each community being as it were a little state within the state. In later times these communities were known as *melets*, and the system continued under successive Muslim dynasties until its abolition in Turkey in 1923. The *dhimmis* were not only tolerated, but were entitled to the protection of the state. They were not allowed to fight in the army; and in lieu of military service were subject to a special tax known as the *jizya*... not only the payment of *jizya*, but also the humiliating conditions were to which the *dhimmis* were subjected. The chief of these conditions were that the *dhimmi*

⁸² Alphonse Mingana, "Prefatory Note" in *Timothy's Apology for Christianity*, Edited and translated by A. Mingana. Woodbrooke Studies: Christian Documents in Syriac, Arabic, and Garshuni, Vol. 2 (Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons, 1928), 11.

⁸³ Newman, 163.

⁸⁴ Moffett, 325.

must be distinguished by his dress, must not ride on horseback, or carry weapons. He was also under certain legal disabilities as regards testimony in the law courts, protection under criminal law, and marriage. On the other hand the *dhimmis* were guaranteed security of life and property in the exercise of their religion. They might repair and rebuild existing churches, but not erect churches on new sites.⁸⁵

For Christians in the Abbasids, *Dhimmitude* system of Islam became “historical realities” and “common caliphal administrative practices.”⁸⁶ Griffith observes that Dhimmitude led Christians supposedly under the Abbasids to an apologetic and accommodative response to Muslims as well.

In response, their disadvantaged situation in life under Muslim rule inevitably elicited from the subject Christians both a discourse of accommodation and a discourse of resistance. On the one hand they attempted to compose a philosophical or religious discourse in Arabic for the sake of a clearer and more effective, apologetic statement of their Christian faith in their Islamic circumstances, and on the other hand they also produced a Christian Arabic literature of resistance and of martyrdom, with a more polemical intent... Dhimmitude brought hardship and eventual demographic diminution, but it also for a time brought with it a new cultural opportunity for the articulation and defense of Christianity in Arabic, within the world of Islam.⁸⁷

Another political-religious element is Abbasids caliphate’s divorce from Umayyads’ policy of Arabicization by incorporating non-Arabs into the army and the core of empire administrations, and return to the unity of Empire through the essence of Islam itself.⁸⁸ Moffett depicts the milieu of Abbasids Christians interacted with,

The Abbasids ruled Islam in Asia for the next half a millennium, from 750 to 1258 as “the most celebrated and longest- lived dynasty in Islam.” The claimed to be more strictly orthodox than their predecessors and proved to be more aggressively Muslim in the treatment of religious minorities than the practical-minded Umayyads... Another basic change in the empire developed almost unnoticed at first and was not

⁸⁵ Browne, 44-45.

⁸⁶ David M. Freidenreich, “Christians in Early and Classical Sunni Law,” in *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History*, 104.

⁸⁷ Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 17.

⁸⁸ Grunebaum, 80-81

geographic but ethnic... the ‘Abbasids, who came to power on a tide of Islamic orthodoxy, gave religion a recognized priority over the race. True religion, not Arab birth, was to be the basis of Islamic rule. ... The emphasis on true religion did not at first worsen the treatment of Christians in the empire or further exacerbate friction between Sunni and Shi’ite Muslims. The third caliph, Mahdi, opened his rule with a determined effort to appease the Iranian Shi’ite opponents of Baghdad orthodoxy and in an unusually irenic gesture toward Christians staged a famous debate that brought him face to face with the Nestorian patriarch Timothy I (779-823).⁸⁹

Through the policy of universal Islam, Abbasids attempt to embrace and unite all peoples within Empire. Küng rightly describes Abbasids’ policy of tolerance toward other religions and ethnic groups.

The ‘Abbasid regime showed great tolerance to the old religions (Zoroastrianism and also Christianity), which were already very disorganized. The main interest of the caliphate was to bring together, on a religious basis, the local and central elites, of whatever ethnic and religious origin, into the most coherent system possible.⁹⁰

In this political and religious milieu, Caliph Al-Mahdi, a contemporary to Mar Timothy, continued the precedent policy of tolerance and enhanced interaction with other religions. Caliph Mahdi (755-785) was third Caliph of Abbasid, and son of Al-Mansur (754-75) who moved the capital from Damascus to Bagdad which he built in 762, and announced the policy of “turning point”: from Arab ethnic hegemony to “all Muslim” disregarding whether Arabs or not; from exclusive Arab culture to becoming “common possession” of Muslims; from traditional ethnic religion, “Islam became a world religion.”⁹¹ The reign of the Caliph Mahdi was remarkable in the relation to Christianity.

Al- Mahdi attempted to do justice to his eschatological, messianic name. He had prisons emptied, established courts of appeal, restored mosques, signposts and wells on the pilgrim routes and made gifts to Mecca and Medina. It is also worth mentioning once more that he carried on a religious conversation with the Nestorian

⁸⁹ Moffett, 348-349.

⁹⁰ Hans Küng, *Islam Past, Present & Future* (Oxford: Oneword, 2007), 250.

⁹¹ Ibid., 246.

patriarch Timotheos I, which was recorded on the Christian side. Under al-Mahdi, theologians (*mutakallimun*) were for the first time invited to discuss with the 'heretics' (*zanadiqa*).⁹²

Baum depicts how the catholicos enjoyed the favorable relation with Caliphs during ninth and tenth centuries.

The Catholicos became the official representative of the Christians to the 'Abbasid caliphate. In the ninth and tenth centuries members of the Church of the East played a significant role at the court of the caliph, gaining respect in particular as personal physicians and court doctors, but also in the administration of Syria, Iraq, and Egypt. The monasteries educated an outstanding new generation of civil servants. High officials could rise to the post of vizier [minister]; however, as a rule, attainment of this position required them to convert to Islam... Because of his good relation with the court, Timotheos I succeeded in having several churches rebuilt. He was in high regard by the Caliphs al-Mahdi and Harun al-Rashid; he worked under a total of five different caliphates and promoted missionary activity in India, China, Turkestan, Yemen, and around the Caspian Sea.⁹³

In this circumstance, Timothy's dialogue could be carried out with Caliph Al-Mahdi in the caliphate court. In addition to this political situation, his physical situation of dialog with his ruler surely influenced him to present more conciliatory view on Islam.

Moreover, Nestorian church's historical links with Arabs presumably may contribute to Mar Timothy's view of and conciliatory attitude to Islam. Newman notes,

Traditionally, it was the Nestorians who took the message of the Gospel to the peoples of the East, and it appears that what little directed contact Muhammad may have had with Christianity was also with the members of this group. In general the Nestorians were looked upon as being doctrinally nearer Islam than either of the Melkites or Jacobites.⁹⁴

⁹² Ibid., 250.

⁹³ Baum, 59-60

⁹⁴ Newman, 164.

Overall, Mar Timothy's view of and conciliatory remarks on Islam reflected his political context in Abbasid caliphate and historical links between Nestorian church and Arabs.

Christology

The dialogue between Mar *Timothy* I and *Mahdi* started with Mahdi's false accusation on Christians' claim that "God married a woman from whom He begot a son."

He said to me: "O Catholicos, a man like you who possesses all this knowledge and utters such sublime words concerning God, is not justified in saying about God that He married a woman from whom He begot a son." ⁹⁵

Mahdi's accusation of Jesus' carnal birth between God and Mary alludes to the Muslims' misunderstanding of orthodox doctrinal axiom of *theotokos*- Mother of God. Then the Caliph Mahdi precedes the dialogue by questioning about the notion of "Son of God" and Timothy's answer follows with the lucid Christological formulation of two natures.

And our victorious King said to me: "What then do you say that Christ is?" – And I replied to his Majesty: "O King, Christ is the Word-God, who appeared in the flesh for the salvation of the World." – And our victorious King questioned me "Do you not say that Christ is the Son of God?"- And I replied to his Majesty: "O King, Christ is the Son of God, and I confess Him and worship Him as such. This I learned from Christ Himself in the Gospel and from the Books of the Torah and of the Prophets, which know Him and call Him by the name of "Son of God" but not a son in the flesh as children are born in the carnal way, but an admirable and wonderful Son, more sublime and higher than mind and words, as it fits a divine Son to be."⁹⁶

Mar Timothy denied the accusation and claimed that 'Son of God' was not born in a carnal way, but as "divine Son," Christ is "the Word of God, born of God, high above the times and before all the worlds." Furthermore as a Nestorian catholicos Timothy articulates the

⁹⁵ Patriarch Timothy I, *Timothy's Apology for Christianity*, Edited and translated by Alphonse Mingana, Woodbrooke Studies: Christian Documents in Syriac, Arabic, and Garshuni, Vol. 2. (Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons, 1928), 17.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

orthodox understanding of two natures of Christ in reply to Caliph's question on Jesus' birth from Mary.

The same Christ is the Word born of the Father, and a man born of Mary. From the fact that He is Word-God, He is born of the Father before the times, as light from the sun and word from the soul; and from the fact that He is man He is born of the Virgin Mary, in time; from the Father He is, therefore, born eternally, and from the Mother He is born in time, without a Father, without any marital contact, and without any break in the seals of the virginity of His Mother.⁹⁷

To explain the divinity of Christ Timothy employs the term "Word-God" which alludes to the notion of Logos in the Gospel of John. The theological tenet appeared in Timothy's apology reflects Christology of the Nestorian Church which clearly distinguishes two natures of Christ in line with orthodox belief. Interestingly the Caliph Mahdi revisits the Alexandrian accusation of two beings of Christ: "There are, therefore two distinct beings; if one is eternal and from God as you said, and the other temporal, the latter is therefore a pure man from Mary."⁹⁸ Yet Timothy keeps in line with orthodox Christology, clarifying the unity of Christ and denying the concept of "two sons" which Alexandrian School has blamed as Nestorian heretic. Timothy retorts,

Christ is not two beings, O King, nor two Sons, but Son and Christ are one; there are in Him two natures, one of which belongs to the Word and the other one which is from Mary, clothed itself with the Word-God. - And the King said: "They are, therefore, two, one of whom created and fashioned, and the other uncreated and unfashioned."- And I said to him: "We do not deny the duality of natures, O King, nor their mutual relations, but we profess that both of them constitute one Christ and Son."⁹⁹

It is reasonable to believe that Timothy is well informed of the Christological controversy of Chalcedon and its theological formulations. Alongside his Nestorian theological tenets,

⁹⁷ Ibid., 17-18.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 19.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

informed knowledge of Christological controversy and Islamic false notion are distinctively incorporated in Patriarch Timothy's apologetic dialogue with the Caliph Mahdi.

Trinity

At the response to Mahdi's questions of "if He is one, He is not three; and if He is three, He is not one; what is this contradiction," Timothy employs analogy used by Church Fathers to explain the doctrine of Trinity.¹⁰⁰ The Caliph Mahdi accuses Christians that they believe in "three gods."

And our King said to me: "Do you believe in Father, Son and Holy Spirit?" and I answered: "I worship them and believe in them." Then our King said: "You, therefore, believe in three Gods?" And I replied to our King: "The belief in the above three names, consists in the belief in three Persons, and the belief in these three Persons consists in the belief in one God. The belief in the above three names, consists therefore in the belief in one God. We believe in Father, Son and Holy Spirit as one God. So Jesus Christ taught us, and we have learnt from the revelation of the books of the prophets. As our God-loving King is one King with his word and his spirit, and not three kings, and as no one is able to distinguish him, his word and his spirit from himself and no one calls him King independently of his word and his spirit, so also God is one God with His Word and His Spirit, and not three Gods, because the Word and the Spirit of God are inseparable from Him. And as the sun with its light and its heat is not called three suns but one sun, so also God with His Word and His Spirit is not three Gods but is and is called one God." ¹⁰¹

It is remarkable that the Caliph Mahdi is well informed about the doctrine of Trinity and clearly distinguishes the triad by naming "Father, Son and Holy Spirit." About 40 years before under the Umayyad caliphate, John of Damascus primarily attempts to verify the divinity of Christ only through his being Word of God and the Spirit of God. It is supposed that the understanding of the doctrine of Trinity is not well informed to Muslim counterparts during the time of Umayyads, and then Christian apologists are satisfied with merely

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 69

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 22.

demonstrating the divinity of Christ as he is the Word of God and the Spirit of God which designations are familiar with Muslims through Qur'an. In his response to Caliph Mahdi's accusation that Christians believe in "three gods," Timothy demonstrates his orthodox belief in the Trinity. He employs two analogies to articulate the doctrine of trinity. Interestingly Caliph Mahdi's accusation echoes the theological questions to which Gregory of Nyssa wrote to answer in *On Not Three Gods*.¹⁰² The first is analogy of human elements. He exemplifies Caliph Mahdi, his word and his spirit. Analogy of human elements employed by Timothy is similar with the Augustine's ' "Psychological analogy" that human image of God reflects of trinity such as mind, knowledge and love and; human tri-economy of body, soul and spirit; and mind, knowledge (logos) and love. ¹⁰³ Conclusively Timothy elucidates that "as human beings are composed of body and soul," though "in His essence He is one," God is "three because of His Word and His Spirit."¹⁰⁴

The sun is also one, O our victorious King, in its spherical globe, its light and its heat, and the very same sun is also three, one sun in three powers. In the same way the soul has the powers of reason and intelligence, and the very same soul is one in one thing and three in another thing. In the same way also a piece of three gold denarii is called

¹⁰² Gregory of Nyssa. *An Answer to Ablabius: That We Should Not Think of Saying There Are Three Gods*, In *Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. Edward R. Hardy, Library of Christian Classics, vol. 3, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 265-267.

Gregory of Nyssa employs the analogy of gold and its many coins and staters. "there may be many golden staters, but gold is one"(p.265) Gregory's discussion on the trinity "*On not Three Gods*" was primarily written to answer to Ablabius, a younger bishop who questioned the false notion on Trinity that compelled others to say that there is three gods; either we must deny divinity to the Son and the Holy Spirit.(p.256) His arguments may effective to defend the unity of God, however, analogy of the Gold and coins and "mode of divine existence" shows embryonic stage of doctrinal development of trinity.(p.267)

¹⁰³ St. Augustine, "Psychological: mental Image, First Draft" in *The Trinity, The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, pt. 1, vol. 5, intro. trans. and notes Edmund Hill, O.P. Ed. E. Rotelle, O.S.A. (New York: New City Press, 1991), 271-282.

¹⁰⁴ Timothy, 69.

one and three, one in its gold , that is to say in its nature, and three in its persons, that is to say in the number of denarii. The fact that the above objects are one does not contradict and annul the other fact- that they are also three, and the fact that they are three does not contradict and annul the fact that they are also one.¹⁰⁵

Timothy's remark of "a piece of three gold denarii" echoes the Gregory of Nyssa's analogy of "Gold and gold coins."¹⁰⁶ As for the difference between the Son and the Spirit, Timothy articulates the Trinity as the first unbegotten, and the second the begotten, and the third proceeds.¹⁰⁷

Timothy's theological arguments show that he was well informed by the orthodox doctrine of Trinity and its theological implications.

In this very way from the uncircumscribed Father the Son is begotten and the Spirit proceeds, in an uncircumscribed way: the eternal from the eternal, the uncreated from the uncreated, and the spiritual from the spiritual. Since they are uncircumscribed they are not separated from one another, and since they are not bodies they are not mixed and confused with one another, but are separated in their persons in a united way, so to speak, and are united in their nature in a separate way. God is, therefore, one in nature with three personal attributes.¹⁰⁸

Timothy's arguments are reminiscent of Nicaea's definition of consubstantial- *homoousios*:

"Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father, only-begotten, that is from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father."¹⁰⁹ The emblem of orthodoxy for the Trinity, "one *ousia*, and three *hypostases*" appears in Timothy's discussion: "God is, therefore, one in

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Timothy, 225; Gregory of Nyssa, 267.

¹⁰⁷ Timothy, 74.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 26.

¹⁰⁹ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*. rev. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 232.

nature with three personal attributes.”¹¹⁰ Watt comments that Timothy’s theological disposition influenced by the ecumenical councils.

Timothy, however, and other Christian writers identify Word and Spirit as mentioned in the Qur’an with the second and third hypostases of the Trinity... Timothy then went on to argue that God’s Word and Spirit must be eternal, since God could never have been without a Word and Spirit... When asked about the difference between the three hypostases, all he could say was that they were characterized by fatherhood, filiation and procession (that is, proceeding from the Father and Son).¹¹¹

Timothy’s theological discussion alludes to the Orthodox Church fathers such as Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, and doctrinal formulations of the ecumenical councils. Timothy’s dialogue with Caliph Mahdi is uniquely colored by his orthodox doctrine of Trinity, Chalcedonian doctrinal formulation of Christology with Nestorian tenets of distinguishing two natures of Christ, and informed knowledge of Islam with conciliatory approach.

Counter criticism on Islam

Moreover, in his response to Caliph Mahdi’s unjust accusation to Christian beliefs, Timothy refutes Muslim’s false notions and points to their own doctrinal defects. Notably Timothy accuses adversely Muslims who separate Word and Spirit from God and deny the divinity of the Word and the Spirit.

As light and heat are not separable from the sun, so also the Word and Spirit of God are not separable from Him... So also if one separates from God His Word and His Spirit, He will cease to be a rational and living God, because the one who has no reason is called irrational, and the one who has no spirit is dead. If one, therefore, ventures to say about God that there was a time in which He had no Word and no Spirit, such a one would blaspheme against God, because his saying would be

¹¹⁰ Kelly, 254; Timothy, 26.

¹¹¹ William Montgomery Watt, *Muslim-Christian Encounters: Perceptions and Misperceptions* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 1991) 71-73.

equivalent to asserting that there was a time in which God had no reason and no life.¹¹²

His argument is persuasive in accusing Muslim's error as blasphemy of diminishing God.

As it is a blasphemy to add something to Godhead, it is also a blasphemy to diminish something from it in our belief... He who divests God of His Word and His Spirit resemble the one who would divest the sun of its light and its heat, and the soul of its reason and its mind, and the pearl of its beauty and its luster. As it is impossible to conceive a pearl without luster, or a sun without light, or a soul without reason and mind, so it is never possible that God should be without Word and Spirit. If, therefore, Word and Spirit are God's by nature, and God is eternal, it follows that the Word and the Spirit of God are also eternal. They are not added to Him from outside that one might think of the plurality of Godhead, but it is of the essence of God to possess both Word and Spirit.¹¹³

Significantly, his arguments even go further echoing John of Damascus' accusation against "*Koptai*- mutilators who deny the divinity of the Word-Christ" and consequently make God like stone or some insensible thing "without reason and without life."¹¹⁴ However, he uses a milder word to refute a Muslims who "blaspheme" and "divests God of His Word and His Spirit."¹¹⁵

In response to the Mahdi's criticism of the worship of the Cross, Timothy gave a direct and clear answer. He replied that Christians honor the Cross as "the cause of life and immortality" and "a decisive proof of the love of God."¹¹⁶ Timothy's statement on Divine

¹¹² Timothy, 23.

¹¹³ Timothy, 75.

¹¹⁴ John of Damascus, *On Heresies*, 141.

¹¹⁵ Timothy, 75.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 39-40.

love demonstrated by the cross is reminiscent of Theodoret's remarks on Incarnation as "supreme manifestation of God's loving care for mankind."¹¹⁷

This love of God can then be demonstrated from all creatures, and from the ordinary Divine Providence that is manifest in them, but the great wealth of His love for all humanity is more strikingly in evidence in the fact that He delivered to death in the flesh His beloved Son for the life, salvation, and resurrection of all. It is only just, therefore, O our victorious King, that the medium through which God showed His love to all, should also be the medium through which all should show their love to God."¹¹⁸

Apparently Timothy's theological discussion with Caliph is enriched by Antiochene Theodoret whose thought was inherited by the Nestorian church.

To the Mahdi's question of "Can God then Himself die," Timothy answers, "the Son of God died in our nature, but not in His divinity." Timothy stands on the theological position of the two natures of Christ clearly differs from Monophysites position. Mahdi's subsequent claim that "they did not kill him nor crucified him," but Jesus' replica died, parallels the teaching of Docetism.¹¹⁹ Timothy answers the question by presenting the prooftexts for Jesus' death and resurrection from the Qur'an: "Peace be upon Me the day I was born and the day I die and the day I shall be sent again alive" (Sura19:34); "I will make Thee die and take Thee up again to Me." (Sura3:48).¹²⁰ Moreover, against the Mahdi's claim that God "made a similitude only for them," Timothy appeals to the truthful character of God that God "cannot deceive them and nor show them something which was not true."¹²¹

¹¹⁷ Theodoret of Cyrus. *On Divine Providence*. trans. and annotated by Thomas Halton (New York: Newman Press, 1988), 5.

¹¹⁸ Timothy, 40.

¹¹⁹ Timothy, 40.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

Timothy's attitude is in contrast with John of Damascus who accuses Muslims for kissing and embracing the stone in *Kabah*.¹²² Differing from the situation of John of Damascus who secluded in monastery, Timothy hardly use any tone of polemic or debate, rather uses direct but sensitive word in order to answer to the Mahdi's questions with elucidation.

Prophethood of Muhammad

The dialogue on the subject of the Prophethood of Muhammad is especially interesting as it is undoubtedly sensitive and even dangerous for Timothy in front of the Muslim Caliph. Mahdi demands Timothy to acknowledge that God gave *furkan* (Syriac word for salvation) through Muhammad as He gave the Law through Moses and the Gospel through Christ.¹²³ Amazingly Timothy denies that God authenticates the transition from the Gospel to Islam through Muhammad in the same way that it had transitioned from Law of Moses to the Gospel of Christ.¹²⁴ Then the Caliph Mahdi presents the Scriptural verse Deuteronomy 18:18 and alleges that "prophet among brothers" implies the coming of Muhammad. Patriarch Timothy replies that the coming of "prophet among brothers" will primarily apply to Israelites, and if not, Edomites should be considered preferably to brother to Israelites.¹²⁵ Furthermore, Timothy rejects Mahdi's assertion that Muhammad has been sent as a prophet to his own people. He insists that if Muhammad was a prophet like Moses,

¹²² John of Damascus, *On Heresies*, 141-142.

¹²³ Timothy, 206.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 207.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 208.

he should have “wrought miracles and prodigies” and “taught the Torah and practiced the circumcision and observed the Jewish Sabbath and festivals.”¹²⁶

Timothy did not concede to Mahdi’s persistent demand that “if you accepted Muhammad as a prophet your word would be beautiful and your meaning fine,” and “If you had not corrupted the Torah and the Gospel, you would have found in them Muhammad also with the other prophets.”¹²⁷ Nonetheless during the second day’s dialogue Timothy gave an accurate answer to the Mahdi who questioned, “What do you say about Muhammad?”¹²⁸

Muhammad is worthy of all praise by all reasonable people, O my Sovereign. He walked in the path of the prophets and trod in the track of the lovers of God. All the prophets taught the doctrine of one God... he walked therefore, in the path of prophets. Further, all the prophets drove men away from bad works and brought them nearer to good works, and since Muhammad drove his people way from bad works and brought them nearer to the good ones, he walked therefore in the path of the prophets. Again, all the prophets separated men from idolatry and polytheism and attached them to God and His cult, and since Muhammad separated his people from idolatry and polytheism and attached them to the cult and knowledge of one God, besides whom there is no other God, it is obvious that he walked in the path of the prophets. Finally, Muhammad taught about God, His Word and His Spirit, and since all the prophets had prophesied about God, His Word and His Spirit, Muhammad walked, therefore, in the path of all the prophets.¹²⁹

He concedes that Muhammad taught the doctrine of the unity of God. Although Patriarch Timothy said earlier that there was not to be a prophet after Jesus except Elijah, he admitted that Muhammad was one who followed the path of the prophets.¹³⁰ Significantly, the caliph Mahdi and Mar Timothy reach to the similar conclusion in the doctrine of God. Mahdi urges Timothy to accept the words of Muhammad: “That God is one and that there is no other one

¹²⁶ Ibid., 208-209.

¹²⁷ Timothy, 211-212.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 218.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Watt, 72.

besides Him.”¹³¹ Timothy asserts that “This belief in one God... I have learned from the Torah, from the prophets and from the Gospel,” and claimed with boldness, “I stand by it and shall die in it.” When the caliph Mahdi complained that Christians believe in one God, “but one in three,” Timothy admitted, “I do not deny that I believe in one God in three, and three in one, but not in three different Godheads,” and “three constitute one God.”¹³²

Mar Timothy’s response to Mahdi’s accusation against the Trinity was an unshakable and uncompromising assertion of orthodox faith in the Trinity, while he recognized clearly the common belief in the Oneness of God of both Islam and Christianity.

4. Comparison of John Damascus with Patriarch Timothy I

The difference and similarity between John of Damascus and Mar Timothy are to be understood in the context of religious and political transition from Umayyads to Abbasids. Firstly during the Umayyads Christians perceived advent of Islam in Apocalyptic perspective and as temporary catastrophe while Christians under Abbasids in theological perspective and as a perpetual religion. Secondly, under the Umayyads, Christians went through a series of Islamicization and Arabicization, while as a “protected subject people” in the Abbasids Christians accommodate the established *Dhimmitude* system.¹³³ As *dhimmi*s, Christians under the Abbasids in response to political incapability and religious humiliation produced a philosophical and theological writings to defend Christian doctrine. Timothy’s apology was

¹³¹ Timothy, 219.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Browne, 44.

exemplary. Thirdly, in this transition of political-religious context from Umayyads to Abbasids, the change of Christian's view of Islam from confrontational-apologetic to conciliatory- dialogue can be appropriately understood, which was displayed by John of Damascus as a Christian representative in Damascus and Mar Timothy as a Christian representative in Bagdad.

Although the doctrinal perspectives on Islam of John and Timothy are similar, the tone of dialogue and language they use differ substantially from each other. Both of the Christian representatives refute Islam's false notions about Christian doctrine. The false notion of "Two gods" and the Islamic Docetic denial of the death of Christ are rejected by both. John refutes the Islamic errors claimed in the Qur'an that the Jews only crucified Him in appearance only (4:157), but Christ was not crucified , nor did he die, for God took Him into heaven (4:158).¹³⁴ Notably Timothy proves the death of Christ from the Quranic verses 19:33: "It is written in the Sura 'Isa, 'peace be upon Me the day I was born and the day I die and the day I shall be sent again alive.'"¹³⁵

However, the difference between John and Timothy appears prominently in the remarks on Muhammad and the tone of dialogue and the language they use. This difference reflects their different political and physical contexts. John of Damascus wrote an apologetic manual on Christian heresies purely from the Christian orthodox perspective to refute the errors of heretics, while as a subject Patriarch Timothy dialogued with his ruler Caliph Mahdi face to face in his responses to the Mahdi's questions. This circumstantial difference led to their different responses to Islam. John took a more logical and apologetic approach, while

¹³⁴ John of Damascus, 139; Timothy, 198.

¹³⁵ Timothy, 198.

Timothy took a more dialogical and conciliatory approach. Both John and Timothy responded to the accusation of *Hetairiastai* (Associators) against Christians. John took seriously Muslims' accusation against Christians as *Hetairiastai* (Associators, *Shirk* in Islamic term) who set Christ as an associate beside God when they say that Christ is the Son of God, and responds with the reverse accusation against them as *Koptai*-mutilator. In contrast, Timothy reasoned with Mahdi, responding to the false notion that Christians worship three gods. Timothy's reasoning was enriched with Biblical exegesis and also the philosophical-theological analogy of sun, gold, and human elements.

Notably, both John and Timothy refute the validity of Muhammad's prophethood in the Biblical sense. Timothy refutes Muhammad's universal prophethood on the basis of Muhammad's lack of signs and miracles which would be evidence of Biblical prophethood. Similarly, Muhammad's prophethood is rejected by John, who accuses him of being a "false prophet" who formulated his doctrine in "association with an Arian monk."¹³⁶ Although Timothy rejects Muhammad as prophet because of his lack of miracles and signs that would demonstrate biblical prophethood, still he appraises him to be worthy of all praise because he "walked in the path of all the prophets" and "separated his people from idolatry and polytheism and attached them to the cult and knowledge of one God."¹³⁷

Interestingly, Timothy in his arguments on the divinity of the Word uses a milder word for a Muslim who denies the divinity of the Word and Spirit, saying that he commits "a blasphemy to diminish something from it in our belief" and "divests God of His Word and His Spirit." John of Damascus's argument does not differ in terms of doctrine, yet even goes

¹³⁶ John of Damascus, 139.

¹³⁷ Timothy, 218.

further by accusing Muslims of being *Koptai*- mutilators who deny “the divinity of the Word-Christ” and consequently God becomes like stone or some insensible thing “without reason and without life.”¹³⁸

In the final analysis, although John and Timothy show parity in their doctrinal position while John is more polemic and confrontational, Timothy’s attitude is conciliatory and respectful to Islam. The difference is heavily derived from socio-religious context.

5. Conclusion: Implication for Modern Discussion of Christian-Muslim Relation

Modern discussions on Christian-Muslim relations mainly focus on debating whether a confrontational or a conciliatory approach should be adopted. A confrontational approach is well supported by history as well as theory. Equally well supported biblically and historically is a conciliatory approach.

The complex and diverse teachings of Islam on Christianity intensify the problem of Christian-Muslim relations. The tradition of Islam itself is divided by the contradictory teachings of the Qur’an and the early traditions (the Hadith): One category of teachings is favorable to Christians, while the other category denounces the Christians faith and calls Muslims to Jihad against Christians. The root of this diversity of Islam certainly is in Muhammad himself, the founder of Islam.¹³⁹ His two different approaches toward the people

¹³⁸ John of Damascus, 141.

¹³⁹ Richard Bell, *The Origin of Islam in Its Christian Environment: The Gunning Lectures, Edinburgh University, 1925* (London: Frank Cass, 1968), 134-165. In the fifth lecture,

of the Book (*ahal e kitab*, implying Jews and Christians) mark the starting point of Islam's complex attitude toward Christians. Christians' views of Islam and Muslims are complex as well. Though there is a wide spectrum of approaches to Islam, they fall into two opposed categories, confrontational and conciliatory. Christians and Muslims have interacted to each other for over 1400 years and left a rich historical heritage of inter-religious relations. Each group holds confrontational and conciliatory views of the other.

In this paper John of Damascus is presented as a representative of the confrontational approach toward Islam, while Patriarch Timothy is presented as a representative of conciliatory dialog. Unlike the Byzantine authorities in Constantinople, John of Damascus defined Islam as "Ishmaelite heresy." He refuted Islam in his apologetic writings that defined and defended orthodox Christianity. His definition of Islam as "Ishmaelites heresy" and his polemical method have influenced succeeding generations of Christians. In contrast, Patriarch Timothy, as head of the Church of the East under the Abbasid caliphate in Bagdad, responded to his Muslim counterpart, Caliph Mahdi, with a conciliatory approach, yet he strongly defended orthodox Christian teaching. His dialogue with the Caliph Mahdi is very important due to his orthodox theological tradition, enriched by the teachings of the church fathers and the ecumenical councils as well as informed knowledge of Islamic beliefs and the Qur'an itself.

"Attitude to Christianity," delivered in the Cuning Lectures at Edinburgh University in 1925, Bell traces how Muhammad's attitude evolved from the favorable to the hostile in the course of time. Muhammad's attitude toward the people of books significantly changed when he faced the oppositions from Jews in Medina as a theocratic ruler. His favorable attitudes toward Christians was mainly demonstrated to gain solidarity with them when he as a religious prophet faced a strong opposition from his fellow Arabs due to his monotheistic preaching in Mecca.

Modern Christians facing the enormous challenge of interreligious relations can learn significantly from both of them. Firstly, in relation to Insider movement, churches and missions are divided between the pragmatic efficiency and the danger of syncretism. It is plausible that Insider Movement's pragmatic methods may outweigh theological integrity and lead Muslim-background believers into syncretism, mixture of Christianity and Islam. Mission scholars address the danger that Insider movement "missionaries are promoting an Islamized Gospel."¹⁴⁰ Common ground between John and Timothy regarding theological lucidity and unpromising faith in orthodox doctrine is significant for the discussion regarding Insider movement. Modern missionaries and church learn a lesson from Timothy who defended orthodox faith even under the religious pressure from his Muslim ruler.

Second issue is related to religious pluralism. How can we hold peace-promoting dialogue and inter-religious harmony between Christianity and Islam while avoiding religious pluralism and liberalism? Bennett's observation is noteworthy: "Conciliatory Muslims and Christians risk the charge that they only converse with those others who share their 'liberal' views."¹⁴¹ In this aspect, Patriarch Timothy's conciliatory dialogue with the Caliph Mahdi offers an eloquent counterexample of an orthodox Christian in conversation with an orthodox Muslim.

Third concern is that Christian Zionism, which promotes confrontational view of Islam with attractive theory of "the clash of civilization," threatens Christian-Muslim relations. Premillennialists especially advocates the agenda of Israel's occupying the site of the

¹⁴⁰ Joshua Lingel, Jeff Morton, and Bill Nikides, eds, *Chrislam: How Missionaries Are Promoting an Islamized Gospel*, rev. ed. (Garden Grove, CA: i2 Ministries Publishing, 2011).

¹⁴¹ Bennett, 9.

Al-Aqsa mosque and rebuilding the temple, and that would be considered a declaration of religious war against Muslims.¹⁴² Patriarch Timothy's conciliatory approach and considerate presentation of orthodox Christian doctrine in a sensitive and respectful way is a profound example for current Christian-Muslim relations.

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¹⁴² Muslims believe that the Al-Aqsa Mosque (Arabic: *al-Masjid al-aqsa*) is Muslim's holy sites where Muhammad traveled from Mecca (Sura 17:1) and ascended to heaven (Sura 53:8-15). The Aqsa Mosque is regarded as the third most sacred place after Mecca and Medina. The Aqsa Mosque has become a symbol not only for the Palestinian nationalist movement and liberation from Israeli occupation, but for the Islamic Jihad movement. (Juan E. Campo, *Encyclopedia of Islam*, New York: Infobase Publishing. 2009), 48-49.

That's why Osama Bin Laden declared a holy war against the West and Israel and issued fatwa (declaration a holy war) to all Muslims "in order to liberate the al-Aqsa Mosque and the holy mosque [Mecca] from their grip, and in order for their armies to move out of all the lands of Islam, defeated and unable to threaten any Muslim." (Osama bin Laden, *Al Qaeda's Second Fatwa: Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places*, available from http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/military/jan-june98/fatwa_1998.html, accessed on 11 July 2014)

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