STUDIA PATRISTICA

VOL. CXXX

Papers presented at the Eighteenth International Conference
on Patristic Studies held
in Oxford 2019

Edited by
MARKUS VINZENT

Volume 27:
From the Fifth Century Onwards (Latin Writers)

Female Power and its Propaganda
(Edited by MATTIA CHIRIATTI)

Theologizing Performance in the Byzantine Tradition
(Edited by DAMASKINOS OLKINUORA)

Nachleben

PEETERS
LEUVEN – PARIS – BRISTOL, CT
2021

Table of Contents

FROM THE FIFTH CENTURY ONWARDS (LATIN WRITERS)

THEOLOGIZING PERFORMANCE IN THE BYZANTINE TRADITION
(edited by Damaskinos OLKINUORA)

NACHLEBEN

The Religious Other in the Homilies of John of Damascus: References to the Christian Confessions and Muslims of the Middle East

Petros Tsagkaropoulos, University of Valladolid, Valladolid, Spain

Abstract

In the eighth century the emerging communities of Melkite Christians in the Umayyad caliphate in Syria and Palestine lived side by side with the ruling Muslims and with Christian groups of different theological inclinations. Against this background, John of Damascus (*ca.* 675 – *ca.* 749) undertook to define Melkite identity through his prolific and diverse literary production. His theological and polemical treatises were aimed at defending Chalcedonian orthodoxy and attacking the views of non-Chalcedonian and Monothelite Christians and Muslims in a thorough and systematic way.

Nevertheless, John of Damascus was not only distinguished as a writer but also as a talented and influential preacher. His homiletic work consists of sermons of great artistic value on major liturgical feasts and saints. A significant feature of his homilies, which they share with his other works, is their theological thrust, through concise summary presentations of doctrine and the exegesis of biblical passages. Yet unlike his treatises, John of Damascus' homilies do not directly engage with the beliefs of non-Melkite Christians and Muslims, and so the evidence they provide about these communities is at first sight scant. They have therefore been neglected for the most part as sources for understanding John of Damascus' preaching and the position of Melkite Christians in the Umayyad caliphate in this period. A more detailed examination of these texts, however, reveals previously unrecognised references and allusions to other religious groups of the Middle East which enrich our knowledge of the preacher and his audience. From these we can gain an insight into John's concern to draw a line between the Melkites and other Christians, his view of Muslim teachings about Christ, and the social implications of life in the world of Islam through the lens of John's remarks. Above all, the Damascene's homilies emerge as dynamic texts which interact with the wider context, despite their apparent resistance to external influences.

The writings of John of Damascus are inseparably linked to the particular religious composition of the Umayyad society in which he lived.[1] The coexistence

[1] See Sidney H. 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 (2011), 207-37. With regard specifically to the Christian denominations

Studia Patristica CXXX, 171-182.

of various Christian groups and Muslims in Syria and Palestine in the seventh and eighth centuries exercised an enormous influence on his intellectual and spiritual development which is reflected in his literary production. The bulk of John of Damascus' prose works is concerned either with the refutation of heresy, in the form of polemical tracts, or with the authentic expression of the Christian faith, most notably in his compendium of orthodox doctrine, the *Expositio Fidei*.[2] His works, therefore, help open a window to the identity of the Christian and Muslim communities of the caliphate, from the vantage point, of course, of a prominent Melkite and fervent defender of Chalcedonian orthodoxy such as himself.[3]

Yet, despite John of Damascus' preoccupation with the profile of the different religious confessions of the Middle East in his treatises, his homiletic works are practically silent on the subject, at least at first glance. The lack of direct engagement with the wide spectrum of beliefs and practices of the local populations is particularly striking. The reason may be found in the specific aims of John's homilies. In contrast to his anti-heretical writings, the focus of his sermons was the liturgical occasion on which they were delivered rather than issues of broader contemporary relevance, such as theological rivalries or other types of social interaction.[4]

Nevertheless, the Damascene's homilies are not completely cut off from the dynamic cultural environment from which they emerged. Embedded in John's discourse are glimpses – sometimes vague, other times clearer – of the Christian and Muslim communities with which Chalcedonian Christians in the Islamic world had close contact. Andrew Louth was the first to pinpoint examples in which the Damascene alludes to these groups in his homilies, although they have not received further attention either by him or by any other scholar.[5] However, a more detailed examination of the texts can shed more light on this aspect of John's sermons by bringing forward hitherto unnoticed references

of the Middle East, *id*., '"Melkites", "Jacobites" and the Christological Controversies in Arabic in Third/Ninth-Century Syria', in Thomas David (ed.), *Syrian Christians under Islam: The First Thousand Years* (Leiden, Boston, Köln, 2001), 9-55.

[2] *Ibid*. 19-55; also Andrew Louth, *St John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology* (Oxford, 2002), 84-116 and 155-79.

[3] S.H. Griffith, '"Melkites", "Jacobites" and the Christological Controversies in Arabic in Third/Ninth-Century Syria' (2001), 21-2. On Melkite identity, *id*., 'The Church of Jerusalem and the 'Melkites': The Making of an 'Arab Orthodox' Christian Identity in the World of Islam (750–1050 CE)', in Ora Limor and Guy G. Stroumsa (eds), *Christians and Christianity in the Holy Land: from the Origins to the Latin Kingdoms* (Turnhout, 2006), 175-204.

[4] As can be concluded, for example, from the analysis of John of Damascus' homilies on the Transfiguration of the Lord and the Dormition of the Mother of God in Louth, *St John Damascene* (2002), 234-49.

[5] Andrew Louth, 'St John Damascene: Preacher and Poet', in Mary B. Cunningham and Pauline Allen (eds), *Preacher and Audience: Studies in Early Christian and Byzantine Homiletics* (Leiden, 1998), 247-66, 254-5; and again *id*., *St John Damascene* (2002), 229-30.

and allusions to the religious and social panorama of eighth-century Syria and Palestine. This article will therefore offer a survey of the Damascene's implicit and explicit remarks about the different Christian confessions and Muslims in the region, revealing him as a preacher whose message was attuned to contemporary reality.

The Christian denominations

The conquest of the Middle East by the Arab Muslims invading from the Arabian Peninsula took place against the background of a society plagued by long-standing religious dissent.[6] The story of the controversies that led to the creation of different Christian factions is all too familiar.[7] By the seventh century Christians were divided into those who accepted ('Melkite'/'Chalcedonians') and those who rejected ('Jacobites'/'Monophysites' and 'Nestorians') the decisions of the Council of Chalcedon on Christology some two hundred years before (451).[8] In addition, Monothelitism, the doctrine that Christ had two natures but one will, which was promoted by Byzantine emperors as a point of compromise among the several parties, further complicated the situation.[9] By the time of John of Damascus little had changed, and the existence of the various Christian groups was still a pressing issue for him.

As the theological content of John of Damascus' preaching suggests, although his sermons were primarily associated with the feast day on which they were delivered, they were also preached with a view to counterweighing non-Chalcedonian doctrinal teaching. As a general rule, this function was fulfilled indirectly, through systematic affirmations of orthodox belief. Thus, throughout John's homilies, one can detect succinct summaries of Chalcedonian doctrine, designed to develop familiarity with the theological language of the Chalcedonian tradition and bolster resilience to heterodox views.[10] The most salient feature of these summary presentations is the rigorous use of technical terminology to explain the tenets of Melkite theology and express

[6] For the history of the period, see John Haldon, *The Empire that Would Not Die: The Paradox of East Roman Survival, c. 640–740 CE* (Cambridge, MA, 2016).

[7] See Philip Booth, *Crisis of Empire: Doctrine and Dissent at the End of Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, 2014). For a more theological approach to the debates, see Demetrios Bathrellos, *The Byzantine Christ: Person, Nature, and Will in the Christology of Saint Maximus the Confessor* (New York, 2004).

[8] Despite their polemical overtones, these terms will be used here for reasons of convention.

[9] D. Bathrellos, *The Byzantine Christ* (2004), 60-98.

[10] For example, John of Damascus, *On Holy Saturday* 12-8; *Encomium of St John Chrysostom* 3; *On the Dormition I* 3.24-46 in *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos V: Opera homiletica et hagiographica*, ed. Bonifatius Kotter, Patristische Texte und Studien 29 (Berlin, New York, 1988).

the mystery of Christ's two natures in one hypostasis, his two wills and two energies.[11]

Occasionally, however, a certain overemphasis on these aspects of Chalcedonian Christology gives us an insight into what were meant to be interpreted by John's audience as clear allusions to the erroneous beliefs of other Christian groups. Although contemporary Christian denominations are not mentioned by name, John's carefully formulated statements make them easily identifiable. The most evident example occurs in the *Homily on Holy Saturday*, in which the Damascene objects to Monophysitism in a series of rhetorical questions:

> How would Christ be of one composite nature, if the Father and the Spirit are contemplated in a simple nature? Or how can he be consubstantial with the Father and with us, unless one says that the Father is also consubstantial with us, which is more outrageous than all monstrous thoughts? And how does he himself say 'Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father', and again, 'Why are you looking for a way to kill me, a man who has told you the truth?' For if one has only seen him as a man, he has not seen God the Father.[12]

John here focuses on the assertion that Christ has 'one composite nature'. He wonders how the composite nature of Christ can be compatible with the simple nature of the Father and the Holy Spirit, and further seeks to reduce this formula to absurdity by asking how one can speak of a composite nature in Christ without also claiming that the Father is consubstantial with us, a thought he forthrightly rejects as unacceptable. He then includes two biblical quotes and raises the question of how they should be interpreted in light of this false doctrine.

The preacher leaves these questions unanswered, without engaging in a refutation of the assumption that Christ has a composite nature. He trusts, however, that his audience would readily appreciate the theological consequences of this formula and would easily associate it with the large number of Christians who espoused it both in Syria and Palestine.[13] That John makes reference here to the Jacobites and their Christological teaching can be confirmed from his treatise *Against the Jacobites*. There the Damascene asks his Jacobite interlocutors: 'If you say that there is one composite nature from two natures, tell us, how do things that are composite come to be united?'[14] Just as in the

[11] See, for instance, with regard to John's use of technical language in the homilies on the Dormition, Fr Evgenios Iverites, 'Christological and Ecclesiological Narratives in Early Eighth-Century Greek Homilies on the Theotolos', in Thomas Arentzen and Mary B. Cunningham (eds), *The Reception of the Virgin in Byzantium: Marian Narratives in Texts and Images* (Cambridge, 2019), 257-80, 262-3.

[12] John of Damascus, *On Holy Saturday* 15.

[13] Chalcedonian Christians were outnumbered by the Jacobites and the Nestorians in the area; see S.H. 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' (2011), 217.

[14] John of Damascus, *Contra Jacobitas* 24.1-2 (*Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos IV: Liber de haeresibus; Opera polemica*, ed. Bonifatius Kotter, Patristische Texte und Studien 22

Homily on Holy Saturday, John dwells on the concept of the one composite nature and comments on its implications, although, as one might expect, in greater detail. The difference between the homily and the treatise is that what, in the first instance, is a series of rhetorical questions implicitly aimed at the Jacobites, in the second one is a query explicitly addressed to them. For our purposes, it is significant that John's sermon unmistakably reflects the theological challenges that this distinct Christian tradition presented for the Chalcedonian community.

Similarly, in the same set of rhetorical questions that John poses in the *Homily on Holy Saturday*, there are several that touch upon heretical views about the energies and wills of Christ. Monenergism, the doctrine that Christ possessed one activity, figures in the following passage: 'And if we say that he has one energy, to what shall we attribute the corporeal walking, the breaking of the bread, the oral speech and the like, which do not belong to the divine nature but to human energy?'[15] Nevertheless, it is monothelitism that attracts greater attention in the next two sections.[16] The Damascene asks with respect to Christ's natural desires: 'If we assume that he is without a natural and free will according to his human nature, to what shall we attribute the nature desire for food and the rest?'[17] He then continues with biblical examples from Christ's earthly life which prove his possession of both a divine and a human will.[18]

John's enquiry into the truth of the claims about Christ's one will and energy could also be viewed as an indirect reference to contemporary adherents of these doctrines, and most specifically of monothelitism. The so-called Maronites, Christians who embraced the decisions of Chalcedon yet supported the doctrine of one will, represented yet another Christian group from which Melkites had to differentiate themselves and whose erroneous Christological beliefs John intends to signal in his homily.[19] As in the case of the Jacobite Monophysites, John's homily does not provide any particular information on the identity of the Maronite community. However, it confirms that their religious beliefs were a concern for him as a preacher in fulfilling the need of the Melkite community for self-definition.

[Berlin, New York, 1981]). The treatise is in fact a letter which John Damascene wrote on behalf of Peter II, bishop of Damascus for the Jacobite bishop of Daraea. It is not, therefore, addressed to a fictional interlocutor but reflects a real exchange of views on Christology between the members of the two communities.

[15] John of Damascus, *On Holy Saturday* 16.1-3. On monenergism, see P. Booth, *Crisis of Empire* (2014), 186-224.

[16] John of Damascus, *On Holy Saturday* 17-8. This case is also noted by A. Louth, 'St John Damascene' (1998), 254.

[17] John of Damascus, *On Holy Saturday* 17.1-3.

[18] *Ibid*. 18.1-6.

[19] For the Chalcedonian Maronites, A. Louth, *St John Damascene* (2002), 166.

In terms of direct references, the only example of a religious group being explicitly named in John of Damascus' homilies concerns the Nestorians in the *Third Homily on the Dormition*: 'Let demons take to flight, let the Nestorians wail as the Egyptians of old and their leader, the new Pharaoh, the bitter scourge and tyrant, for they were buried down in the depths of blasphemy.'[20] This particularly hostile depiction of the Nestorians is related to their refusal to recognise the Virgin Mary as the Mother of God (*Theotokos*).[21] Furthermore, their representation in such harsh terms enhances the rhetorical effect the preacher is seeking at this point, since Mary is exalted in the defeat of the 'wailing' Nestorians. Elsewhere, the Damascene also appears unforgiving with this group of Christians, which was active in his immediate milieu, although it enjoyed a greater influence in the territories of the former Persian empire.[22] In the first lines of his treatise *Against the Nestorians*, John brands them as heretics: 'The discourse with those who are of like mind with Nestorius should begin thus: You tell us, whom did the holy Virgin conceive: the Son of God by nature and God, or a man? And if they say the Son of God by nature and God, they are orthodox […] But if they say a man, then let us converse with them as heretics.'[23] It seems that the extent of the theological error of the Nestorians justified a reprimanding tone. The comparison between them and the Melkites in the *Third Homily on the Dormition* eloquently captures this idea: 'But we, who have been saved with our feet dry and have passed over the salty sea of impiety, let us sing our exit ode to the Mother of God.'[24] John here reassures his audience of the superiority of the intact orthodox doctrine over the blasphemies of the heretics, something he repeats in relation to his non-Christian opponents, as we shall see now.

The Muslim threat

Christian theology does not stand out as the only field of debate to which the Damascene devoted his energy. He was also well familiar with the system of beliefs embraced by the Muslim overlords and propagated in the territories of the Umayyad caliphate. Aware of the growing momentum of Islam, John

[20] John of Damascus, *On the Dormition* III 3.1-3.

[21] On the Nestorian controversy and Nestorius' condemnation at the Council of Ephesus (431), see Christopher A. Beeley, *The Unity of Christ: Continuity and Conflict in Patristic Tradition* (New Haven, London, 2012), 256-84.

[22] See S.H. Griffith, 'John of Damascus and the Church in Syria in the Umayyad Era' (2011), 214.

[23] John of Damascus, *Against the Nestorians* 1.1-7 (*Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos IV: Liber de haeresibus; Opera polemica*, ed. Bonifatius Kotter, Patristische Texte und Studien 22 [Berlin, New York, 1981]).

[24] John of Damascus, *On the Dormition III* 3.3-5.

undertook to deal with some of the views it expressed in the last chapter of his book *On Heresies*.[25] This pioneering work exhibits remarkable knowledge not only of common Muslim beliefs and practices but also of the Qur'an, probably as a result of John's close relations with the Umayyads while still employed in their service early in his life.[26]

That the threat of Islam to Christianity deeply troubled John also becomes obvious in his homilies. His attention is primarily drawn to the Muslim claim that Jesus was a prophet and a servant of God, a position that disputed the most essential Christian doctrine, that Christ was the true Son of God. John's reaction in the *Homily on Holy Saturday* is very telling of his determination to combat this notion in the most aggressive terms: 'Let us hate his [Christ's] enemies. Whoever (Πᾶς ὅστις) does not confess that Christ is the Son of God and God is an Antichrist. If somebody (Εἴ τις) says that Christ is a servant, let us close our ears, knowing that he is a liar and that there is no truth in him. Let us bear the insult as a crown of glory.'[27]

This extraordinary exhortation comes in the closing part of the homily, after the Damascene's exposition of the mystery of Resurrection. The preacher launches a particularly harsh attack on the deniers of Christ's divinity and sonship, calling them enemies of Christ and 'antichrists'. Although John preserves the anonymity of this group under the generic formulation πᾶς ὅστις/τίς, there is no doubt that he refers to Muslim believers. John's well known chapter 100 on Islam in his *On Heresies* provides two parallels which confirm this connection: the first one is his description of Islam as a forerunner of the Antichrist ('There is also the superstition of the Ishmaelites which to this day prevails and keeps people in error, being a forerunner of the Antichrist'), and the second his reference to the prophet Muhammad's teaching about Jesus as a servant ('He [Muhammad] says that the Christ is the word of God and his spirit, and a creature and a servant').[28]

Besides the religious differences between Muslims and Christians, the Damascene occasionally hints at the precarious social position of the latter in the world of Islam. Although explicit indications are lacking, a close reading of the

[25] See A. Louth, *St John Damascene* (2002), 76-81. On John and Islam in general, see most recently Daniel J. Janosik, *John of Damascus: First Apologist to the Muslims* (Eugene, OR, 2016); Peter Schadler, *John of Damascus and Islam: Christian Heresiology and the Intellectual Background to Earliest Christian-Muslim Relations*, History of Christian-Muslim Relations 34 (Leiden, Boston, 2017).

[26] For the Damascene's career in the Umayyad court, see Sidney H. Griffith, 'The Manṣūr Family and Saint John of Damascus: Christians and Muslims in Umayyad Times', in Antoine Borrut and Fred. M. Donner (eds), *Christians and Others in the Umayyad State* (Chicago, 2016), 29-51, 32-4.

[27] John of Damascus, *On Holy Saturday* 37.11-5. Andrew Louth also draws attention to this reference: A. Louth, 'St John Damascene' (1998), 255.

[28] John of Damascus, *On heresies* 100.1-2 and 18-9.

sermons allows us to gain a firmer grasp of John's carefully targeted language. The opening lines of the *Homily on the Transfiguration* are revealing:

> Come, let us celebrate, O God-loving assembly! Come, let us feast together with the heavenly powers that love to feast! […] For whom is this feast and celebration? For whom this gladness and rejoicing? For those who fear the Lord, who worship the Trinity, who reverence the Son and the Spirit as coeternal with the Father, who with one soul and mind and word confess one divinity that is made known indivisibly in three hypostases, and know and proclaim Christ as the Son of God and God, one hypostasis that is made known in two indivisible and unconfused natures with their natural properties. For us (Ἡμῖν) all festal merriment and joy. For us (Ἡμῖν) did Christ institute the feasts, 'for there is no joy for the impious' (τοῖς ἀσεβέσι). Let us rid ourselves of every cloud of sorrow (λύπης) that darkens the mind and prevents us from being lifted up on high. Let us scorn all earthly things, for our citizenship (πολίτευμα) is not on earth. Let us raise our mind to heaven, whence we welcomed Christ, our Lord and Saviour.[29]

The homily begins with a repeated invitation to celebrate the feast of the Transfiguration that is soon followed by the question of who should take part in this celebration. The answer is straightforward: those who fear the Lord and worship the triune God. John and his audience are the recipients of 'all merriment and joy' on the day of a feast which Christ established 'for them' in contrast to the 'impious'. Rather than emphasising the theological importance of the feast in the proemium of the homily, the preacher wishes, first and foremost, to distinguish himself and his congregation from those who do not deserve to participate in it. As will become apparent, those 'impious' seem to have been a source of concern for John at the moment of the sermon's delivery. This is also perhaps the reason why he invites the faithful to free themselves from the clouds of sorrow in order to listen to his speech. Besides, he reassures them, their citizenship is not on earth. John uses Paul's words, who speaks of 'citizenship in heaven', to emphasise that they should free themselves of all earthly affairs.[30]

Combining these two elements – the God-given right of the faithful to take communion in divine joy to the exclusion of those who are unworthy of it, and the need to abandon their sorrow – we may assume that John alludes to some event or circumstances that caused distress to his community. That this is not mere speculation is confirmed by another passage further on in the homily. Explaining St Peter's role as a witness of Christ's Transfiguration on Mount Tabor, John suddenly interrupts the flow of the narration with a petition to the Apostle: 'We pray for the sea storm (κλυδῶνα) to calm down, for the tumult (τάραχον) to disintegrate, and for calm and waveless peace (εἰρήνην) to be conferred on us. Entreat this of Christ, the immaculate Bridegroom of [the Church]…'[31]

[29] John of Damascus, *On the Transfiguration* 1.1-16.

[30] *Phil.* 3:20. The idea that Christians are members of a celestial world is recurrent in John's homilies; see E. Iverites, 'Christological and Ecclesiological Narratives' (2019), 275.

[31] John of Damascus, *On the Transfiguration* 6.49-51.

It is not clear what kind of 'sea storm'/'tumult' John refers to. The passage is not related to anything that precedes or follows in the homily, and there is therefore no sufficient evidence to attempt an identification of the event to which John alludes. The task is made even more difficult by the fact that the date of John's homilies cannot be established due to the lack of chronological indicators. What can be said is that whatever affected John's congregation was likely provoked on religious grounds. The end of the homily provides a clue in this direction. John asks the faithful to remember the words of God the Father to his Son: '"This is" not a servant (δοῦλος), nor an envoy (πρέσβυς), nor an angel (ἄγγελος), but "my beloved Son; listen to him".'[32]

John merges here two biblical passages. The first one is a quote from the gospel of Matthew (*Matt*. 5:21). The phrase 'no envoy or angel' is drawn from the book of Isaiah (*Is*. 63:9). There is, however, a third element, the word servant (δοῦλος), which is John's own addition and is given priority over the characterisations 'envoy' and 'angel', being placed before them. The phrase echoes again the Muslim teaching that Jesus was a servant of God, against which John also rails in the *Homily on Holy Saturday* and in *On Heresies*. Thus, in his final address to the congregation, John wants the faithful to bear in mind what he considers to be the most fundamental Christian belief in the Islamic milieu, that Christ is not a servant or envoy or angel, but the true Son of God. John's appeal to the Apostle Peter for 'waveless peace' could, then, be a request for free and unimpeded confession of the Christian faith.

It is worth noting in this respect two instances that reflect Christian unease on the question of religious expression. The first one comes also from the *Homily on the Transfiguration*: 'Let us confess without being ashamed (ἀνεπαισχύντως) that Christ is the Son of the living God'.[33] The preacher here hopes to disperse feelings of discomfort for upholding Christian orthodoxy and inspire steadfastness in his audience. A similar exhortation is found in the *Homily on Holy Saturday*, as already seen above: 'Let us bear the insult (ὀνειδισμόν) as a crown of glory'.[34] Both examples provide a unique insight into the psychological effects that persistent Muslim pressure had on John's Melkite community. Interestingly, we may observe a shift of focus between them: although, in the first case, John hints at the passive embarrassment of Christians for their beliefs, in the second, he emphasises the actively offensive attitudes ('insult') to which they were exposed. His evocation of martyrial imagery ('crown of glory') further implies that Christians felt they suffered disrespectful treatment.[35]

The unfavourable conditions under which Christians lived in the caliphate lead us to the last point to be considered in this study. A curious passage in the

[32] *Ibid*. 20.3-4.
[33] *Ibid*. 5.3.
[34] See fn. 27.
[35] It should be noted, however, that we should also be cautious about inferring too much from these statements, since they were also used to create a certain rhetorical effect.

Second Homily on the Dormition is perhaps the closest we can ever come to John of Damascus' political viewpoint and his opinion of the ruling Muslim authorities. John entreats his audience to accept his speech despite his weaknesses as an orator, just like when a peasant brings, out of season, a violet or a rose 'to the emperor (τῷ αὐτοκράτορι) that has divinely (θεόθεν) been entrusted with the helms of those who are of the same race with him (τῶν ὁμοφύλων)'.[36]

In this *captatio benevolentiae*, the preacher presents himself as a peasant who offers a humble but valuable gift to the emperor, his audience. Although from a rhetorical point of view there is nothing out of the ordinary in this simile, the connotations it carries deserve some comment. The language John employs is appropriate of the Christian Byzantine political orbit rather than of the Muslim caliphate. He speaks of an emperor appointed by God to rule over those with whom he shares a common race.[37] It would not be an exaggeration to claim that John consciously avoids here using an analogy built on elements from the political context of the caliphate. This perhaps represents an indirect way of expressing disapproval of the Muslim authorities.[38] One could argue, of course, that in referring to a divinely chosen emperor, John simply draws on a literary commonplace for his simile. Nevertheless, his listeners would have no difficulty in recognizing in this statement the implicit rejection of the Muslim claim of authority over the Christian populations of the Middle East which already felt alienated from their overlords, as the examples adduced from the homilies in this section have intended to demonstrate.

Conclusion

Since the mid-seventh century, Melkite Christians in the Middle East had represented one of the several religious communities that experienced the dramatic changes brought about by the establishment of a new Islamic hegemony in the area. Christians of the so-called 'Chalcedonian', 'Monothelite', 'Monophysite' and 'Nestorian' denominations competed both with each other and with the Muslim newcomers for the title of the possessor of the true faith and for a better position in the social fabric of the caliphate. This plurality of confessions that shared the same living space had a profound effect on the mentality

[36] John of Damascus, *On the Dormition II* 1.20-1.

[37] For the title αὐτοκράτωρ in relation to the Byzantine emperor in contemporary historical sources, see for example, Theophanes the Confessor, *Chronographia* 448.22; 466.15, *Theophanis Chronographia*, ed. Carl de Boor (Leipzig, 1883).

[38] The fact that Constantinople was still politically and religiously relevant for the Melkites in the eighth century might have also contributed to this: S.H. Griffith, 'John of Damascus and the Church in Syria in the Umayyad Era' (2011), 220.

and literary output of John of Damascus. In his extensive treatises John attempted to define orthodox doctrine in order to make it more accessible to his coreligionists, and minutely exposed the weaknesses of the religious convictions of his adversaries. His active involvement in the shaping of Melkite identity reveals a man that was sensitive to the social and cultural developments that were underway in Syria/Palestine in the eighth century.

It has been the aim of this article to argue that John Damascene's homiletic work could not possibly have remained unaffected by the contact with other religious communities, especially in light of the treatment these receive in the rest of his writings. Considering that his public presence as a preacher would have allowed his message to reach a wide audience, it is hard to believe that John had nothing to say about contemporary Christians with heterodox views or the ruling Muslims in his oral deliveries. A first approach to the homilies, however, seems to confirm this rather peculiar characteristic of John's sermons, which are overwhelmingly concerned with the theological exposition of the great liturgical feasts of the year and the praise of the celebrated saints.

Nevertheless, upon closer inspection, one can discern references and allusions that suit the contemporary context of the homilies' production. Though limited in number, these instances of John's interaction with factors that are external to the original thematic scope of the homilies demonstrates the engaging capacity of his preaching. References can be distinguished into implicit (the majority of the examples) and explicit, and are made with regard to Christians and Muslims alike. In the first case, they appear exclusively as criticisms against the erroneous theological teachings of non-Melkite Christians and provide no information of special historical interest. They strongly attest, however, to the social relevance of the various Christian groups for the Damascene and his audience, as can also be deduced from his polemical treatises. Charges against the doctrines of Monophysitism and Monothelitism emerge with particular clarity from more general statements about orthodox doctrine, while Nestorians become the focus of disparaging remarks, an indication that the different Christian traditions were approached, at least in terms of theological discourse, with varying degrees of tolerance.

The second case involves references and allusions to the Muslim community. The Damascene insists in his homilies on the Muslim belief that Christ is a slave and attempts to deter his audience from such deviations. The most significant observation in this regard is that for the first time in the homilies, and perhaps in his entire work, John of Damascus expresses the feelings of the Chalcedonian community with respect to Muslim objections to Christian doctrine and, specifically, to Christ's divinity. John encourages his listeners to bear Muslim offences without embarrassment, implying that Christians felt uncomfortable proclaiming their faith in the caliphate and that they were presumably victims of offensive behaviour, as a result of the superior political position of Islam. For the first time we also encounter allusions to specific historical circumstances,

which, though difficult to identify, seem to have affected adversely John's community, as well as language with potential political overtones which betrays disapproval of the Muslim political authorities. Far from being sterile, then, John of Damascus' homiletic discourse responded to external stimuli, even though the preacher's remarks were camouflaged by his lengthy theological meditations. This study has sought to throw light to some of them and provoke reflection on the contemporary context of the Damascene's preaching activity.