



## THE CHRISTIAN REACTION TOWARDS ISLAM IN THE SEVENTH AND EIGHTH CENTURIES

YEDİNCİ VE SEKİZİNCİ YÜZYILLARDA HİRİSTİYANLARIN İSLAMİYET'E KARŞI TUTUMU

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### Abstract

This present study is regarding Christian reaction towards Islam in the seventh and eighth centuries. It has been tried to analyse the Christian community who retained their loyalty to the Council of Chalcedon and later coming to be known as Melkites because of their adherence to the Byzantine liturgy and their attitudes towards Islam. Secondly, the views of Nestorians and Monophysites about Islam have been underlined. Thirdly, it has been given some information about the John of Damascus and his attitude towards Islam and the Prophet Mohammad. In addition to these, lastly, the first Christian interpretations of Islam have been summarized in three main points.

**Key Words:** Christianity, Islam, Melkites, Nestorians, Monophysites, John of Damascus

### Öz

Bu çalışma, yedinci ve sekizinci yüzyıllarda yaşamış olan Hıristiyanların İslamiyet'e karşı tutum ve davranışlarını incelemeyi amaç edinmiştir. Bu bağlamda öncelikle Kadıköy Konsili'ne tabi olan Hıristiyanlar ile Bizans liturjisine bağlılığından dolayı 'Melkite'liler olarak da adlandırılan Suriye ve Mısır'da yaşayan Hıristiyan topluluklarının İslamiyet'e karşı tutumları analiz edilmeye çalışılmıştır. İkinci olarak, Nesturilerle Monofizitler'in İslamiyet hakkındaki görüş ve tutumları ele alınmıştır. Üçüncü olarak, dönemin Hıristiyan düşünürlerinden John of Damascus'un Hz. Muhammed (s.a.v) ve İslamiyet hakkındaki görüşlerine değinilmiştir. Son olarak ise söz konusu dönemlerde yaşamış olan ve İslamiyet'e dair görüşlerini beyan etmiş olan ilk Hıristiyan yorumcularının düşünceleri üç temel noktada özetlenmiştir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Hıristiyanlık, İslam, Melkiteliler, Nesturiler, Monofizitler, John of Damascus

## **Introduction**

When the Islamic community was established in the seventh century, the Christian community responded to this “new phenomenon”, on the basis of an already well established tradition of thought about other religions. This was based partly on the scriptures which it had inherited from the Jewish community, the Old Testament, partly on developments found within its own distinctive scriptures, the New Testament, and partly on the tradition of Christian thought and practice as it developed in the Patristic period, the period of the Fathers of the Christian church (Goddard, 2000:19).

Furthermore, the Christians who came under Muslim domination in the seventh and eighth centuries AD encountered monotheists that are completely different from themselves. Even their own internal debates about the ‘Trinitarian nature of God’ and his relationship with the created order through the incarnate Son clashed in every way against the Muslim emphasis upon God’s unity (Grypeou et al, 2006: 257).

In the context of above explanations, in this present study, at first, I will try to analyse the Christian community who retained their loyalty to the Council of Chalcedon and later coming to be known as Melkites because of their adherence to the Byzantine liturgy and their attitudes towards Islam. Secondly, after explaining the Melkites’ attitudes I will underline the Nestorians and Monophysites views of Islam. Thirdly, I will try to give some information about the John of Damascus who was the first Christian whose considered views on Islam are known and then evaluate his attitude towards Islam and the Prophet Mohammad.

In addition to these, the first Christian interpretations of Islam will be explained in three main points. Because when one begins to think about the Christians encountered by ‘Prophet’ and first Muslims, it has to be realized that their attitudes were very different from the Christians we know today.

In order to make clear the study, it may be useful to have a look at the general atmosphere of Christians of the peninsula. Round about AD 600 there was a main body of Christians constituting the Great Church, which later divided into the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Protestant churches of today; but there were also important bodies of Christians who had been expelled from the Great Church as heretics, notably those often known as the Monophysites (Jacobites and copts) and the Nestorians. Most of the Christians of Egypt, Palestine, Syria and Iraq- the lands first occupied by the Muslims- probably

belonged to these heretical bodies. To these bodies also belonged most of the Christians in Arabia itself (Watt, 1991: 1).

### **The Early Melkite Views of Islam**

In fact, the first Christian writers to report on Islam were Byzantine Christians who identified the Islamic soldiers as Arabs and called them hostile, powerful and fearsome enemies but seemed to know nothing about their Islamic religion. In the 630s, Maximus the Confessor-theologian, monastic and defender of the orthodox faith- wrote Peter the Illustrious exhorting him to be vigilant in his prayers, reminding him of the recent invasion by Arabs, whom he describes but does not name:

To see a barbarous nation of the desert overrunning another land as if it were their own!  
To see our civilization laid waste by wild and untamed beasts who have merely the shape of a human form! (Armour, 2002: 39).

Among Christians who, even under the rule of Islam, retained their loyalty to the Council of Chalcedon, later coming to be known as Melkites because of their adherence to the Byzantine liturgy and the suspicion that their political was to the Byzantine Emperor, a rather different interpretation of the coming of Islam emerged during the first century or so of Islamic rule (Goddard, 2000: 38).

The term *Melkite* is used to refer to various Christian churches and their members originating in the Middle East. In fact, this term was used as a disrespectful after the division that occurred in Eastern Christianity after the Council of Chalcedon (451). Also, it was used by non- Chalcedonians to refer to those who supported the council and the Byzantine Emperor. The Melkites were generally Greek-speaking urban dwellers living in the west of the *Mashriq* (Levant) and in Egypt, as opposed to the more provincial Syriac and Coptic speaking non-Chalcedonians. The Melkite Church was organised into three patriarchates (Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem). All of them are based on Patriarch of Constantinople.<sup>1</sup>

There are a few main sources about early Melkite views of Islam. Firstly, between the years 634 and 640 Maximus the Confessor, describes the Arab Muslims in one of his letter that is written to Peter the Illustrious, as “a Jewish people who... delight in human blood whom God hates, though they think they are worshipping God.” In fact, the author hints at how the Arabs “are announcing the advent of the Antichrist” in another letter he advises earnestly his readers to remain fast in their orthodoxy, to avoid persecution as long as possible, and to suffer death for their faith (Hoyland, 1997: 77-78).

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<sup>1</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Melkite>

In general, although Maximus hints at the Muslim spread as announcing the advent of the Antichrist; his emphasis is on its function as a temporary divine punishment for Christian sins. The feeling one gets from the letter is that all that needs to be done in order to return the Muslim tide is an earnest social penitence (Tolan, 1996: 15). The writings of Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem, are other sources for early Melkite views of Islam. Like Maximus he claims that the troubles which Christians lived are because of their wickedness and just repentance would turn the Muslim advances. He refers to the Muslims as “filled with all diabolical savagery,” “godless Saracens,” “godless and impious,” and so on (Ibid: 15).

On the upshot, the Melkites, those who had lost their empire, ascribed the success of the Muslims to Christian faults and sins. The Muslims are seen as a temporary divine punishment intended by God to bring the Christians back to a righteous way. None of the authors that we have examined sees any positive value in what was beginning to happen. The Arabs or Muslims were either without religion, or were under the rule of a false prophet.

#### **Nestorians and Monophysites’ Views of Islam**

‘Of the Christian’s of Prophet Muhammad’s time the Nestorians and the Monophysites were the most important cultural groups distinct from those lumped together the heading of “Greek” culture’ (Watt, 1991: 6).

Īṣō’yaw III, Nestorian Catholicos in the 650s, in his fourteenth letter wrote with respect to the Muslims:

“These Arabs, whom God has now given sovereignty over the world, are disposed towards us as you know. They are not opposed to Christianity. Indeed, they respect our religion and honor the priests and the saints of our Lord and they give aid to the churches and monasteries” (Tolan, 1996: 13).

As was mentioned above, Nestorian monasteries first began to appear in Palestine only under the Muslims. Clearly, the rule of the Muslims was for the Nestorians a better state of affairs than had been the rule of the Byzantines.

Similar to this situation, when the Muslims were forced to give up Emesa because of the residents taxes that had been collected insofar as they were now no longer able to give their protection to the inhabitants. Under the circumstances the inhabitants said that they preferred the Muslims to the tyranny of the Byzantines. A narration is recorded in both Christian and Muslim sources (Ibid: 13).

Shortly, the relations between the Nestorians and the Arabs were in general quite positive. ‘Even today, the Chaldean patriarch, as with his predecessors in the Middle Ages, is

an esteemed figure, whose authority is recognized among the collective Christian communities of Iraq'.<sup>2</sup>

In 661 the Monophysite Armenian bishop Sebēos wrote of Prophet Muhammad that he was learned in the law of Moses, that he thought the Muslims to know the God of Abraham, and that for their part by “abandoning the reverence of vain things, they turned toward the living God, who had appeared to their father Abraham”. He furthermore made plain that God purposed to fulfill in the Muslims the promises made to Abraham and his descendants, for which reason the Arabs were to possess the region that God had granted to Abraham (Ibid: 13). Thus, with God’s help, they overcame the armies of Byzantium (Ibid: 13). John of Nikiu, The Monophysite historian wrote of the conquests that God, “the guardian of justice,” allowed the Islamic expansion for the sake of his persecuted people, the Monophysites, and as a punishment upon those who “had dealt treacherously against Him,” that is to say, Orthodox (Ibid: 13-14).

Another Monophysite historian pointed out that the Byzantines had been handed to the Muslims “as a punishment for their corrupt faith,” and because of their heretical acceptance of the decrees of the council of Chalcedon (Ibid: 14). In this context, in the early eighth century, when the Muslims strengthen their rule over Albania, they were helped by some sects from within that did not want the Monophysite Albanian church to yield to the authority of the Byzantine Orthodox church (Hitchins, 1984: 243-244).

### **As Forerunners of the Last Days**

The first level of interpretation of Islam, however, was fairly quickly subjected to a number of challenges, as it began to become clear that the Islamic community was not only convinced that its coming was part of God’s will, but also saw itself as having a mission to be a kind of corrective to, or even fulfilment of, the message of the Christian community. Rather than its coming simply being the fulfilment of an ancient promise, therefore, it began to appear to the Christian community as rather more of a challenge; in other words, the Christian community, which had hitherto seen itself as the bearer of God’s final revelation to humankind, began to become aware that this was not an idea which was acceptable to the Muslims (Goddard, 2000: 36).

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.jaas.org/edocs/v11n1/Review.pdf>

### **As God's Temporary Punishment for Christian Dissension**

It is not long before we see a shift to a second layer of interpretation of the coming of Islam, and in this second period the divisions of the Christian world at the time begin to become evident and to make their presence felt. Clearly in the initial encounter of Christians and Muslims after the time of Prophet Muhammad, the Christians involved were all Eastern Christians. It was only later, after the expansion of Muslim community into North Africa and Spain, which western Christians began to formulate their rather different interpretations of Islam. But the Eastern Christian world of day was itself also divided, with the main difference being between those who accepted the definitions of the Council of the Chalcedon and those who did not, and, with respect to Islam the different judgements which began to emerge at this time reflect that split fairly clearly (Ibid: 36-37).

Among the non-Chalcedonian Christians, first, the way in which Islam came to be understood after the initial Abrahamic interpretation was that its coming was in some way a judgement of God, a movement whose purpose was to bring judgement on people who had erred. This view is one which can be found in the writing of both Monophysite and Nestorian Christians, as illustrated by the Coptic editor of the Egyptian *History of the Patriarchs*, Severus of Asmounein, who wrote: "The Lord abandoned the army of the Romans as a punishment for their corrupt faith, and because of the anathemas uttered against them by ancient fathers, on account of the Council of Chalcedon" (Frend, 1977: 13-15). And the twelfth century Monophysite writer Michael the Syrian commented:

The God of vengeance ...raised up from the south the children of Ishmael to deliver us from the hands of the Romans... It was no light benefit for us to be freed from the cruelty of Romans, their wickedness, anger and ardent cruelty towards us, and to find ourselves in peace (Moorhead, 1981: 585).

For all their differences these two groups are thus United in their view that Islam is God's judgement, not on themselves (of course!), but rather on their theological ecclesiastical foes, the Christian who accepted the Christological definitions of the Council of Chalcedon. Again a Biblical analogy is called into play at this point, the analogy of the Babylonian ruler Nebuchadnezzar, who destroyed Jerusalem in 587 or 586 BCE, and whose action was interpreted by some of the Old Testament prophets, such as Jeremiah, as bringing God's judgement on a decant Israelite community (Goddard, 2000: 37).

It was not only theological factors which were involved here. Not only had Nestorians and Monophysites each differed theologically with the church authorities in the Byzantine capital Constantinople, they had also each been on the receiving end of some fairly harsh treatment from the Byzantine authorities in Egypt and Syria encouraged by those bishops who accepted Chalcedon. So, for example, the Copts in Egypt had been fairly harshly persecuted by Cyrus, who had been appointed by the Byzantine emperor Heraclius to be both governor of Egypt and patriarch of the church in Egypt in 631/10. Between his appointment and the Arab conquest of Egypt Cyrus succeeded in alienating the vast majority of Egyptian Christians from both the definitions of the Council of Chalcedon and allegiance to the Byzantine Empire; “The Caucasian”, as he was called, opened a reign of terror the like of which the Egyptians had not experienced since the great Persecution. In the six years 635/14- 641/20 whatever loyalty had been felt towards Heraclius and the Roman Empire ebbed away (Frend, 1977: 351). Not only that, between 608 and 629 the eastern provinces of the Byzantine Empire had been occupied by the Persians. During that interlude the non- Chalcedonian Christians had found themselves treated with a greater degree of tolerance and respect than had been the case under the Byzantines, so that when the representatives of Islam first appeared, many of the non- Chalcedonian Christians welcomed them, seeing them, like the Persians, as liberators from the cruelty of the rulers of the Byzantine emperors and ecclesiastical authorities. ‘What the Persian era showed was that a foreign overlord was not necessarily a persecutor, but a Chalcedonian nearly always was (Goddard, 2000: 37-38).

### **As continuators of the religion of Abraham with teachings recognisable to Christians**

In particular, some of the statements 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, chronologically the first-born, but born to Abraham’s concubine Hagar, and Isaac, born second in time but eventually declared Abraham’s heir since he was born to Sarah, Abraham’s wife. In the course of narrative, it is stated that certain promises were made by God to Ishmael:

But God said to Abraham: ‘... I will make a nation of the son of the slave woman (Hagar) also, because he is your offspring’ (Genesis 21: 12-13)

And this is elaborated later in the same chapter (Genesis 21: 18), where a further promise is made by God:

'I will make him a great nation'

Later in the Book of Genesis, in chapter 25, when the descendants of Abraham are being listed; Ishmael's sons are listed before Isaac's, and the fact that there are twelve of them has traditionally been interpreted as signifying that like the twelve tribes of Israel, they made up some kind of sacred unit.

### **John of Damascus**

John of Damascus, the most prominent theologians of the Orthodox tradition, met Islam at first hand reported on its beliefs. He is often described as the author of the Christian attitude toward Islam.

On the basis of John of Damascus's experience Islam should be understood as a Christian heresy. As a result of his encounters with Muslims, at different levels and in different contexts, he thinks that Muslims had at least some convictions in common with the Christian of Melkites, even if on other points the two communities differed (Goddard, 2000: 38-39).

This view is outlined particularly in two of his Works. The first is an Appendix to his *De Haeresibus* (On Heresies). The work on heresies lists 100 established Christian heresies, in the discussion of which John is heavily reliant on the work of earlier Christian heresiographers, and then Islam is referred to as the one hundred and first heresy.

In the chapter 101 of the *De Haeresibus*, John aims to give the reader a short introduction to Islam, beginning with an explanation of its origin: In this concept, he associates Islam with the idolatrous character of pre-Islamic religion in Arabia; and then, the introduction continues with a brief explanation of the Muslim view of God and Christ; subsequently, the introduction comes an attack upon and satirizing some of the contents of the Qur'an, since he quotes the titles of some Suras from it like Sura 2,4,5; and then it concludes with a note on some Muslim practices such as the kissing of the Black Stone in the corner of the Ka'ba in Mecca, circumcision, not keeping the Sabbath, and abstention from some foods and wine (Hoyland, 1997: 485-486).

John alleges that Prophet Muhammad came across the Old and New Testaments by chance, and with the help of an Arian monk, constructed a heresy of his own (Watt, 1991: 70). John himself makes no mention of Bahira at this point, but Sahas, suggests that this is an intimation, at least, to Bahira as an agent of transmission to Muhammad, and if Arianism was

a Christian heresy it is easy enough to see how Islam might be interpreted in a similar way. Prophet Muhammad thus claimed, according to John, that a book was sent down to him from heaven, but the resulting claim to prophethood is rejected by John, who describes Islam as a deceptive superstition of the Ishmaelites' and 'the fore-runner of the Antichrist' (Goddard, 2000: 39-40). Briefly, the story of Prophet Muhammad and Bahira prompted John and his successors to consider Prophet Muhammad's calling and teachings to be from human sources, not from God.

As we see, the characteristic of Damascus' work is pastoral intent. His treatises are directed toward the Christian community itself. They are written in simple Greek or Arabic and the format is such that they provide easily remembered arguments that could be used by the Christians challenged with the claims of Islam. It seems likely that he was using his works in an effort to stem the growing tide of conversion which was first beginning to affect the Christian communities. At the same time, his discourses might be on the legitimacy of Christianity (Tolan, 1996: 21-22).

Prophet Muhammad's allowance of as many as four wives plus additional wives comes in special criticism by John, and particularly the case of Muhammad's marriage to Zaynab, the divorced wife of the prophet's adopted son, Zayd (Armstrong, 1992: 196).

Because of this incident the Damascene and his successors charged Prophet Muhammad with lechery, criticizing the Prophet's exceeding the Qur'an's limit of wives per man (Zaynab was his fifth wife) (Daniel, 1960: 346) Muslims, have accepted this seeming departure by their prophet, understanding that God gave "his Messenger a few extra privileges," to use the words of Karen Armstrong (Armstrong, 1992: 197) and have used the incident as a precedent for exempting relationships from the laws of consanguinity.

These criticism and objections by Christians indicate more than a difference over stories and specific doctrines, they demonstrate conflicts between two religious systems, each claiming divine sanction for its beliefs and practices, holding itself to be the final and perfect revelation and therefore judging the other to be fraudulent. What Muslims held to be revelations and mandates from God, Christians would see as humanly inspired preachments, some of them- the one just referred to in particular- designed largely to serve Muhammad, the preacher. Because of this wide difference in evaluation, arguments between the two traditions were inevitable. John Meyendorff calls this disagreement a "permanent misunderstanding between the two cultures and the two religious mentalities (Meyendorff, 1964: 122). This

deep level of misunderstanding consistently caused Christians to see Islam in its worst light, often a false light, producing what Norman Daniel terms “a deformed image of Islam” (Daniel, 1960: 8).

In assessing the Damascene’s judgement of Islam, one must remember that the Byzantines were fighting Arabs at the time to defend what was left of the Christian Empire, and perhaps regain what they had lost. John’s hymns pray for “the victory of the Emperor over his enemies (Islam)” and hope that the Emperor “will trample under his feet the barbarian nations (Arabs among them, of course)” (Meyendorff, 1964: 117-118) proud of their heritage of Greek culture and Christian religion as the Byzantines were, they thought of their empire as the kingdom of God on earth, with their emperor as *theotokos*, the “God-bearer” (a term used also for the Virgin Mary). Anyone outside these righteous and privileged domains was held to be a barbarian. The division of the world into these two areas paralleled the classic Islamic distinction between the *dar el Islam*, “the peaced abode,” and *dar el-harb*, “the abode of war”.

Perhaps John harshest criticism of Islam –though less harsh than the charge some would bring- came in his calling the Islamic movement “the forerunner of the Antichrist,” the evil power predicted for the Last Days by the New Testament book of Revelation. In criticizing Islam, John speaks more directly of the book of Revelation’s idea of the Antichrist as a fore runner of the Last Day, as the monk Maximus had done earlier, but he does little more than mention the thought.

### **Conclusion**

Early Christian responses to the Muslims were far from monolithic. Various strategies were employed by different authors at different times.

To some extent, this diversity was a result of the social and political realities with which the Christians had to deal both before and after the Muslim expansion (Tolan, 1996: 24).

On the basis of the few sources, I have attempted to outline the various types of early Christian responses to the Muslims in relation to their context.

For a due appreciation of the first encounter between Islam and Christianity it is necessary for Christians to be aware of the weaknesses of the Christianity of that period. There are three main points.

In the first place, Orthodox Christianity, in other words, the Great Church in general, was too closely associated with the Byzantine Empire after it became the official religion of the Empire in the reign of Constantine. If the Meccans had become Christians, they would inevitably have become in some respects subject to the Byzantines. It seems that for the sake of their trading interests, however, it was important for them to maintain impartiality between the Byzantine and Sassanian Empires (Watt, 1953: 15).

Secondly, official Greek theology as defined by the ecumenical councils had become too abstract and was entirely beyond the understanding of the regular Christian. On the other hand, The Monophysites and Nestorians in defending their positions against the official formulations had also become somewhat abstract. This meant that any Christians whom the Meccans were likely to meet would be incapable of the subtleties of Christian doctrine. It is not surprising that inadequate and erroneous opinions about Christianity were current in Mecca, but this is something for which Christians themselves were responsible (Watt, 1991: 7).

Lastly, the rejections of the Copts, Jacobites and Nestorians by the Great Church were almost certainly a factor facilitating the conversion to Islam of members of these groups. Essentially the decision of the Great Church that these were heretics was a failure to make due provision for cultural diversity among Christians.

John says that Muhammad formed his teachings from elements he took from Judaism and two unorthodox branches of Christianity, the Arian and the Nestorian. Orthodox Christians had charged the former with denying the divinity of Jesus, the latter with overemphasizing Jesus' humanity-views that accord to some degree with Islam- and thus in John's view were the probable sources of Islamic teaching on Jesus.

However, when generally looked at the reactions towards Muslims in the seventh and eighth centuries it can be seen that there are some contradictions and differences among these responses. Because there are not fixed opinions among them. In the early periods, the Christian community reactions were generally on the basis of an already well established tradition of thought about other religions; that is to say, the reactions sometimes were based on the scriptures which it had inherited from the Jewish community or the Old Testament, at times, they were based on the tradition of Christian thought and practice as it developed in the Patristic period as well. Then again, it can be seen that the character of the reactions are changing in later periods. The reactions were about the Prophet Muhammad's private life.

These varying attitudes are quite conspicuous. Because when looked at the general attitudes of Nestorian, Monophysites and even Melkites, it is visible that none of them are talking about the Prophet's private life except a few persons like John of Damascus and his followers.

In brief, it is not easy to see a common compromise among Christian communities in the seven and eighth centuries when they react toward Muslims.

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