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The Divine in the Theological Thinking of Saint John of Damascus in relationship with relevant Teachings of Theodore Abu Qurrah

Abstract

Saint John of Damascus is considered to be one of the most significant personalities of the Orthodox Church, as well as the Christian world in general. As a teacher of the church through his writings, he tried to express clearly the teachings of Church so that they could be transferred effectively to it's active members. Around this frame, the teaching about divinity is included. John as an absolute theologian of the church, tried to explain this teaching about divinity and transfer it to the world of God in the most possible



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way. Putting things on a right basis, he approaches the whole issue under the Biblical observation, and earlier theology of Fathers as well.

On the other hand, Abū Qurrah was also a symbolic personality of the Orthodox Church, who was raised around an Arab-Islamic environment, so the majority of his writings was basically in the Arabic language, while at the same time he was engaged in defending the Christian faith, due to Islamic challenges. It was about two persons acting around the same geographical and cultural frame. That is why comparing the study of their Theological thinking is fairly essential for research.

Keywords

Divinity, Holy Trinity, Trinitarian Theology, John of Damascus, Theodore Abū Qurrah, Orthodox Theology, Christian Kalām

1 Introduction

John of Damascus had been one of the most prominent personalities in the 8th century, which played a fundamental role in the history of Christian thought. He was born in Damascus from an eminent and wealthy Greek-Syrian family and served as a chief secretary in the yard of Umayyad in Damascus. Later on, he set off for the convent of Saint Sabas in Jerusalem and followed monastic life. Damascus had presented a productive writing work with a lot of theological issues. Systematic writing of the dogmatic teaching of the Orthodox Eastern Church is due to him after all. At this present article, we will try to outline in short, about the divinity teaching under the observation of his theological thinking, based on his classic work, *Exposition of the*

Orthodox Faith. We will try to make a comparison between this relevant teaching of John of Damascus and the equivalent of Theodore Abū Qurrah who was taught by him.

Theodore Abū Qurrah was a Syrian Orthodox Bishop in Ḥarrān area around north Syria Mesopotamia and possibly, the first Arab spoken theologian (*mutakallim*) who wrote apologies against Islam, defending the Christian faith against the Islamic challenge¹.

2 The understanding of God in the Orthodox Theology

The understanding of God in Christian faith is connected strongly with the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. God in Christian faith has no abstract meaning, something indefinite, but it is a personal God, a triune God. He is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. At the same time, God is transcendent as far as his essence is concerned. God is not identical to Creation (pantheism) but he is distinguished from that. Based on the above teaching, Saint John of Damascus is trying to explain the meaning of God under the observation of Orthodox Theology. This teaching about God is based on three foundational points: a) Proof about God's existence, b) God is one and transcendent, c) Trinity of God. Let us have a look in short about this issue according to John of Damascus's thinking.

¹ Najib George Awad, *Orthodoxy in Arabic Terms: A Study of Theodore Abu Qurrah's Theology in Its Islamic Context*, Berlin & Boston: De Gruyter, 2015, pp. 1-7.

2.1 The theological Thinking of Saint John of Damascus

2.1.1 Proof about the existence of God

Saint John of Damascus as an experienced teacher and lest students slip into the trap of assuming they can capture God through their intellectual contemplation in the classrooms, starts his exposition by affirming God's incomprehensibility and transcendence above human reason. He stresses that the only knowledge of God available to us is in the testimonies of the prophets, apostles, and evangelists². These scriptural testimonies are our evidence of God's existence, and they alone show us that, despite his incomprehensibility and transcendence, God has implanted in us the reality of his being. So, the evidence of God's existence is first and foremost scriptural in the witness that God's people, led by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, lay open before us³. John affirms that the scriptures awaken the natural human capacity to know God that is innate in us and which invites us to deduce the existence of a Creator from the things created (causal proof of God's existence)⁴.

At this point, it is noteworthy that John is counting on the Holy Scriptures for his argumentation. In this case, what confirms the truth about the existence of God is the written testimony on the scriptures alone. Consequently, this fact is indicated because of the authenticity of the texts.

So, John of Damascus does not see the proof about the existence of God as a fact that should be meditated, and is included in the logic of meditation, but is something that is recorded in the revealing word of God, the divine revelation.

² John of Damascus, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, trans. S. D. F. Salmond, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 9, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, New York: Cosimo, 2007, Bk 1, ch. I-II.

³ *Ibidem*, ch. III.

⁴ *Ibidem*

2.1.2 One and transcendent God

Apart from the logical arguments that the texts use and certify, one cannot speak of God's essence and nature in terms of what he is, but only in terms of what he is not⁵. At this point, John of Damascus is emphasizing the transcendence of God and expressing the negative Theology of the Orthodox Church. According to the Theology of Fathers, the substance of God is inconceivable and cannot be approached⁶. As a result, the negative way or negative Theology refers to the unapproachable, inconceivable, and unknown aspect of God⁷. John as an Orthodox Church writer is expressing the distinction between created and uncreated. According to Orthodox Theology, the substance of God is transcendent and is beyond any created reality⁸.

Saint John of Damascus clearly expressing this, saying: «The Deity being incomprehensible is also assuredly nameless. Therefore, since we know not His essence, let us not seek for a name for His essence. For names are explanations of actual things. But God (...) not only did not impart to us His essence but did not even grant us the knowledge of His essence. For it is impossible for nature to understand fully the supernatural»⁹.

After expressing the negative Theology, at the same time, he emphasized the uniqueness of God. God is only one. He is exposing Christian monotheism. He said: «Since we derive any logical awareness of God's existence from the scriptural attestation and not from reason, we have to search for the knowledge

⁵ John of Damascus, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, ch. IV.

⁶ Nikos Matsoukas, *Dogmatic and Symbolic Theology 3*, [in Greek], Pournaras Publications, Thessaloniki, 2007, pp. 139-147.

⁷ George Martzelos, *Orthodox doctrine and theological problematics. Studies on dogmatic theology, D'* [in Greek], Pournaras Publications, Thessaloniki, 2011, p. 272.

⁸ Nikos Matsoukas, *Dogmatic and Symbolic Theology 3*, pp. 103-118.

⁹ John of Damascus, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, Bk 1, ch. XII.

of God in the Bible and nowhere else. For those who believe in the scriptures, the Damascene points out, “that God is one and not many, is no matter of doubt»¹⁰.

In the Bible, God is perfect, without blemish, good, wise, powerful, without beginning and end, everlasting, uncircumscribed and perfect. These attributes do not allow the possibility of a multiplicity of deities, because plurality would mean that these attributes would be subject to difference, circumscription and degree, which are not to be ascribed to God. God’s oneness, then, cannot be doubted rationally, for it is affirmed by biblical reasoning, which is, for believers, beyond doubt.

So, for John of Damascus, the uniqueness of God and the evidence about God's existence is proved only through Divine Revelation. The fact that God is only one is mentioned strongly in his revealing word.

2.1.3 The Triune God

In the first chapter, John of Damascus argues that being above reason does not mean that God is without reason (alogn), or, thus, wordless. On the contrary, God has his Word eternally and substantially: “There never was a time when God was not Word: but He ever possesses His own Word (...) having a subsistence in him and life and perfection, not proceeding out of Himself but ever existing within Himself”¹¹. The Word has all the attributes that are found in God: “It is of the same nature as God”¹².

For John, God, apart from his Word, has a Spirit as well. Resorting again to the allegorical analogy, the Damascene opines that, just as the human word “is not destitute of spirit,” and since the

¹⁰ Ibidem, ch. V.

¹¹ Ibidem, ch. VI.

¹² Ibidem.

divine Word “is not more imperfect than our own word,” the divine Word also owns a Spirit that is neither from-without God nor without its own subsistence. The Holy Spirit is “the companion of the Word and the reveler of His energy, and not as mere breath without subsistence”¹³. Besides, as God has never been without a Word, so also the Word has never been without a Spirit, for “never was the Father at any time lacking in the Word, nor the Word in the Spirit”¹⁴. In this case, Saint John emphasizes the absolute unity of the three persons of the Holy Trinity, as well as the dependence between them since the Word cannot exist without the Father and the Spirit. John echoes a Basilian linear Trinitarian discourse and uses it precisely as Basil does in his *De Spirito Sancto*, that is, to show that the Spirit and the Word are not different from God and are not creaturely (i. e., from-without God). Basil’s defense of the unity and non-differentiation of the three in a linear fashion underpins, for example, his statement that “He who rejects the Spirit rejects the Son, and he who rejects the Son rejects the Father”¹⁵. Basil’s structuring of the reciprocity between the three hypostases is dominantly linear and mediatorial in order because he departs from an emphasis that the Father alone remains the source or the center of the Godhead. This Basilian trend of linearity, as Dorothea Wendebourg convincingly argues, was taken up by other fathers in the following centuries, but at the expense of other Cappadocian, more reciprocal approaches (such as that of Gregory of Nazianzus)¹⁶.

¹³ Ibidem, ch. VII.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵ Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit*, trans. Stephen M. Hildebrand, Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001, II. 27.

¹⁶ Dorothea Wendebourg, “From the Cappadocian Fathers to Gregory Palamas: The Defeat of Trinitarian Theology,” *Studia Patristica*, 17 (1982), pp. 194-197.

Before passing on to the explanation of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, John of Damascus is emphasizing the unity of God. Christians, he states, “believe, then, in one God, one beginning¹⁷. For John of Damascus, the source of the Son and the Holy Spirit is not the person of the father, but Deity itself. His primary care is to stress out the unity and uniqueness of Deity, and mentions that characteristically: “one essence, one divinity, one power, one will, one energy, one beginning, one authority, one dominion, one sovereignty”¹⁸.

On another point, the Saint underlines the mutual environing of the three Divine substances, which does not mean confusion between them. He writes on characteristically: The subsistences dwell and are established firmly in one another. For they are inseparable and cannot part from one another, but keep their separate courses within one another, without coalescing or mingling, but cleaving to each other. For the Son is in the Father and the Spirit: and the Spirit in the Father and the Son: and the Father in the Son and the Spirit, but there is no coalescence or commingling or confusion. Moreover, there is one and the same motion: for there is one impulse and one motion of the three subsistences, which is not to be observed in any created nature¹⁹.

John endeavors carefully to save what he says from any accusation of polytheism that may arise from his association of the various attributes with what Christians also say about the existence of three subsistences in God. In order to avoid the suspicion that he is falling into the trap of Tritheism or associationism, the Damascene uses the notions of ‘interpenetration’ and ‘reciprocity’ to prove that, although there are three subsistenc-

¹⁷ John of Damascus, *Exposition of Orthodox Faith*, Bk. 1, ch. VIII.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, Bk 1, ch. VIII.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, Bk 1, ch. XIV.

es in God, they are not three ‘Gods’. These three are inseparable and firmly one. This is why, style-wise, John sandwiches what he says on interpenetration and reciprocity between clear and emphatic statements on oneness and inseparability. The central concern about oneness also explains why in the ensuing paragraph, he speaks of the divine nature as totally simple, indivisible, and existing in one motion of the three subsistences²⁰.

Since John ensured the unity of the persons, so that is to say the Deity itself, he goes on explaining the separate roles of the Divine substances. Each substance is different from the other as far as the relation and the role it plays with the other substances. The Damascene resorts to the notion of ‘causal operations,’ thereby distinguishing the three persons in terms of their roles: what they do (i. e., the Father creates, the Son redeems, and the Spirit perfects), rather than who they are. Within the framework of the causal operations, John retrieves his earlier Cappadocian linear choice, invoking again reference to the Father as the arche of both creation (“Creator of all”) and the other two persons’ nature and being (“causer or generator”): the Father is unbegotten, begetting Cause of the Son, who is, in turn, the only begotten Lord, and finally (to complete the linear equation) the Son is the ‘producer’ (probolea) of the Holy Spirit. Here it needs to be stressed out that distinction does not mean division according to granted creative reality. In the terminology of Theology is called “eterotita”²¹.

His distinction of the Divine substances is not contrary to the unity of the Divine substance. This is what is pointed out by Saint John: Though the Father begot the Son, this does not make the Son other in divinity, for he is consubstantial with the Fa-

²⁰ Ibidem, ch. XIV.

²¹ Nikos Matsoukas, *Dogmatic and Symbolic Theology 2*, [in Greek], Pour-naras Publications, Thessaloniki, 2006, p. 92.

ther and is begotten from the Father's very own nature²². Nor does the action of begetting indicate a change in God from the state of no-fatherhood before the begetting to a state of fatherhood after it, for there was no time when the Son was not: the Son, unlike creation, "co-existed from the beginning with the Father", and he is an offspring of the Father's essence, and thus identical to the begetter in nature²³.

Around this frame, John of Damascus, in order to ensure the unity of the divine substance, despite the different parts of these substances, he is expressing with emphasis the matter about these substantial qualities. It is known that Orthodox Theology is distinguishing the divine substance based on personal qualities. These personal qualities cannot be transferred or communicate with each other²⁴. Each substance has its own quality, and there is only the difference between each substance²⁵. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit exist having one, uncreated substance; they communicate according to the interpersonal community of this one substance that is Divinity²⁶. John being delighted by the Orthodox tradition writes: "The Son is everything God the Father is in essence, except in playing the Father's role of begetting; he is the begotten, while the Father is the begetter. On the other hand, the Holy Spirit is everything the Father and the Son are in nature, yet She proceeds from the Father, and is not begotten like the Son"²⁷.

One of the exciting elements in John of Damascus' exposition of the Trinitarian faith of orthodoxy is what he says about the

²² John of Damascus, *Exposition of Orthodox Faith*, ch. VIII.

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ Nikos Matsoukas, *Dogmatic and Symbolic Theology* 3, p. 82.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 83.

²⁷ John of Damascus, *Exposition of Orthodox Faith*, ch. VIII.

twofold generation of the Holy Spirit: first, the Spirit is the production of the Son in particular by virtue of the causal will of the Father, but second, the Holy Spirit “proceedeth from the Father and resteth in the Son,” and is “derived from the Father, yet not after the manner of generation, but after that of procession”²⁸. Hough the above formulation, John of Damascus in no case seems to be supporting the (filioque) teaching. Saint John keeps his faith in Orthodox tradition, which rejects that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Son too²⁹.

3 The relationship between John of Damascus’s and Theodore Abū Qurrah’s Teachings

One of the preliminary distinctions between John and Theodore lies in their view of the role of reasoning in perceiving the existence of God. For the Damascene, God is totally incomprehensible and above reason, even beyond essence and existence. For John, this total transcendence is the natural consequence of God’s nature as simple and non-compound³⁰. Abū Qurrah, for his part, similarly rejects any combination, otherness (ghayriyyah), or dissolution (tabʿīd) in God, emphasizing at the same time that God is simple (laṭīf) and non-compound (tāmm). However, Abū Qurrah does not use this latter emphasis to argue for God’s total apophatic incomprehension and transcendence beyond knowledge, essence and existence, as the Damascene does.

Also, Abū Qurrah differs from John of Damascus in the role he ascribes to reasoning in religious and interreligious debates.

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ Nikos Matsoukas, *Dogmatic and Symbolic Theology 2*, pp. 128-144.

³⁰ John of Damascus, *Exposition of Orthodox Faith*, Bk 1, ch. VIII.

The Damascene, as we deduce from his exposition, only acknowledges the form of reasoning that is attested by the scriptures (i. e., causal argument), deeming scriptural attestation to be the criterion for what is allowable or unallowable concerning the knowledge of God. Abū Qurrah, on the other hand, assesses the tenability of the scriptural attestation and examines it based on reason. He opts for a less apophatic approach to God, using in his maymars various paradoxical, causal, analogical, teleological and apophatic arguments for both the existence and knowledge of God³¹. Yet Abū Qurrah believes that the truth about God is verified not through the scriptures, but through reasoning “min al-‘aql wa-laysa min al-kutub”³². For Abū Qurrah, God remains transcendent, infinite and inexhaustible by human reason, but reasoning also plays for him a more influential and reliable role in knowing and understanding God’s triune-oneness than it is allowed to do for John of Damascus. Why is this so? Because for John, the scriptures and the arguing strategies they contain decide the acceptable rational standards for the hermeneutics of God, whereas, for Abū Qurrah, reason and rational scrutiny decide the best means of proving the authenticity of any religious textual attestation. Another distinction between Abū Qurrah’s and the Damascene’s expositions of the Trinity lies in their explanation of the oneness of the three persons. In his *De fide orthodoxa*, John of Da-

³¹ Abū Qurrah, *Maymar fī Mawt al-Masīh* (Maymar on the death of Messiah), ed. Ignace Dick, (Jounieh: Librairie S. Paul/Rome: Papal Oriental Institute, 1982, pp. 48-49.

³² Najib George Awad, “Min al-‘Aql wa-Laysa min al-Kutub”: Scriptural Evidence, Rational Verification and Theodore Abū Qurra’s Apologetic Epistemology,” in *Exegetical Crossroads: Understanding Scripture in Judaism, Christianity and Islam in the Pre-Modern Orient*, George Tamer, Regina Grundmann, Assaad Elias Kattan and Karl Pinggéra (eds.), Berlin & Boston: De Gruyter, 2018, pp. 95-118.

mascus, as I have shown, relies on a linear, patrocentric attestation of the relations of origin in the Trinity: the Father alone is the arche of the divine existence and essence. Abū Qurrah allows himself to take a more flexible and context-driven position, speaking of the Word and the Spirit as the properties of God, rather than as 'with him,' and calling only the Father 'God'³³. Moreover, Abū Qurrah's strategy corresponds with the nature of the questions his Muslim interlocutors challenge him with, as well as expressing his appraisal of what in the orthodox tradition would be useful and relevant in his attempt to make the doctrine of the Trinity verifiable to Muslims.

This apologetic context makes Abū Qurrah's task more demanding and complicated than that of John of Damascus. The latter is just conveying his understanding of orthodox Trinitarian theology to educate and pastorally train his fellow Christians, who already believe in that orthodoxy and follow its content regardless of whether they find it rational or not. In contrast, Abū Qurrah is doing his best to unpack the core meanings of Trinitarian orthodoxy for apologetic and sometimes polemical purposes, convincing non-Christian skeptics about the Trinity, or at least making them confess their failure to refute its rational plausibility. In order to fulfill this daunting task, Abū Qurrah needed to be as flexible and pragmatic as possible in drawing on various orthodox arguments in different dialogical settings, even if in the eyes of his Christian readers, this gave the impression that he was inconsistent, paradoxical and opportunist.

This pragmatic flexibility and readiness to invest in various theological approaches also explain another distinction be-

³³ Abū Qurrah, *Abū Qurrah wal-Ma'mūn: al-Mujādalah*, Tahqīq Wafīq Naṣrī, SJ, Bayrūt: CEDRAC (USJ)/Jounieh: Librairie St Paul, 2010, where he calls fatherhood the origin (arche) (aṣliyyah) (V.C.1.564) and the Father God (amma al-Abb fahūa Allah) (V.C.3.580).

tween John of Damascus and Abū Qurrah, which lies in the former's exclusion of any traces of the filioque principle in his exposition and his insistence on a patrocentric causality, compared with the latter's use of a filioque assertion, as when he says in the text of al-Mujādalāh that "the Spirit proceeds from the mind and its Word" (*war-Rūḥ munbathiq min al-'aql wal-kalimah*)³⁴. The explanation for this also lies in the particular demands of Abū Qurrah's apologetic setting, which leads him to depend on 'the goal justifies the means' strategy, more than would be the case for a theologian, like John of Damascus, discussing with fellow-believers ideas about what they acknowledge as reliable or unreliable in faith.

In al-Mujādalāh, Abū Qurrah appeals to any theological idea that is capable of serving his defense of the oneness of the Christian deity. This is why he frequently refers there to 'God, his Word, and Spirit,' rather than 'Father, Son, and Holy Spirit'. That is, he borrows from the official Muslim store of vocabulary in his endeavor to bring them onto common ground with what Christians say about monotheism. John of Damascus did not need to do this (or at least he did not reveal in his writings any concern with this challenge), and could thus always safely restrict himself to the traditional Trinitarian language of 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit.' Had he, in fact, used the phrase 'God, his Word and Spirit,' his students would have mistaken his ideas for Arianism and Pneumatomachianism, or even Modalism. This reaction was not a threat for Abū Qurrah, since 'God, his Word and Spirit' is the crucial Qur'anic and Islamic vocabulary, and the Christian heresies were of no interest or concern to his Muslim interlocutors.

³⁴ Ibidem, V.4.A.466.

5 Conclusion

So, as the writings of Damascus and Abū Qurrah are addressing a different audience and at the same time, dispose of a different character, each one is expressing the teaching about Deity differently. As John of Damascus is applying to members of the church, his teaching is more cautious concerning dogmatic matters following the tradition of the Fathers of the Orthodox Church faithfully. From the above reference, it has been clear that Saint John of Damascus as a great Theologian of the Orthodox Church, through his above approaching, summarizes the Orthodox teaching about God. He does not accept God as something abstract that needs to be meditated but as a personal being. One God that is transcendent in substance, and at the same time, personal. The way about the existence of God is being revealed in the Bible as Holy Trinity. God is personal as he is a communion of persons. He is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Also trying to ensure the unity and uniqueness of triune God, he is not failing to emphasize Christian monotheism. Though God is triune, it doesn't contradict the fact he is only one and unique. Besides, the monotheism dogma, as well as the trinity of God, is being expressed with clarity in the sacred texts of the Holy Bible. So, the source of John of Damascus's theological concept is the Bible itself.

On the contrary, because Abū Qurrah's works are apologetic against Islam, he is trying to present a teaching more approachable to the Islamic tradition. In this way, Abū Qurrah becomes a "Theology in the flesh" of the Islamic environment. He is borrowing the Islamic vocabulary and rationalism which try to bridge the two worlds, Islam and Christianity, so putting a joint base and common ground. This is why the use of biblical arguments from his side barely exists. No matter the doubts Abū Qurrah teaching present, from the Orthodox side. Besides, we

should not ignore the fact that he himself, took over to complete a challenging operation that is to explain the Holy Trinity doctrine to Muslims and around an Islamic environment. As a Dominican Christian missionary of the 13th century testifies, Ricoldo de Monte di Croce (1243-1320) it is really too hard to transfer the right meaning of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity to Muslims³⁵.

Moreover, as it has been rightly said, the use of contextual performing pictures, in order to be more understandable the dogmatic truths by people with a different cultural background, from the Orthodox side, lots of times is not only legal but it has to be imposed as well³⁶. Moreover, it consists of foundational and educative principle that is deeply rooted in the history of the life of the Orthodox Church³⁷. On the condition that is limited around the morphology of the doctrine, keeping it untouched and genuine exactly like the Apostles and the Fathers of the Church kept, who used performing pictures and terminology from the cultural background of the Greek world, but absolutely limited at a morphological level, without changing the message of the divine revelation³⁸. So Abū Qurrah in this way, managed a highly important apologetic and missionary work.

³⁵ Robert Irwin, *For Lust of Knowing: The Orientalists and their Enemies*, London: Penguin Books, 2007, p. 39.

³⁶ George Martzelos, *Orthodox doctrine and theological problematics. Studies on dogmatic theology, A'* [in Greek], Pournaras Publications, Thessaloniki, 1993, pp. 141-142.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 142.

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

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