

Byzantium, Southeast Europe and Islam in the Middle Ages: Survey of Encounters and Perception

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Abstract

Earlier than the Western Europe, the Byzantine Empire encountered Islam in the context of at least a thousand years Hellenistic and Roman experience with the Middle East. This was to create a stereotype of perception of Islam, generally different from that in the Medieval Western Europe. For Byzantines it was difficult at the beginning to accept Islam as a new religion. It was rather viewed as a deviation of Christianity or Judaism, or just as a political movement. **Later, after the 9th century, Islam was accepted as a rival religious and political creed with different nuances**, starting from the popular strong anti-Islamic opinion up to the academic narratives or the strict political and diplomatic necessity. The Byzantine-Muslim dialogue finished with some excellent examples, like John Kantakouzenos and Manuel Paleologos’ polemical writings.

It is difficult, if possible at all, to create a definite division into periods of the Byzantine acceptance of Islam as a phenomenon. During the long period starting from the 7th century onwards up to the times of the Late Empire many theories, nuances and polemical opera appeared, the latter not rarely under the form of, predominantly, fictive dialogues. Many different *thopoi* survived for centuries ahead, some of them up to the modern era. If we have to delineate, however, certain stages and trends, they could look like as follows.

Earlier than Western Europe, Byzantium encountered Islam in the context of at least a thousand years Hellenistic and Roman experience with the Middle East. Countries like Persia were considered of

being traditional enemies of the Greek world and the Roman Empire alike.

The clash with the Arabs in the 7th century was partly a surprise, although Arabs were old-time acquaintances of both Greeks and Romans. The massive assault in the 7th century, which led to few sieges of Constantinople itself, was enough to prove the vitality of a civilization brought into the world along with a certain religious zeal in addition. The Byzantine Empire could do nothing more than just to survive losing a great part of its Middle Eastern and African territories. Sassanian Persia was lacking that chance.

It is curious enough, however, that for the Christian Empire it was difficult to signify the war with Arabs in religious terms. Whereas there was a “Crusader-like” atmosphere in the war with Sassanian Persia, when Persians took the Holy Cross from Jerusalem to their capital Ctesiphon, there was nothing like that in the generally dumbfounded mood during the early Byzantine defeats. Was the Byzantine society tired from the long and strongly ideological conflict with Persia to continue its proper standing against the Arabs in military and emotional way? The answer is far from clear. What is to be noticed is that the contemporary sources, even when mentioning the *infidel Saracens*, did not invest the narrative with strongly religious zeal and significance. For the Romans/Byzantines the war was firstly against the Saracens, then against infidels. Not that the understanding of the clash between Christianity and the new religious challenge, shaped by early Islam, was not present, but it was not stressed in a way we could expect from our far later perspective. The Bulgarian ruler Tervel helped the Byzantines in the winter of the 717-718 to expel the Arabs from the surroundings of Constantinople and this event was related in many sources. As later the sources, as clear was the religious opposition we/they, Christians/Muslims, to the extent that the same Tervel was canonized, probably many centuries later, as St. Trivellius Teoctistus, and accepted along with Charles Martel as one of the savers of Europe. This is, however, later and strongly ideological perspective, completely unfit for the realities of the early 8th century.

The Muslims, respectively, used to contact with the Christian clergy preferring it to the civil authorities. This is to be explained with the philosophy of the early Muslim Empire where there was no division between the religious and civil power of the *khalif*. We are ominously lacking data about vigorous incites on the side of the Christian clergy to the believers to fight vehemently against the enemies of Christ. Sophronios of Jerusalem was partly exclusion, but even he did not die fighting the Muslims, but rather delivered the Holy city after an agreement and assurance by the Muslim leader Khalid ibn al-Walid. We should not forget that the reforms of Muhammad were perceived by him as revelation from above, but in the sense of Reformation, not creation of a radically new faith. The early followers of Muhammad, the *mumminun* (the direct followers of Muhammad) and *muslimun* (believers subdued to the words of God through His Prophet) considered themselves as the real restorers of the pristinely clear Monotheistic religion and the original obedience to God, as it had been bequeathed by the Patriarchs of the Old Testament, namely Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. For those early believers/reformers, moreover, Islam was the primeval Monotheistic religion restored so that even Abraham and Jesus Christ were in a sense Muslims and God’s prophets, too. The Jews and Christians were grouped therefore in a special category, different from the true believers, but related to them, the “people of the Book” (*dhimmi, ahl al-Kitab*). They, namely the Jews and the Christians, used to be true believers in the past, according to the early Muslims, but partly betrayed their obedience to God by mixing their faith with pagan philosophy or, in the case of Jews, approaching towards certain atheism. The successful early Islamic/Arab conquests during the “Rashidun era” created in addition a feeling of religious correctness of those chosen by God [1].

Affronting the Arab Muslim challenge along with the spiritual dissent inside the Church and society, the Byzantine authors in the 7th century reacted in a way not to be expected by many nowadays. The

Byzantines directed their wrath as well as argumentation against the Jews and Judaism. It is by sure not a surprise that Jews were traditionally considered of being enemies of Christ and not completely loyal, neither completely equal in rights, subjects of the Roman/Byzantine Emperor. During the 7th century wars against Persia the Jews in Palestine and Syria usually supported the Persians, thus provoking the anger of the Byzantines, including the Emperor Herakleios who had the idea of baptize them or expel them. At that time the first anti-Jewish polemical writings appeared, but after the Arabic successful campaigns of the 630s their number grew even more. It is still not clearly explained were those polemical treatises and dialogues in fact a veiled response to the challenges posed by Islam? And what was, furthermore, the early Islam like? Was it identified with Judaism, as a sect or a development of the latter? And was it widely believed among the populace or just an example of imperial propaganda? Difficult questions to be answered even nowadays. In any case, Jews were considered of being problem for the predominantly Christian society and there were still a considerable number of them in the Middle East at that time. Maxim the Confessor was eager in a letter to put responsibility on Jews and Judaism for the Arabic conquests. For (Pseudo)Sebeos the new Islamic teaching was just a sequel of Judaism, while Andreas of Crete was strongly insisting on anti-Judaism in his sermon in the early 8th century [2].

The Arabs were well-known in the Middle East since the ancient times. Their perception was ever seasoned with certain animosity and persisted like that after the appearance of Islam.

For Byzantine chroniclers, like Theophanes and the Patriarch Nikephoros, they were just the Saracens of the past, always treacherous and incline to predatory inroads. The Byzantine society was not in ease to define them as something new, as fighters for a new religion. St. Demetrios saved Thessalonica from the “godless” Avars and Slavs, but not a saint was helping the Byzantines against the Arabs in the East. We ought to have in mind, moreover, that many Arabs in Syria were Byzantine subjects, being Christians in their majority.

Sometimes at the late 7th and early 8th century the first attempts of explanation appeared, the first dialogues (fictive or real) with Muslims debating the different points and perspectives, and many texts with apocalyptic and eschatological sounding as well. Some of them were confused in defining the personality of Muhammad, accepting him either as political troublemaker or a harbinger of new radical heresy rather than as a prophet of a new faith. Other eschatological texts viewed already Islam as a godless and demoniac doctrine.

The Islamic god was recognized as a mischievous invention, and Muhammad as a deceiver, a kind of exotic “guru” or founder of a Satanic cult. This line came to be popular in the Latin West for a long time. It was probably reaction to the spread of the Islamic Empire and to certain important steps of the Umayyads, including the building of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem and the new Islamic coinage with an openly anti-Christian message to provide.

Islam was against some important principles of Christian faith and theology. Firstly, it was against the Trinitarian doctrine and against Jesus being accepted as Son of God. It was not by chance that the citation from Quran 112 “God does not beget nor is he begotten” found place on the early Islamic coins. The second main point of discussion was connected with the Old Testament and the role of circumcision. Thirdly, it was the position and authority of Muhammad as the last prophet of God. **Next, it was the Christian veneration of icons and relics repudiated by Muslims. And finally, it was the superiority of Islam as later (presumably the last) religion favoured by the Lord who gave to the Muslims victories and domination over vast territory. These arguments and counter-arguments would be repeated again and again for centuries, thus clearing the status of Islam as a different religion standing vis-à-vis Christianity. Not many of the Byzantines, however, were ready to accept this fact so easily**

The time from the 8th to the 10th centuries we could tentatively define as the first “classical” period for both Byzantium and the West, when the anti-Islamic polemical literature is in concern. Firstly, we have to start with the important person of John of Damascus, the last great patristic theologian of the Orthodox Church. He viewed Islam as a dangerous heresy, creating many stereotype accusations to be repeated later, like the “lost generation” of Hagar and Ishmael, the cult to Aphrodite and the stone Kaaba, the coarse material acceptance of God, the lascivious character of the Muslims and many other exotic theses. What is more curious in the case of John is that he lived most of his life in an Islamic milieu, in the Khalifate, being a financial official of the Umayyads for a while. Another author was Niketas Byzantios who wrote an extremely harsh anti-Islamic polemical treatise in the second half of the 9th century. Personality of the (pseudo)prophet Muhammad was blackened to the extreme and many of Niketas’ anti-Islamic *thopoi* were to be discovered in the Western Christian texts up to the time of the Crusades. Many of the polemics from that period were clearly marked by the sensitiveness of the Byzantine society towards heresies and the fear from the might of the Islamic Empire. The next 10th century brought certain relief in that direction – the once strong Abassid Khalifate was practically dissolved and many new political subjects appeared, not only Arabic, but also Turkish and Kurdish. The Byzantine Empire used against them the skillful combination of diplomacy, corruption, and military force.

After the late 11th century, the tide turned back again. After the disastrous defeat at Manzikert (1071) the Byzantine Empire was again in a retreat vis-a-vis its Islamic neighbours. They were, moreover, new, vital and aggressive – the Seljuk Turks. The Crusades brought at the beginning some relief, but later they led to the final division of Christendom into the Catholic West and the Orthodox East. The late Byzantine intellectuals preferred to remove in those difficult circumstances the religious problem from the schedule and thus to secularize the relations with both West and East. Theodore Metochites and George Gemistos Plethon were two of the most prominent representatives of that phil-Hellenistic trend with the inclination to search for in the language and history of the past a means of exit from the failures of the present and uncertainty of the future. Others, including two Emperors – John Kantakouzenos and Manuel II Palaeologos, preferred to continue with the polemical tradition, this time disputing with the victorious Ottoman Turks. This was the second “classical” period of the Byzantine polemics with Islam, encompassing the 14th and 15th centuries, already charged with depth, rationality, moderation and self-criticism, which we could hardly find in the previous period [3].

After the 8th century, therefore, two main trends appeared in the Byzantine society concerning Islam and the civilization related to it. From one side, it was the polemical tradition, which developed through the centuries from lack of knowledge and difficulty in accepting the new religion into a more erudite and moderate set of positions. On the other side, the official imperial policy was trying often to keep certain *modus vivendi*, to avoid wars if not necessary and to use, in a very Roman way, one Muslim country against another.

Among the practicalities of higher diplomacy, the differences in the religious view of life were of small use. **There were people, and moreover, Emperors, like Manuel I Komnenos (1143-1180) who regarded Islam with both the eyes of a politician and (at least pretending to be) a scholar.** What Manuel envisaged in the late 12th century was the alleviating of the whole procedure of transition from Islam into Orthodox Christianity. Manuel appealed for lifting up from the catechetical books of the anathema against the god of Muhammad who was, according to the traditional formula, "neither creator, nor created". The reason for this appeal was that it was blasphemous for the Muslims converted into

Christianity to denounce God who was actually our God so far as Muslims recognized the God of the Old Testament. The proposal, however, clashed with the stubborn resistance of the Patriarch Theodosios Boradiotes (1179-1183) who was not eager even to listen to that kind of arguments.

According to the Patriarch, the so-called god of Muhammad had been invented by the impostor and it was a material, 'massive' (*holosphyros*) god. Thus, the two main concepts made a stand against each other. For Manuel and his followers, who were not missing at all, as we know from Choniates, the doctrine of Muhammad was just a deviation, untrue enough, of the unified Biblical tradition implying, anyhow, the existence of one and only God, Creator of the world. This tolerant position was nevertheless difficult for chewing by the Byzantine society then.

During the 14th and 15th centuries, in the Late Byzantine Empire of the Palaeologoi, new debatable points appeared in the dispute with Islam, mainly the correlation and a possible subordination between the Testaments, their feasibility, the moral and the social effect.

Manuel II Palaeologos, a sole Emperor from 1391 up to his death in 1425, put together in his personality and writings the two main abovementioned trends in the Byzantine perception of Islam. In the case of Manuel, we could discern simultaneously the polemicist, the theologian and the politic, whose mastery of argumentation tells us a lot about the system of schooling we don't know enough, just having to guess.

The Emperor was an author of a polemic named *Meetings with a Persian*. "Persian" was the widely used form for Turk in Byzantium at that time. It was, probably, a real dialogue, not a fictional one, as usual, and it was held in Ankara during the winter of 1390-1391, or the next winter. We have to realize that Manuel was in Ankara not so much as an Emperor of the Romans than as a vassal of the Ottoman sultan, ready to help the latter in one of the many wars waged against other Turkish principalities in Asia Minor. The other participant in the dispute was an unknown representative of the local intelligentsia, mentioned only with his administrative title of *muderis* [4]. Even though redacted later, the text did keep evidently a great level of authenticity and cohesion.

Manuel has defended flatly the principles of Christian belief and *Weltanschauung*. Even if being in an uneasy position as an Ottoman vassal in an already Muslim milieu, the Byzantine Emperor succeeded in posing systematized arguments in a convincing way. He was not, anyway, in a position to admonish any more. Not that Manuel was a friend of the Turks: in the 1380s, he organized a revolt against them in Thessaloniki, being regent-governor in that city. Later Manuel stood bravely against the enormous forces of Sultan Bayezid I, provoking the first great siege of Constantinople by the Ottomans. Between 1399 and 1403, Manuel used to travel to Europe, visiting Italy, France and England, searching for a help in order to save the perishing Empire. The result was close to null, but at least the European powers had the opportunity to see and listen to such an erudite ruler, not typical for the Western world at that time.

Manuel has passed through the full Byzantine *curriculum* with industry and ardour, as we are to know from his letters along with the few surviving pieces of grammatical and rhetorical exercises. What he was loyal to was the modern then hesychasm of the Gregory Palamas' trend. Manuel's intelligence and competence in the theological disputes came to be well-known after his Paris stay in 1401-1402, when after disputes with professors from the Sorbonne he wrote his treatise *The descent of the Holy Spirit* in 156 chapters. *Dialogues with a Persian* is another good example of Manuel's polemical feather. It consists of dedication, introduction, and 26 chapters. All the main traditional topics from the Christian-Muslim debates were involved in, along with three themes not well developed in previous writings or just sounding differently in the new historical conditions. Three interesting aspects of the Islamic argumentation are in concern, central for the fifth and seventh chapter of the *Dialogues*. **Those three topics are: the political success from the historical perspective as a criterion for the truthfulness of Muhammad's message**

; the simplicity and unpretentiousness of the Islamic Law; the consequence and subordination of the Testaments. The main theses of the Muslim opponent of Manuel looked like as follows:

1. The followers of Muhammad ran over many territories and obtained prosperity, which should be regarded as a sign of Divine benevolence to their deeds and respectively to their beliefs. This argument was surely sounding harsh for the Byzantines pressed desperately by the Ottomans in the late 14th century;
2. The Christian Law is very exacting and hard to be pleased by the ordinary population, supposing moral and behaviour hardly attainable by human nature. The Muslim Law, contrariwise, is more moderate and easy for implementation;
3. Being the latest, the Muslim Law is therefore the most perfect command of God to humankind. The Muslim collocutor of Manuel underlie a formulation, traditional for Islam and based on the third chapter of the Quran, *The family of Imran*, about the ascending development of Laws, from the Jewish (the Old Testament) through the Christian (the New Testament) up to the Quran. The first Law was degenerated according to the Muslims into factual disbelief, while the second was spoilt by the pagan philosophy of the Greeks and Romans. The third, Islamic Law, was just a reversal back into the perfect simplicity of the Abrahamic faith [3, chapters 5 and 7.5-6].

Those arguments received the counterarguments of Manuel who, following another Emperor, John Kantakouzenos, had organized in a clear and well-arranged form.

It is true, Manuel replied, that the Roman Empire was passing through hard times, the Turks (called *Persians* in the text) being successful. The lifespan of the earthly kingdoms, however, is subject to a certain inexorable cycle: some kingdoms die, other flourish just to die at some next phase. Basing his arguments on both Bible and the ancient historiography, Manuel practically abandoned the traditional Byzantine doctrine of the Empire chosen by God to rule the Christians up to the Last Judgment. Thus, Manuel arranged himself in the order of the Byzantine sceptics prone to view philosophically the changes around. There were some kernels of optimism, too. Lord does not punish his beloved without purpose of amending them. Another practical reminder is connected with the existence of strong Christian kingdoms in the West, Byzantium being just the weak vanguard of Christianity.

The second argument of the Muslim collocutor received as Manuel's answer certain arguments based on the freedom of human choice combined with the Trinitarian division of humankind. Man received by God the free will to choose good or bad ways. The good ways are difficult to follow and reach. There is a certain group of elected ready to pass through many hardships and privation in order to reach the virtue of being true believers in God, consecrated to the Divine Love towards humankind. They are the only ones to pass over the stage of servitude and reach filial status in front of God [3: 11, 17b], being companions of the angels alone (17c). The second class of people includes the servants of God, ready to carry out their duties towards God and humanity and thus to obtain salvation in a world here-in full with temptations, passions, and sin [3: 16-b]. God, being Almighty, does not require people to accomplish impossible deeds, anyway [3: 9f; 17d].

The third class of people includes those possessed by sin who had definitely turn back to virtues. They lose gradually their human outlook turning into swine-like creatures [3: 17c: *choir?deis*). The easy ways, therefore, lead often to corruption and depravity.

The division of people into three classes was a direct reverberation from Matthew 19.12. The appeal “Who is able to accept, let him do it” underlie the free will and the acknowledgement of differences among human beings, thus forming a response to the Islamic accusation towards the Christian Law of being harsh and impossible to fulfil [3: 11d].

To the third thesis of the Muslim collocutor, connected with the consequence of Laws and their presumable subordination, the Emperor answered by developing the following net of arguments:

Belief is, first of all, a product of the soul, not of the body. Appurtenance to one or another Law could not be bought by money or imposed by force. The law of Muhammad, therefore, was not able to raise high the human soul, being thus redundant and needless [3: 3, 29]. What this law brought to the world was blood and destruction [5]. Our Saviour Jesus Christ offered a New Law without abolishing the Old one (*Matthew 5.17*), but rather complementing it by replacement of the rude and material with spiritual and divine. Muhammad, however, preferred to return back the old Jewish material prescriptions, like circumcision and food and drink restrictions, thus moving back towards the older and most imperfect Law [3: 27].

We should praise the skills of argumentation in the case of Manuel, who succeeded in catching out the contradictions of his opponent, so far as the latter recognized the First, Jewish, Law as imperfect, but rendered as positive the turn back towards the pure beliefs of the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Moreover, Muhammad had taken some of the prescriptions easy to be fulfilled and followed in order to gain more adherents. In that sense his law was nothing more than stealing (*klopés*), like to steal cows, or horses [3: 28-29, 33].

Being put-up by different contradictory norms and commandments, this “law” of Muhammad was actually even less perfect than the law of the Old Testament [3: 3g; 28-29].

The time of Manuel Paleologos, the late 14th and early 15th centuries, was difficult for the Balkan Christians. Ottomans were overwhelming one possession after another, cutting parts of the Byzantine Empire and destroying the inheritor puppet states of the Dušan’s Serbian Empire. In 1393 the Ottomans took Tarnovo and thus put to end the existence of the once glorious Bulgarian medieval Empire, although some forms of resistance and demonstration of royal tradition continued some decades later. The chroniclers of the Balkans were stupefied enough to attribute, like the monk Isaiah from the 14th century, the misfortunes to the God’s anger through the hands of the “godless Hagarenes”. Many Balkan princes, however, found it more practical to contact with the Ottomans and be their vassals, thus prolonging their own existence, limited power, and resources. Some of them, like Constantine Dragas and Marko, the son of Vukashin, died in battle fighting their coreligionists, being on the side of the Ottomans. It was of little relevance, perhaps, that Marko, known as Krali Marko, came to be a Balkan folklore “star” in the later centuries as the hero fighting the Turks and relieving the unhappy Christian subjects from the Turkish yoke.

With Manuel Paleologos, therefore, came to an end a long and fruitful tradition of the polemical discourse with Islam in a probably most brilliant way: by suppressing the harsh and exotic accusations, substituting them by a milder scholarly tone, but strictly contiguous when arguments were concerned and when the weakness of the opponent was to be used. The diplomatic skills of Manuel, combined with a predisposition towards polemic debates, were partly inherited by his grandfather John Kantakouzenos (c. 1292-1383, Emperor from 1347 to 1354, later monk with the name Ioasaph). Two generations of intellectuals appeared out of the circle around Kantakouzenos who were trained or felt themselves called upon to defend the Orthodox Christianity, pleading for equality vis-à-vis Catholic West. Towards the East they had often to demonstrate a rather philosophical, and fatal, resignation in front of the aggressive Ottomans. There were a few exclusions, too, like Demetrios Kydones,

who has fled to the “Catholic camp”, or George Gemistos Plethon, who decided to return back to the quiet pier of Antiquity and paganism. Generally, the anti-Islamic and even anti-Jewish polemics were not forgotten completely, even though Byzantium was in a weak position to demonstrate any muscles. This time polemical literature used Western sources as well.

Kantakouzenos based his *Lectures against Muhammad* on the Kydones’ translation of *Confutatio Alcorani* written by the Dominican friar Ricoldo da Monte Croce. Anti-Islamic overtones could be noticed in his *Apologies* in defense of Palama and hesychasm, too.

Manuel used many of the motives and arguments of Kantakouzenos and moreover, being in Thessaloniki as a governor in the 1380-s, he received from his friend Kydones his translation of *Confutatio Alcorani* of Ricoldo da Monte Croce. We could thus delineate a school in the Late Byzantine anti-Islamic polemical literature where the rarely advertized influence of the Western scholastic thought is clearly visible. In Europe it was the time of John Wycliffe and Nicholas Cusanus, both of them demonstrating a more academic approach towards Islam, and the exceptional Juan of Segovia (c. 1393-c. 1458), whose translation of the Quran was to a greater extent consistent with the realities of the Arabic and Islamic world. The latter’s appeal for tolerance and peaceful dialogue was rare in a world dominated mostly by intolerance [6]. There were centuries to pass, however, before Islam to enter the universities as an academic subject. In the case of the waning Byzantium, the academic interest faded surprisingly away after the death of Manuel, being substituted by the uniate quarrels with the Catholic Church, notwithstanding the fact that the Ottomans were at the doorsteps of Constantinople itself [7].

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[5] It is curious enough that this very argument of Emperor Manuel from chapter 7.3 was used by the Pope Benedict XVI during his speech in Regensburg on 12 September 2006, thus provoking wild reactions among the Muslims throughout the world. Similar argument was used by the Byzantine theologian Gregory Palamas in a letter to David Disipates.

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