

Article

The Dialogical Paths with Islam in the East: Homage to Arabic Christian Theology

Evi Voulgaraki-Pissina

Faculty of Social Theology, National and Capodistrian University of Athens, 10679 Athens, Greece;
evivoulg@soctheol.uoa.gr

Abstract: This is an opinion article, based on a lifelong syncretic study of the dialogical paths taken by Eastern theologians, Greeks and Arabs. At the crossroads of three continents, in direct relation with the Byzantine and Syriac traditions, with the Mediterranean and its Greco-Roman culture, but also with the Asian and African hinterland, Arab and Arabic-speaking Christian theologians have formed a culture of dialogue. They managed to engage with Islam in shapes and forms that are of very great interest and could point the way to a different approach to Islam today. The article, written by a Greek author, proposes a better integration of Arabic Orthodox theology as an enrichment to Orthodox theology as a whole, serving at the same time a broader connection between the Greek and Arab worlds. The article also proposes that discovering the heritage of the Orthodox East is interesting for Christian theology on a global scale. In primarily Christian/Western academia, one should be open to a genuine encounter with the Islamic world beyond geopolitics and other concerns extrinsic to religion; this is an encounter that would open up paths beyond the “clash of civilisations” impasse and allow for the rediscovery of the humanizing factor of religion. This is of interest to Christian and Muslim theologians as well as serving humanity and creation as a whole.

Keywords: interfaith dialogue; Christian-Muslim dialogue; orthodox theology; orthodox missiology; Arabic theology; intercultural dialogue



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1. Introduction

The profound relationship between Arab and Greek/Byzantine civilization, and by extension between Christians in the East and Islam, has been demonstrated in the field of art—both in the performing arts and in music—, letters, philosophy, the sciences, medicine, etc. (Gutas [1998] 1999; El-Cheikh 2004; Shboul 2004; Hapsoulas 2019)¹. In recent years, there has also been a flowering in scholarly research on relations and eclectic affinities in the field of religion—interactions, contrasts, dialogue, conversions (Papaconstantinou 2015; Dorrol 2022). This article will also deal with the topic of religion. We will focus on the Christian theology of the East in relation to Islam. In the second part, a particular emphasis will be placed on Arabic Orthodox Christian theology, in the framework of Arabic culture and conviviality.

We shall establish that beyond confrontation, a different path was taken in the East and encounters on different levels developed gradually. In the field of religion, beyond polemic or refutations, a culture of dialogue emerged and was further nourished by open-minded theologians.

We shall start by discussing issues of the present, widespread misconceptions in perceptions of Islam, even islamophobia lurking within primarily Western/Christian-dominated Academia. We shall also briefly refer to the scholarly progress in recent years. It is the present that actually guides all historical research, since history is commonly acknowledged as a study of self-understanding (Braudel 1982). This applies to the field of the Study of Religion as well. Even in classical approaches in the History of Religion (Eliade [1969] 1971), or in the most renowned recent approaches in the study of Islam (Ess 2006),

the questions of the present lead the historical research. Similarly, in the domain of social history, understanding of the past, deriving from new interpretations as to how the past has shaped the present, is a key element for defining the future (Stearns 2003).

We shall then explore the dialogical element in the past using a wide-angle lens directed towards the Greco-Roman East and beyond. In theological terms, it is the theological tradition and dialogical heritage we are looking for, but not in the form of a museum piece. Tradition is understood here rather as living “experience” in a critical and creative manner, as a rich inheritance and a basis for the free invention of the present (Bakhtine 1970, p. 127).

In the second part, we shall focus more on Arabic Christian theology, and its achievements regarding dialogue with Islam, taking also into consideration certain difficulties and challenges that it faced.

Lastly, in the conclusion we shall sum up the benefits of creating a culture of dialogue and a theology of encounter through the study and rediscovery of the Eastern and more particularly Arabic Orthodox theological traditions.

2. Reading Islam Today

A precondition of dialogue, beyond the self-awareness of the subjects involved, is to know and listen to the other. With regard to Islam, current impressions lead to misconceptions broadly disseminated across the Christian world and, especially in the West, to a series of misunderstandings. In the eyes of many in contemporary society, Islam is a religion that is predominantly political, with a strong element of law, a strongly assertive character and in some versions fundamentalist tendencies or even extremism. Both historical reasons and the frequent headlines in the news concerning incidents of terrorism, or the general confrontation between Islam and the West, contribute to this perception.

The issue is not therefore the reality of Islam as such, but primarily the gaze of the viewer. The image we have of Islam is highly abstract and disregards a lot. Even when speaking of “political Islam”, this highly questionable but also very widespread neologism, one disregards, for example, that the political instrumentalisation of Islam in contemporary reality, in two different and partly contradictory contexts, arises from outside and *not* from within, even when it is carried out by Muslim leaders. It does not serve the religion itself, but other purposes.

Thus, in the late 20th century, Islam was instrumentalised to counter the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1980s), and a number of local Muslim leaders (or from further afield) were trained by the US and other global networks in versions of unorthodox warfare, practices that later developed into actual terrorism (Misra 2002; Griffin [2001] 2003; Coll 2004; Cooley [1999] 2000, pp. 80–126; Rashid 2022; Emadi 2010, pp. 161–207; Jalata 2016). This underground influence and assistance did indeed contribute to the Russian withdrawal from Afghanistan, but the warfare skills spread widely and in an uncontrolled manner, so that it was eventually turned against the Western, “imperial” metropolis with the attack on the twin towers of Manhattan on 11 September 2001. Since then, it has bred a generation of terrorists, culminating in the Islamic caliphate of ISIS, an aggravating condition from which it will take humanity a long time to recover, in the sense that the knowledge acquired and the military skills of trained cadres are now being exported for use in different conditions and environments.

Moreover, Islam was instrumentalised also by local leaders to counter Western penetration in predominantly Islamic regions. This is also a way to read the case of Al Qaeda (Snyder 2003). Another significant example, not Arabic, but Islamic nonetheless, is the Iranian Revolution, which brought the so-called “Islamic democracy” to Iran in 1979 (Menashri 1990), a theocratic constitution that is today being strongly contested, especially by women, following the death of Mahsa Amini in Teheran on 16 September 2022 (Ayu Puspitasari et al. 2022). Similar phenomena have spread to the Arab world. Typical is the Palestinian intifada, first and second (1987–1991 and 2000–2005), the uprising against the state of Israel, which initially had secular characteristics but gradually acquired an increasingly religious, fundamentalist connotation (Litvak 1998; Mitchell 2017).² Of course, in this discussion we

should not forget the general return and instrumentalisation of religion in the post-Soviet era, and not infrequently in its conservative, retrogressive and generally fundamentalist versions—certainly a feature of the Christian world as well (Voulgaraki-Pissina 2023a). But of course, hope remains that we can and do invest in religion for the peaceful resolution of disputes (Abu-Nimer 2003).

Viewing Islam in a more sociopolitical and geopolitical way unfortunately overshadows its peaceful aspects and its multifaceted reality as a religion. It is the religion as such that should come to the fore when engaging in dialogue with Islam. Beyond geopolitics and other considerations external to theology, one can develop dialogue as inter-faith and cultural dialogue.

3. The Dialogical Heritage of the Past

3.1. *Complications beyond the Religious Sphere*

As far as the historic past is concerned, here too things are complicated by realities beyond the religious sphere, though one should keep in mind that in antiquity and medieval times (as well as in multiple modernities or post-modernities of our time beyond the Western paradigms), the distinction between religious and secular spheres is rather blurry, if it exists at all.

The first element to impinge upon the Byzantines at the time of the original spread of Islam was actually not that of religion, but the increasing frequency of the Arab raids; only then came an awareness of the somewhat strange religious views of these people, which seemed to be a quirky interpretation of the Bible (Voulgaraki-Pissina 2020b). However, the cause-and-effect relationships are not so clear here. Islam was of catalytic importance for the Arab world, being the driving force that united the Arab tribes into a more organised entity (I avoid the word ethnicity because of its current connotations, which would be anachronistic applied to a pre-modern era). Or better, let us say a community, which gradually evolved into a community with an international character, the ummah, while keeping the Arabic language at its heart. Indeed, through Islam, the Arabic language and culture spread to all the southern shores of the Mediterranean, gradually deeper into Africa and from an early date further east into Asia, and also into Europe, both from the west, from the natural border of Gibraltar, and from the eastern side of the European map, from the Black Sea, the Caspian Sea, Asia Minor and the Balkans westwards to Vienna.

Historically, we cannot fail to notice the speed of the Arab conquests in the period of about half a century after Muhammad's death, with the consequent diffusion of the Islamic religion and, by extension, of the Arab-Islamic civilization in successive stages in the conquered areas, as well as the gradual shrinking of the Christian populations in the areas under the dominance of Islam. These are the basic lineaments of history, etched deep into the cultural map of the ancient known world, the Mediterranean basin and the African and European hinterland in general, but also of neighboring Asia and the Middle East in particular.

Despite the Islamic conquests, in successive waves, from the conquest of Egypt just a decade after Muhammad's death in 642 to the conquest of Spain in 717 (Braudel 1993, pp. 73–124), the local populations were neither forcibly nor immediately Islamised. It is more accurate to say that there were significant variations by place and region. Averil Cameron briefly points out:

Conversion to Islam in Syria and Palestine was not encouraged. It was the eventual decline of the urban centers, hastened by the eastward move of the Caliphate to Baghdad, that provided the conditions that favored conversion. We are ill-informed about Byzantine North Africa in the later seventeenth century, but Carthage did not fall to the Arabs until the very end of the century and recent research has made it clear that Christianity continued even though the conditions for Islamicisation were more favourable. (Cameron 2006a, p. 181)

Muslim leaders also faced dilemmas between Islamising subjects and keeping them under the 'protection' (Crone 2006, p. 113; Kennedy 2007; Kennedy [2004] 2017), the

status of the so-called dhimmi, as the Islamic inequality between Muslims and others filled the coffers with special levies, the so-called poll tax, al jizyah, which applied to non-Muslims (Braudel 1993, p. 102). It is also accurate to mention that until the Crusades, the majority of the population of the conquered territories remained Christian. The Crusades dramatically squeezed the local Christian populations between the twin pressures of the Western crusaders, a version of Christianity that consistently took an arrogant view of the local population, and of the Muslims, who now viewed everything Christian with greater suspicion (MacEvitt 2008, pp. 12–13; Griffith 2008, pp. 177–78; Papadopoulos 2000, pp. 135–42). It should be stressed, moreover, that even before the Crusades, in every Byzantine campaign against the Arabs, or more generally whenever there was armed conflict, the position of the local Christians was made worse. A case in point is Egypt, where historical evidence from Patriarchate sources also confirms this dismal situation (Papadopoulos [1935] 1985, pp. 502–86; Papadopoulos 2000, p. 131).

3.2. *The Multifaceted Character of Islam*

Contrary to the prevailing impression of a narrow and fundamentalist conception, Islam is by its very nature a religion with a strongly multifaceted and dialogical character. As this issue belongs to the basics of the study of Islam, let us very briefly recall that Islam incorporated elements of the pre-Islamic religion of the Arabian Peninsula, with animism and astrology, and elements of henotheism as found in religious outlook and practice of Muhammad's tribe, the Quraysh, and as still attested today in the Islamic doctrine of Alahu Akbar, God Most High. In this formulation we have the superlative form of the adjective kabir, which means great. Apart from the use for the sake of emphasis, a comparative hierarchy of gods is also revealed here, which remains in the Islamic vocabulary from its early period, with its henotheistic, heliolatric influences, despite the strong and absolute Islamic monotheism that was formed as time went on (Ziakas 2002, pp. 58–59, 104–106). At the same time, Islam incorporated many elements of Judaism, first of all the importance of the law and the festal circle, which Muhammad not only was well acquainted with but also experienced daily in the house of the Jewish merchant Hadijah, who was his first employer and later his first wife. Of course, Muhammad also knew Christianity, in various versions, but there are questions in the research as to whether he fully understood the dogma of the Holy Trinity or Christology, and in which version he encountered it (Grypeou et al. 2006; Thomas 2008). In any case, Muhammad brought into dialogue in an eclectic and syncretistic manner the elements of religious knowledge he possessed, so that his preaching would form the basis for Islam. Exactly when Islam emerged as a new organised religion remains a question, and it could be argued that the prophet's sermon was a sermon of repentance (Ziakas 2002). It is only natural, then, that the early Christian apologists treated Islam as just another Christian heresy, and a key element in Christian apologetics addressed towards Islam throughout most of the Byzantine period concerned its syncretistic character (Argyriou 1992; Griffith 2008; Ziaka 2010). In many dialogues that we have studied throughout most of the Byzantine period, or at least early on, however, they are speaking of an agglomerative or syncretistic character in a condescending way, taking as their starting point and guiding principle the Christian conception of the unity of faith and of organisation through the councils around the doctrines and canons of Orthodoxy.³ Christian apologists towards Islam seem not to fully understand the dynamics of the Muslims' attitude. This dynamic did not just artificially weld together disparate elements, but gave birth to a new, creative, organic synthesis that emerged as a world religion. Apart from this, and although in later Byzantine dialogues an element of respect is increasingly present, even today the dialogical element of Islam and its ability to adapt to its particular environment has not been adequately or even correctly evaluated, with the emergence of a huge variety and numerous case-by-case particularities (Makris 2011). In contrast, the common, though uninformed, opinion considers Islam a rigid religion. Moreover, a part of the scholarly community, in a somewhat outdated methodology or perhaps from sheer ignorance, treats Islam in an essentialist way, without the necessary

fluidity and understanding of the constant potential for evolution and change in a living religion. Instead, they focus purely on the constitutional sources that historically shaped a religion, or more broadly its origins. But of course, as a counter to this, we must also note the tremendous progress that has been made in the field of religious studies in recent years (e.g., [Hughes 2013](#); [Ess 2006](#)). Western-centricity always remains an issue. But as many Muslims are now living among Christian-origin populations (believers or non-believers) in the Western world through immigration, the study of Islam is now moving out of the realm of Orientalism. Also, via modern means of communication and the internet many Muslim theologians or scholars have the opportunity to speak for themselves in conversation with the Western world.⁴ This possibility provides more opportunities for dialogue and the removal of fundamental misunderstandings, but it also offers a different kind of subjective understanding of Islam; not necessarily in terms that the faithful would use, but still based on a self-description offered by various versions of Islamic theology.

In all of the above, it is not my intention to make an apologetic for Islam. Speaking in this regard in my religious capacity and also in combination with my interests as an Orthodox theologian, historian and responsible citizen, I only want to emphasise that history is open and dynamic. Religions evolve historically and are even shaped by exogenous factors in the context of social interaction. That is why interfaith and broader social dialogue is always so useful and important, because in the social sphere we are “communicating vessels”. This is what happened in our Byzantine heritage, where dialogue took place and a qualitative development and deepening in understanding is registered in Greek Christian literature ([Ziaka 2010](#)).

The common social and secular space, the fact that we belong to a wider East with sometimes conflicting relations between us but mostly neighbourly relations that give birth to coexistence and interaction, is the main factor that has allowed us to cultivate Greek-Arab friendship, which has a long tradition and history in our country (Greece). The Christian East, and especially the Orthodox faithful, understand, together with the Arabs (of all particular varieties and nationalities, because the word Arab is a broadly inclusive term), that in relation to the current geopolitical center—what those of us who deal with international affairs, whether in the field of politics or religion, call “empire”—we are at the periphery, with all its consequences both positive and negative. Moreover, important historians point to a particular yearning for freedom, which seems to be a structural characteristic of Arabs and Greeks and has nourished many generations of friendship and understanding, fostering feelings of love between the peoples ([Psiroukis 1992](#)).

But it is not only the secular sphere, society or politics, art and music. It is also the realm of religion that is not just a point of confrontation, but also a point of reconciliation and encounter.

4. Christian-Muslim Meetings in the Field of Religion with a focus on the Common Arabic Language

Here I will examine Arabic Orthodox Christian theology and its structurally dialogical character. There is a growing literature on this topic, and Sidney Griffith’s work, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque* ([Griffith 2008](#)), although it is concerned more broadly with the Christian world under Islamic rule and not exclusively with Arab Christians, remains the classic reference work.⁵

Arab theology is almost contemporary with the emergence and development of Islam. It is the spread and prevalence of Islam that marked the end of Late Antiquity ([Cameron 2006b](#)) but also made Arabic an important language, a lingua franca whose momentum is still maintained today. In the regions where Islam prevailed, the languages of Christian theology were a plurality of local but significant languages—in addition, of course, to Greek and Latin, the languages of letters and administration respectively. The heresy of trilingualism, developed in the West, endorsed Greek, Latin, and Hebrew but ignored the wealth of other local languages that were particularly important in the broader East, such as Aramaic (the language in which Christ preached), Syriac, a gloriously rich language

for theology, Coptic (language of the indigenous Christians of Egypt), Ge'ez, one of the languages of Ethiopia, and many more. The Syrians were the first to switch from Syriac to Arabic, as early as the second half of the 7th century (Griffith 2002; Papaconstantinou 2010; Graf 1944–1953), so that their texts would have a wider reach and impact. Egypt followed suit in the following centuries with the transition from Coptic to Arabic. The first to cross this imaginary border in 975 was the Greek Patriarch of Alexandria Eutychios writing his ecclesiastic history (Papadopoulos [1935] 1985, p. 528; Tzoumerkas 2011; Breydy 1985), followed by the Coptic Bishop of Hermopolis Magna Severus ibn al-Muqaffa', also known as Severus of El Ashmunein (Heijer 1989).

It remains, moreover, an indisputable fact that Arabic as a language is shaped by the Qur'an. There is certainly the very remarkable pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, celebrated by the Palestinian national poet Mahmoud Darwish in his work *State of Siege* (Darwish 2010, pp. 20–21)⁶, but the dissemination and language of the Qur'an is of constitutive importance for Arabic. This is accepted and experienced effortlessly by Arab and Arabic-speaking theologians. Metropolitan of Mount Lebanon George Khodr has recorded it brilliantly, saying in his book *The Nature of Islam*:

Bear in mind that the Qur'an was written in the most beautiful style of all our literary periods, and that Christians cannot bypass it if they are to address their own audience, especially the church, in perfect Arabic. Language to us is one of the instruments of the message. It happens sometimes, among Christians, that we discuss our stylistic preferences within the Qur'anic text. Cultural Arabism exists. If you do not master it, your speech will reveal a simplistic language and it will not pass muster. There is a common Arabic sensibility. It comes basically from Islam, and Islam remains clearly a linguistic phenomenon as well, in relation to which the testimony becomes stronger. In this context, the Church of Antioch, composed exclusively of Arabs, is eminently well-placed to carry the message of the Gospel to Muslims. Already there is a real dialogue because of the simple fact of symbiosis. (Khodr 2009, p. 46) [my translation into English]

The reference to carrying the message is obviously a hint, or actually a suggestion of the necessity of mission. After all, Khodr's need to find the appropriate means of expression in order to express the invisible God, his attempt to "tame words", as he says in another work (Khodr 2016, p. 40), is in his life a constant agony and toil (Voulgaraki-Pissina 2015). It is the medium that brings out the message, or perhaps it is the message, based on contemporary epistemological considerations (Benjamin 1997; McLuhan 1994, pp. 7–21).

Pointing out that Islam and the Qur'an are influential through language in Christian theology (Arabic-speaking and other) causes many traditional theologians, even those with some expertise in Islamology, to shrug their shoulders in puzzlement, or to point out that it is well known that Islam has been influenced by Christianity and not vice versa. The latter view has some legitimate grounding in chronology, given that Christianity is an earlier religion, and in elements of intertextuality, given that the Qur'an refers to the Bible, accepts it in part and incorporates several elements from both the Old and New Testaments (Neuwirth 2010), and considers the founder of Islam himself as both a continuation and a seal of the prophets. However, taking a deeper and more multi-layered approach we find that the issue is more complex for Arabic Christian theology and the influence is not one-way.

We have already said that from the beginning, Arabic Christian theology developed in synchrony with Islam, but we must stress that it also developed side by side with it. Arabic Christian theology had to find the appropriate terminology to express in a new language the doctrine that was primarily formulated in Greek. The development of Arabic to accommodate Christian doctrine and to carry the Greek philosophical apparatus was already a major achievement,⁷ further complicated by the effort of Christian communities to circumscribe their own understanding of doctrine in the face of other Christian Churches. At the same time, it had to face another issue: the fact that in the mind of the average listener and user of Arabic, the dissemination of the Qur'an linked the Arabic words

with the Islamic interpretation of them, which was dominant and better placed in the marketplace of ideas. But this created the danger of misunderstanding, of colouring all concepts according to their Islamic interpretation. So, on the one hand they had to ensure fidelity to doctrine and the Gospel, and on the other hand to face the challenge of the Islamisation of every Arabic word and terminology, and to ensure and convey the distinctive Christian meaning and import of the words they used. Regardless of the degree of success of this project and the possible individual issues, a huge task of incarnating theology in a new culture is taking place here, and with it the task of integrating faith into society. This is technically called in missiological jargon the “inculturation” or “incarnation” of theology (Stamoolis 1984; Voulgarakis 1998) and is a matter of central importance for mission theology.

At the same time, the element of proximity was and is a given in all phases of the history of Arabic Christian theology. Arab and Arabic-speaking Christians have had and continue to have an enduring daily life closely linked to coexistence with Islam—even when this coexistence is realised in unfavorable terms. Very schematically and abstractly speaking, if the relationship between Christian theology and Islam in Western literature was mainly one of argument in a polemical climate, and if for Byzantine literature, which varies over long periods of time in style and content, wavering between polemic and dialogue, the Muslim is also often a third party, in Arabic Christian theology the subjects in dialogue have the peculiarity of being very close, neighboring interlocutors.

The kinds of dialogues that we find in Arabic literature technically belong to the wider Greek rhetorical culture and style. We have interrogative dialogues, dialogues between teachers and students, we have fictitious dialogues (i.e., those that depict an ideal rather than a concrete dialogue) and also very concrete, historical dialogues that are recorded close to the time they occurred (Voulgaraki-Pissina 2020b). It is also significant to state that here a series of literary personalities employed in translating ancient texts into Arabic, to supply the demand, were actually skilled theologians and informed thinkers who wrote original treatises and other genres in Arabic but shared a common Graeco-Roman culture. Sometimes pioneers in the translation movement in Baghdad, sometimes leading figures in the caliph’s court, of various origins (Greek, Arabic or other), multilingual but also certainly Arabic-speaking, they were an elite of thinkers and theologians who served a theology of encounter. This is a tradition followed by modern Arab theologians, who nowadays are often the pioneers of orthodox and ecumenical cooperation.

Very typically, however, we have another kind of dialogue that is very formally entitled “monk in the emir’s court (*majlis*)” and reveals precisely the organised dialogues that political power encouraged in its own court in the hearing of all (Griffith 2008, p. 64; Lazarus-Yafeh et al. 1999).

In addition to the above, one finds in Arab Christian theologians an in-depth understanding of the Qur’an and of the ethics of Islam, which is forged out of proximity. Moreover, the dialogical disposition existed on both sides, as we have elaborated in the introduction, and as various pieces of textual evidence demonstrate.

The concept of dialogue in general goes far beyond the format of formal occasions organised by official delegations, often with secular and diplomatic purposes. The essence of dialogue and the witness of faith, which goes hand in hand with a witness of ethos, is a matter of everyday life with its multiple levels. This kind of dialogue greatly expands the possibility of coexistence, builds reconciliation in society and fosters friendship.

Arab Christian theologians do not see their Muslim counterparts through geopolitical prisms or other concerns alien to theology, since they share the same space. There is a dialogue going on where deep existential concerns, concerns of philosophy and theology, are expressed. This dialogue should ideally be held on the basis of equality between the parties, but this is rarely the case. The differing status of the parties to the dialogue is the backdrop to most dialogues. The inequality between Muslims and others, to which we have already referred, is a matter of great concern still today. At present one should raise the issue of the inadequate safeguarding of human rights and freedom of religion in

predominantly Islamic and sometimes institutionally Islamist societies. But although the default position of differing status among faith communities can never be acceptable from the viewpoint of human rights, civil society, equality, and justice, from a strictly Christian theological viewpoint it may not be seen only as a source of pain or a curse, but also as an opportunity. It is an opportunity for a kind of humble witness to the cross appropriate to faith in the crucified and resurrected Christ, through paths so dear to Orthodox mission, such as those of martyria, diaconia and dialogue.

5. Conclusions

If one is concerned to cultivate dialogue and a culture of dialogue with Islam, it is worth studying the traditions of the East. Orthodox theology has cared for dialogue and developed tools that would foster exchange and sharing in different ways. And yet Orthodox theology in general has much to learn from its Arabic version, to gain in experience, knowledge, openness and the capability to meet the other on terms of friendship and respect for one's own identity on the one hand and for otherness on the other. This is already inherent in the spirit of the Christian East, and of the Byzantine heritage, and can only be strengthened and enriched by the Arab Orthodox theological tradition.

A deeper knowledge of this tradition more broadly in today's world will also mean the deepening of amicable relations at all levels with the Arab world, at the grass roots and not only on the level of diplomatic alliances between authorities and states. This is a prospect which can only benefit Christian populations holding minority status under Islamic rule, under "protection", the dhimmis, which are often ignored in the face of other global diplomatic concerns, and sometimes isolated.

More generally, it can help foster the friendship we wish to serve and develop a theology of encounter, unfathomably significant for social cohesion and peace. Far from keeping religions trapped in geopolitical interests, security concerns, and the lust for profit, the formation of a dialogical culture through the study and rediscovery of Eastern Christian tradition and the ethos of a living faith today will allow religion to reclaim its true nature, as a factor in elevating the human being and building peace.

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- ¹ This article was originally written and delivered as a presentation at the event "Hellenic-Arabic Observations in Religion and Culture", organized by the Association "Remembering the Vanguard, Opening New Paths", <https://mnimi-protoporia.com/> accessed on 8 November 2023, at the Megaron Concert Hall—Music Library Hall on Monday, 17 October 2022. It has been revised for publication.
- ² Between submitting and publishing this article, a terrorist attack against Israel was unleashed by the Palestinian Islamist organisation Hamas on 7 October 2023, leading to the slaughter and kidnapping of civilians. At the time of writing, a subsequent Israeli retaliation is still taking place, with the shelling and invasion of the Gaza Strip. The death-toll of civilians (including children) is in the thousands and still rising, despite the UN's efforts to secure a humanitarian ceasefire.
- ³ Although this is not a directly grammatical linguistic study but is initiated by comes out of a missiological and dialogical research interest, from a theological viewpoint and also using the tools of historic research, I have actually studied throughout the years all significant texts in Greek from the 7th–15th centuries, as referred to and classified by (Ziaka 2010). Regarding Arabic texts, and more broadly, due to language limitations, I have been mostly based on translations, ancient or modern, where they exist, and secondary literature. Some patristic texts belong to both traditions, as e.g., John Damascene (see on this debate Voulgaraki-Pissina 2020b, discussing the view of Griffith 2008; Louth 2002; See also Sahas 1972). This would also apply to Theodore Abû Qurrah, some works of whom circulated also in Greek, in his own time, as well as others.
- ⁴ Very briefly and utmost selectively we may present some examples of different genres: An experiential approach on what it means to be a Muslim today by (Esack 1999). A more scholarly one by (Nguyen 2019). A Muslim view on Christian-Muslim

relations, from (Sachedina 1997). A scholarly guide on Contemporary Muslim Thought on Unity and Diversity, in an edited volume (Poya and Suleiman 2017). A representative edited volume of Muslim feminist theology (Aslan et al. 2013).

- 5 For a more specific study from a mission and dialogue perspective, broadly in Griffith's spirit, see my extensive article "Dialogue and Mission at the Intersection of Three Continents: The Case of Arabic Theology" (Voulgaraki-Pissina 2020b). On late medieval-early modernity dialogues, see my article on Gennadios Scholarios, including a comparative section with a dialogical work by the Ethiopian saint ʿĒnbāqom (Voulgaraki-Pissina 2023b). On 20th century endeavors by Arab theologians from a missiological and dialogical perspective, the main figure here is Metropolitan George Khodr, on whom I have written two different studies. (Voulgaraki-Pissina 2015; Voulgaraki-Pissina 2020a). As far as the sources are concerned, beyond Griffith as a guide, one should take into account the classical work of (Graf 1944–1953) or the more recent multivolume reference work by David Thomas and different collaborators for different volumes (Thomas et al. 2009), a project still ongoing. Anthologies are also of interest (Noble and Treiger 2014; Hoyland 1997).
- 6 We present a bilingual Greek-Arabic edition, as the English translations we have read do not correctly convey the meaning of the original.
- 7 For an example of the complex nature of the endeavor, focusing on the Holy Trinity, see (Haddad 1985).

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