

TEO, ISSN 2247-4382  
72 (3), pp. 21-37, 2017

## **A Moment of the Christian-Islamic Inter-Religious Dialogue. The Sirian-Jacobit Patriarch, John I, in Dialogue with the Emire 'Amr Ibn al-'As (639 d. Hr.)**

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### **Abstract**

The study presents one of the first moments of the encounter between Christianity and Islam throughout history, the dialogue between the patriarch of the Syrian-Jacobite John I and the Emir 'Amr Ibn al-'As that took place in the year 639 d. AD. The dialogue which we refer to was translated by M.F Nau at the beginning of the twentieth century, from manuscript number 17193 at the British Museum, dating from the year 874 d. AD. In the thematic debate, the two discussed the Revelation, the uniqueness of the gospel, accepted by all Christians. Another theme is the Christological Person of Christ, a stumbling rock for Islam, too. After several discussions on certain aspects of jurisprudence, the dialogue aims towards the problem of the divine providence, the Emir asking for clarification on God's care during the incarnation of His Son.

### **Keywords**

Inter-religious dialogue, Islam, Christianity, the history and philosophy of religions, the Syrian-Jacobite religion, the Syrian-Jacobite patriarch, John I, the Emir 'Amr Ibn al-'As

## I. Introduction

When talking about the missionary dimension of the Church in the contemporary world, we should consider first the religious reality in which we live, the reality to which we are addressing. However, the current crisis of the Syrian immigrants, of those from the Middle East and Africa makes us refocus our mission, a mission that will address, in future, to those who will integrate into our Christian societies even if they are bearing a different religious message, the message of the Islam. This is just another episode in the long history of the meetings between Christianity and Islam. The two religions have interacted since the beginning of the Middle Ages in the noise of weapons on the battlefield. Their meeting was, first, the armed and doctrinal confrontation, religious polemics and only finally dialog, which shows that the dialogue is an art, a fact which was claimed to be miraculous, the highest form of relationship between religions until the present.

The Church's mission cannot neglect this aspect, namely, the inter-religious Christian-Islamic dialogue, especially in a time when the followers of Islam begin to populate the Christian countries of Europe. We don't see any gap between the inter-religious dialogue and the Christian mission, the dialogue acting as another face of the Church's mission *ad gentes* (to the nations). We must know the specifics of the faith that we are in dialogue with. To achieve this end, a thorough study is necessary, which should be done respecting the criterion of truth and openness of the mind and goodwill of the participants. It is necessary to gain a better understanding of the doctrine of faith and history, spiritual life and worship, religious psychology and culture of the Muslims with whom we enter into dialogue. The manner and method in which we express the Orthodox doctrine shall not constitute, in any way, an obstacle to the inter-religious dialogue, but should become bridges, as far as the specifics of Christianity allows, without altering in any way the doctrine of faith. This should be expressed clearly and fully, because a false irenism alters the dialogue and it can alter the doctrinal purity and it will invalidate it. Beyond these aspects of ethics of the dialogue remains the freedom of conscience of each participant in the dialogue in full respect of the personal integrity.

In this process we can use examples from past meetings between the representatives of the two religions. It is exactly what we'll do, we

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will refer to one of the first moments of inter-religious Christian-Islamic dialogue held between the Syrian-Jacobite patriarch, John I, and the Emir Ibn al-'Amr 'As. The meeting to which we refer belongs to the first stage of the dialogue, representing one of the first, if not the first more meaningful relationship, worthy of being mentioned in the history of the Christian-Islamic relations, in the year 639 AD, which is only seven years after the death of the prophet of Islam. The dialogue is between the Syrian-Jacobite patriarch John I and the Emir 'Amr Ibn al-'As, i.e. between a representative of a Neo-Chalcedonian church and a representative of the Muslim world.

The one who established the stages of the Christian-Islamic dialogue in the Christian East is the Archbishop of Tirana, His Beatitude Anastasios Yannoulatos, who distinguishes three stages. According to the Greek Archbishop, the first phase extends from the middle of the eighth century to the middle of the ninth century<sup>1</sup>. The first writings from this period are from Syria and are drafted by the Greek Fathers before experiencing a significant development in the capital of the Byzantine Empire. The second phase of the confrontation of the Byzantine scholars with Islam, which is also the most extensive one, begins in the first decades of the ninth century and ends by mid-fourteenth century. Constantinople, the seat of the Byzantine power, becomes this time the centre of doing these writings, unlike the previous period in which Syria and Palestine had a dominant role. The third stage of the Christian-Islamic polemics begins in mid-fourteenth century and ends with the fall of the Byzantine Empire (1453). It appears as the most important stage because it is the time of a better knowledge and understanding of Islam, the time in which there are established close relationships that will lead to a true inter-religious dialogue. The works of this period are characterized by an objective knowledge of the other, their tone no longer being so incisive. From the integration of the dialogue to which we refer in this classification, we can notice that the first period of the Christian-Islamic dialogue should be moved a century earlier, the Christian-Islamic inter-religious dialogue being present in the first half of the 7th century, i.e. in the early age of the existence of Islam.

We can also notice that

“the spiritual and intellectual encounter of Muhammad and the first generations of the followers of Christianity did not

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<sup>1</sup> Anastasios Yannoulatos, *Ortodoxia și problemele lumii contemporane*, trad. de Drd. Gabriel Mândrilă, Pr. prof. dr. Constantin Coman, Editura Bizantină, București, 2003, p. 127.

involve the Imperial Orthodox Church, but the Monophysite and Nestorian communities that made up the majority of the Christians in Arabia, Egypt, Syria and Mesopotamia. By the end of the omeiade period, the Syrian or Coptic Christians were the main and practically the only spokesmen of the Christian faith in the Caliphate”<sup>2</sup>.

Only after this period, the Orthodox Christianity is strongly affirmed by Saints Anastasios of Sinai and John of Damascus.

## II. An original manuscript

At the beginning of the twentieth century, François Nau translated an interesting dialogue<sup>3</sup> between the Emir 'Amr Ibn al-'As and the Syrian-Jacobite patriarch John I, shortly after Hegira (622 d. Hr.), i.e. in the eighteenth year i.e. in 639 from Christ<sup>4</sup>, that is, just at the beginning of Islam, when the new religion was not yet very well defined, looking for its recognition from the other two monotheisms: Judaism and Christianity. This results from the dialogue of the two, when the Jacobite Patriarch argues about the divinity of Christ in the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, facts known by the emir. That was only seven years after the death of Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, and the successor caliphs were in military campaign to spread Islam. However, we can notice the preoccupation to clarify certain unclear doctrinal issues for the followers

<sup>2</sup> John Meyendorff, *Bizantine view of Islam*, in “Dumbarton Oaks Papers”, vol 18 (1964), p. 113, cf. Pr. prof. univ. Dr. Alexandru Stan, *Studii bizantine. Relații canonice cu alte etnii și religii*, Editura Moroșan, București, 2016, p. 62.

<sup>3</sup> A Syrian manuscript in the British Museum, with the number 17193, finished in 17 August 874, contains a letter of the Jacobite patriarch Mar John in which he speaks about the discussion with the emir of the Agarens, in the morning of the 9th of May, 639 AD. The manuscript Add. 17193 is a volum entitled “Volum of demonstration, of collection and of letters”. The extracts are in general very short, with 125 subjects on 99 pages.

<sup>4</sup> See the study *Un colloque du patriarche Jean avec l'émir des Agaréens et faits divers des années 712 à 716 d'après le ms. du British Museum Add. 17193, avec un appendice sur le patriarche Jean Ier, sur un colloque d'un patriarche avec le chef des mages et sur un diplôme qui aurait été donné par Omar à l'évêque du Tour Abdin*, presentation, texte et traduction par M. François Nau, in “Journal asiatique” (from now on JA) XI, 5 (1915), pp. 225-279.

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of the new religion and their positioning in the conclave of the other monotheistic religions.

The dialogue translated by M. F. Nau, in the present at the British Museum, due to the dates and the names they provide, parallel to the Chronicle of Michael the Syrian<sup>5</sup>, and also in the general history and timeline, allows us to say that it is a conference, a meeting and a real dispute between the Jacobite patriarch John I and the emir 'Amr Ibn al-'As, in a city in Syria, on Sunday 9th, May 639 AD. (17 after Hegira). This report, in a manuscript in the British Museum, and forgotten since 874, is the one that we offer in translation from French, after the translation of M. F. Nau (Annex).

**III. When an emir meets a patriarch**

The patriarch, invited by the emir, was accompanied by five bishops, by many leading Christian and believers. A few days later, he wrote a report<sup>6</sup> that he sent to the Christians of Mesopotamia to inform them, to reassure on the results of the meeting, but also to ask them “to pray for the illustrious emir, so that God could give him wisdom and enlighten him on what He likes.”<sup>7</sup>

Emir Ibn al-'Amr 'As (صاعلا نب ورمع, born 585 - died on 6 January 664), was very known in that time, even before his converting to Islam, was sent with a delegation to the Abyssinian King Negus, with the status of a high diplomat to persuade him to extradite the early Muslims refugees in his kingdom. Muhammad decided to send all the Muslims in exile to protect them from extinction imposed by the Quraish of Mecca. The first group of Muslim exiles arrived in Abyssinia in 615 AD., Muhammad told them: “Abyssinia is a country of truth. Stay there until God will ease the situation.”<sup>8</sup> Here they found protection, but the delegation composed of Emir 'Amr Ibn al-'As and Ammar-bin-al-Walid-im-the-Markhzuni request their extradition, the emir saying about the Muslims that:

<sup>5</sup> See Michel le Syrien, *Chronique* II, col. 431, in Michel le Syrien, *Chronique*, Éditée par Jean-Baptiste Chabot, Tome II, Ernest Leroux Éditeur, Paris, 1901.

<sup>6</sup> Add. 17193, foll. 73-75.

<sup>7</sup> *Un colloque du patriarche Jean avec l'émir des Agaréens...*, in “JA” 5 (1915), p. 227.

<sup>8</sup> Abd el-Malik Ibn Hicham, *Kitab Sirat Rasul Allah (Das Leben Muhammeds nach Muhammed Ibn Ishāk)*, Éd. Wuestenfeld, 2 vol. Göttingen, 1859-1860, p. 209.

“They are thieves of our people who have left our religion and who claim that our parents were deceived. They insult our gods. If we let them spread their views, we do not know, but they may corrupt even your faith.”<sup>9</sup>

From persecutor of Islam, after converting, he will become a staunch supporter and fighter for the spread of the new religion.

He was among Muhammad’s companions (*sahaba*). He quickly climbed the Muslim hierarchy after his conversion to Islam in the year 8 after the Hijra, i.e. 629 AD. He was then sent as ambassador to Oman, finally excelling in his significant contribution to the spread of Islam participating in the conquest of Mesopotamia, between 634-639 and of the Egypt between 639-643.<sup>10</sup> While he stood in Mesopotamia, he met the Jacobite Patriarch, John I, trying to make him and ally. As far as the time spent in Egypt, it is said that after the conquest he governed “wisely”, which did not prevented him from destroying many pagan monuments, like the Library of Alexandria, the pride of Antiquity in manuscripts of great value.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Constantin Virgil Gheorghiu, *Viața lui Mahomed*, Transl. by Gheorghită Ciocoi, Editura Sofia, București, 2016, p. 188.

<sup>10</sup> 'Amr had a popular support in Egypt from the Copt Christian population. In his work *The Great Arab Conquests* Hugh Kennedy writes that the Roman governor Cyrus sent in exile the Copt patriarch Benjamin. When 'Amr occupied Alexandria, a Copt nobleman, named Sanutius, convinced him to send the patriarch a free pass permission, in safe conditions, and an invitation to come to Alexandria. When patriarch Benjamin returned, 'Amr treated him with respect. Then, he was instructed by the governor to take control over the Copt Church. He initiated the restoration of the monasteries in Wadi Natun, destroyed by the Chalcedon (Orthodox) Christians, a monastery functioning in the present, too. See Hugh Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquests: How the Spread of Islam Changed the World We Live In*, Da Capo Pres, Philadelphia, 2007, p. 164. This explains the easy way in which the Arabs conquered large territories, in a short time, from the beginning of the spread of the Islam. The conquerors had the support of the population in conflict with the Chalcedon Orthodoxy, which was prosecuting the heretics.

<sup>11</sup> Sine then dates the famous saying of caliph Omar, who conquered Alexandria together with his general, emir 'Amr Ibn al-'As, regarding the burning of the books from the famous library: “they are either in contradiction with the Koran, case in which they are heretical, or they agree with it, and then, they are useless”. It is said that the manuscripts have been gathered and used as fuel for 4 000 public baths of the town, for six months.

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The emir was a lover of symposia, being himself “eloquent”, “used to solve the most delicate situations”<sup>12</sup> with the reputation of being a formidable diplomat, “the most cunning and unscrupulous in his time.” Apart from dialogue to which we refer to, other two symposia are mentioned, held by Emir, one with the Byzantine Emperor Constantine III, son of Heraclius in 638 and the other with the Copto-Jacobite Patriarch, Benjamin in 643 in Egypt.

With Constantine III, 'Amr Ibn al-'As used a brutal manner.<sup>13</sup> The king asked him by what right the Arabs take possession of Byzantine Syria, 'Amr replied: “With the right which it conferred by the Creator. The earth belongs to God; He gives it as inheritance to whom wishes of His servants, and through the victory of weapons He expresses His will.”

After five years, at a meeting with the Egyptian Jacobite Patriarch Benjamin, the emir proves more lenient because the Jacobites of his army told him about the persecutions to which they were subjected by the Greeks, the Byzantines. He knew that the patriarch Benjamin had been wandering in the monasteries of Upper Egypt for thirteen years, being obliged to leave Alexandria. He greeted the patriarch, exclaiming: “Verily, in all the countries we have taken possession, I've never seen a man of God like that.”<sup>14</sup> As a result, the emir entrusted him the management of all the churches of his people, gave him the opportunity to manage their wealth and, if he wished, to pray for him because he still had to fight to conquer the entire Egypt, and if victorious, he promised that he would come back and give him everything that the patriarch would ask. These promises made Benjamin so sensitive that prayed for 'Amr and made a speech that stunned all. The content of the speech is not known; it is unknown whether he commended the emir or if he promised non-combat from the faithful whom he shepherded, but later historians, including Michael the Syrian, accused him that he gave Egypt to the Muslims,<sup>15</sup> which certainly is an exaggeration, but it is very possible that the diplomacy of 'Amr Ibn al-'As to be paid off in his military campaign.

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<sup>12</sup> See Henri Lammens, *Mélanges de la Faculté orientale de Beyrouth*, II, Imprimerie Catholique, Beyrouth, 1907, p. 22.

<sup>13</sup> Charles le Beau, *Histoire du bas-Empire, en commençant a Constantine le Grand*, Tome sixième, L'Imprimerie de Didot le Jeune, chez Desaint et Saillant, Paris, MDCCCXIX, Livre LVIII, cap. 56.

<sup>14</sup> *Un colloque du patriarche Jean avec l'émir des Agaréens...*, in “JA” 5 (1915), p. 231.

<sup>15</sup> Michel le Syrien, *Chronique* II, pp. 432-433.

The colloquium to which the Syrian-Jacobite Patriarch of Antioch John I was invited to attend between 631-648 was on theological issues.

John I was a Jacobite or Monophysite patriarch, he was part of a church that has rejected the dogmatic rules of the Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD. However, as can be seen from the report, he will become spokesman for Christians in that area, no mention about the Christological differences between the Jacobites Monophysite and the Chalcedon Orthodoxy. There was no time for doctrinal disputes between Christians of different shades. It seems that the Orthodox were not outraged when the Patriarch called his own community as Orthodox and the Chalcedons as heretical. It is known that the Emir 'Amr Ibn al-'As banned the display of the Cross outside churches and he threw away the existing ones.<sup>16</sup> This aspect, along with other measures restricting the freedom of expression of the Christians will make them realize the enormous danger that represent the advancement of Islam. In times of great crisis, which were threatening even the existence of Oriental Christianity, doctrinally divided Christian communities were able to make common front in the face of danger, leaving aside dogmatic disputes. Even if there might have been a certain amount of subjectivity in reporting the facts, it wouldn't be impossible to believe that Chalcedon Orthodoxy agreed to be represented by a p Jacobit, Monophysite patriarch, so heretical, in the absence of a major theological representative. To a certain extent, we can give believe that the Orthodox even prayed for the victory of the Jacobite Patriarch in the dispute with the emir.

It seems that the dialogue ended in an undecided way, Emir 'Amr Ibn al-'As understanding that "people of the book" did not belong to their holy books which were considered "boxes of verses from which they could draw answers on all occasions." After the meeting, the Emir found out his poor knowledge of the sacred books and ordered the patriarch to translate the Gospel into the language of the Saracens, i.e. Arabic, but with no mention of Christ's divinity, of baptism or of the cross. At this exaggerated request, the Patriarch had the strength of character to reply: "God does not like me to cut one jot or one point of the Gospel, even if all the arrows and all the spears that are your (battle) field will pierce me." At this gesture of courage, the Emir replied: "Go; write whatever you want."<sup>17</sup> The Patriarch

<sup>16</sup> Michel le Syrien, *Chronique II*, p. 431.

<sup>17</sup> Michel le Syrien, *Chronique II*, p. 432.

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called the bishops and the representatives of the three tribes who knew Arabic and Syriac, and gave the command to translate the Gospel into Arabic. He ordered each sentence they translated should be seen by all the translators. Thus the gospel was translated into Arabic and was entrusted to 'Amr Ibn al-'As, probably in the same year, the eighteenth of the Hegira - 639 AD.

**IV. The Theme of the Debate**

The first question asked by the Emir was connected with the holy book of Christianity, the Holy Gospel, namely its uniqueness, a natural question, given the importance of Islam's holy book, the Koran, for a Muslim believer. The Patriarch's response was satisfying, because it showed that the Gospel is accepted by all Christians throughout the world, regardless the language spoken by them.

The next question, which concerned the lack of unity of the Christian faith, given that it was from the same revelation, could be asked only now, at the beginning of Islam (it was year 18 of Hegira), when the Islamic community was not yet divided between Sunnits and Shiites. Over just after a few years, the Emir would not have put such a question, because he could have explained himself the fact that from one Koran there will be different interpretations and beliefs. The Patriarch will reply, referring to the Old Testament accepted by many religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam), but interpreted differently by each. "It is the same with the faith in the Gospel - says the Patriarch - every heresy is understood and interpreted differently, not like us."<sup>18</sup> It was the only answer possible then.

The analyzed dialogue and those that will follow over the next centuries, show that the Christological issue was particularly important. Is Christ truly the Son of God or just a man? - Here's the question which troubled the Muslim world in the confrontation with Christianity. Therefore, in this case, after the issue of the Revelation, the Emir's questions aimed the Person of Christ: is He really God or not? The answer comes quickly:

“(We say) that He is God, and the Word Who is born of God, the Father, eternal and without beginning, and at the end of time (the fullness of time, Ed.), for the salvation of men, became flesh

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<sup>18</sup> See Annex.

and became man from the Holy Spirit and the Blessed Virgin, Mother of God, Mary, and was a man.”<sup>19</sup>

The response shows that regarding the triadological problems there were no differences between the Chalcedon and neo-Chalcedon Christians, the differences appearing only when referring to Christology. Therefore, the patriarch could be a representative accepted by the Chalcedon Orthodoxy. The answer, however, had no way to satisfy the Emir, who considered Christ a mere man. The discussion continues with a special issue on Christ’s messianism, which was prophesied by the prophets before, but not clearly, because of the frequent slides towards polytheism of the Hebrew people. The prophets spoke mysteriously and wrote about that the same God is One in Divinity and in three hypostases (persons); “For there are not and we do not profess three gods or three divinities, because there is only one Godhead of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit”. When referring to how the Son and Holy Spirit take their being from the Father, Patriarch John I does not distinguish between the birth of the Son and the Holy Spirit’s procession, saying that “from the Father preceede the Son and the Spirit.” These statements are required to be proved by reasoning and the Law of the Old Testament, not the Gospel, to which the Patriarch bringing more arguments from the prophets related to Christ’s birth of the Virgin Mary in Bethlehem of Judea, about His baptism, about His passion, death and His resurrection from the dead the third day. The Patriarch proved to be a good connoisseur of the Old Testament, demonstrating the emir, by Scriptural passages, that Christ is true God and true man, full deity and full humanity, but the Greek and Syriac scriptures were foreign to him because there were no translations of the Old Testament in Arabic, as it can be inferred.

As expected, the dialogue reaches issues of jurisprudence laws, the Emir asking about Christian laws and their importance in the content of the Gospels, or in this regard, there could not be drawn a parallel between the New Testament and the Quran. If in the Qur’an, Muhammad legislated and regulated many aspects of daily life, the Messiah did not focused on legal regulations, but on the spiritual aspects of life on earth and the New Testament is not a collection of laws. Or, the Christians have a canon law developed in the spirit of the Gospel, integrating not only the decisions of the councils, but also the Roman laws. Patriarch John rightly showed, that

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<sup>19</sup> See Annex.

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“The divine Gospel teaches and requires divine, life-giving teachings and precepts; it blames all sins and evils; it teaches all good and justice”, citing several biblical passages in this regard.

The third aspect regards the problem of the divine providence, the Emir asking for clarification on the care of God in the Incarnation of his Son. Using with great exactness the books of the Old Testament, the Patriarch responds with a question: “When God came down on Mount Sinai, and spoke with Moses for forty days and forty nights, who was holding and governing heaven and earth?”<sup>20</sup> Surely, God was the One who took care of heaven and earth, valid answer in both cases, because, in the Virgin’s womb, among the disciples or on the Cross, Christ remains the same Almighty God.

From the above analysis there can be found a few blocks of crystallized ideas from the beginning in the Christian-Islamic polemic and those will be constants in the further attempts of inter-religious Christian-Islamic dialogue: the problem of Revelation, of the providence, of the divinity of Christ, etc.

The dialogue discussed previously places before us a document of great value for the awareness regarding the first reaction of the Christian communities, already on the Islamic ground, after the great Arab conquests.

**V. Conclusions**

The meeting of Christianity with Islam implicitly meant the birth of a kind of religious polemic literature between the two religions, the non-Chalcedon Christian communities being the first to come into contact with new monotheistic religion as, only after a century, the imperial Orthodoxy initiated inter-religious dialogues with representatives of Islam. During this period, Christianity has set in motion a formidable defensive system, defending the polemical works written in the form of a dialogue. The theme of the anti-Islamic non-Chalcedon and Byzantine literature covered all doctrinal aspects that opposed Christian dogma: the legitimacy of Muhammad’s prophetic mission, the authenticity of the Revelation of the

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<sup>20</sup> See Annex.

Quran, the Islamic teaching about the so-called prophets or the rejection of the arguments against the divinity of Jesus Christ and the Holy Trinity etc.<sup>21</sup>

When Islam started to spread in the previously Christian territories, we can speak about the phenomenon of Muslim proselytism, some Christian embracing Islam, at first because of their own interest, but also because of the aversion towards the Chalcedon Orthodoxy imposed on non-Chalcedon by the Byzantine imperial power. Those who saw salvation in the Islam were convinced later and, unfortunately, they keep the ongoing deception, regretting the times before the Arab invasion. Clerical and monastic groups showed a much firmer opposition against Islamisation, remaining true sources of culture and Christian spirituality.

Syria was the bridge between the Greek and the Arabic culture, fundamental philosophical works of antiquity were saved by being originally translated into Syrian and then into Arabic. This explains the relative continuity between the Greek heritage and the first cultural flowering of the Arab spirit. The Christian communities, especially the monastic ones, were responsible for the translations of the Greek works. Even if the contribution of the Syrian Fathers is not one that is characterized by originality, their number and their creative force impressed posterity.

In front of the common danger that Islam represented, Christians were united even if belonging to different groups. In our case, the Syrian-Jacobite patriarch John I represented all the Christians in front of the Emir. Even more, it must be observed that the Jacobite also had a mandate of the Orthodox, Chalcedon party, whose representatives were praying for the success of the Christian party in the Christian-Islamic dispute.

Those Christians understood the imperative of their times and had the wisdom to overcome the doctrinal differences that separated them. Similarly, we, as Christians, must have the maturity to understand and read the signs of the times in which we live, and one of these signs is the Christian-Islamic religious dialogue. In this regard, the first sample of a dialogue, to which we refer, can be of great help in our approach, because, since then, there were drawn the guidelines for the future dialogues.

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<sup>21</sup> Arhid. Caius Cuțaru, *Creștinism și islam în Evul Mediu. Primele încercări de dialog interreligios în Răsăritul creștin*, Editura Astra Museum, Sibiu, 2015, pp. 57-58.

ANNEX

*Un colloque du patriarche Jean avec l'émir des Agaréens et faits divers des années 712 à 716 d'après le ms. du British Museum Add. 17193, avec un appendice sur le patriarche Jean Ier, sur un colloque d'un patriarche avec le chef des mages et sur un diplôme qui aurait été donné par Omar à l'évêque du Tour Abdin, présentation, texte et traduction par M. François Nau, in "Journal asiatique" XI, 5 (1915), pp. 225-264.*

1. Because we know that you are worried and afraid because of us, about the problem (cause) for which we were called in this region,<sup>22</sup> together with our Beatitude Father honoured by God, our patriarch, we inform Your Love that on the ninth day of this month of May, the day of holy Sunday,<sup>23</sup> we entered the illustrious general emir, and the Beatitude Father of our gathering was asked by him to know if there is only one and the same (identical) Gospel without any differences, which is recognized by all who are Christians and that take this name all over the world. His Holiness answered that it is one and the same for the Greeks, Romans, Syrians, Egyptians, Cushites,<sup>24</sup> Hindus, Armenians, Persians and all other peoples and (all) languages.<sup>25</sup>

2. He also asked: "Why, if the gospel is one, the faith is different?" And His Holiness replied: "Just as the Law (the Pentateuch)<sup>26</sup> is the same, and as it is accepted by us Christians, and by you Agarens (Mahgroie),<sup>27</sup> and by the Jews and the Samaritans and every nation is divided for faith;

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<sup>22</sup> F. Nau considers that the meeting was held in Syria, because the names of three tribes are mentioned, all originating from the West Euphrates and all being present at the meeting.

<sup>23</sup> It is the 9th May 639 AD.

<sup>24</sup> The Cushites means Ethiopians, the country called Cush, in old times, is today Ethiopia. Most researchers agree to this, even if others identify it with other regions.

<sup>25</sup> When doing this enumeration, the author willingly omits to mention the Arabs and the Arabic language which make us think that the Gospel was not yet translated into their language at the 9th May 639 AD. It seems that it will be translated in the same year, namely in May-June 639, after the meeting with the patriarch John I and before 'Amr's leave to Egypt.

<sup>26</sup> The Law of Moses means the Pentateuch. The Koran considers the Bible is made up of The Law (*Thora*), The Psalms (*Zabour*) and the Gospel (*Injil*).

<sup>27</sup> For M. F. Nau "Agars" mean "Mahgroie", that is "descendent of Agar". In this text, he refers to the Muslim Arabs, the term "Muslim", not being largely used in that time.

so does faith in the Gospel, every heresy is understood and interpreted differently, not like us.”<sup>28</sup>

3. He also asked him: “What say ye be Christ; God or not?” - And our Father said:

“(We say) that is God, and the Word Who is born by God the Father, eternal and without beginning, and at the end of time (the fullness of time, Ed), for the salvation of men, was incarnated and was made man from the Holy Spirit and the Blessed Virgin, Mother of God, Mary, and was a man”.

4. The illustrious emir asked this: “When Christ was in the womb of Mary, He of whom you say that He is God, who kept and governed heaven and earth?” - Our Blessed Father replied by the same argument: “When God came down on Mount Sinai, and spoke with Moses for forty days and forty nights,<sup>29</sup> who was holding and governing heaven and earth? because you say that you accept Moses and his writings.” The Emir said “it was God who governed heaven and earth” - and immediately he heard from our father: “So it is with Christ God; While in the Virgin’s womb, he was holding and governing heaven and earth and all that is in them, as God Almighty.”

5. The illustrious emir said again: “What were the opinion and the faith of Abraham and Moses?” - His Beatitude, our father said, “Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron and the prophets, and the wise and the righteous, all had and kept the faith of Christians” - The emir said: “Why since then, they did not write with clarity and did not make known the things about Christ?” His Beatitude, our father replied:

“They knew, as confidants and relatives of God but - because of the naivety and harshness of the people of that time who inclined and aspired to polytheism, on the point of considering as gods (objects) of wood, stone and many other things, to lift idols, to love and offer sacrifices – the saints were unwilling to give ground to those who were lost, departing from the living God and to follow the mistake, but they revealed cautiously what truth

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<sup>28</sup> From the position of the Christian Orthodoxy, the Syrian-Jacobite patriarch considers the other Christians heretical. In this case, patriarch Joan I, who was Jacobite, i.e. monophysit, “the heretics” were the Nestorians and the Chalcedons, the last being the true Orthodox.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Exodus 24, 18. The quotations from the Bible are from *Biblia sau Sfânta Scriptură*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, București, 2008.

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is, *Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is the one Lord*,<sup>30</sup> because they really knew that there is only one God and a Godhead of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit; they also spoke in a mysterious way and wrote about, that the same God is one in divinity and three hypostases and persons; for there are not and we do not profess three gods or three divinities, and in no way gods and deities, because there is one Godhead of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, as we have already said, and from the Father proceed the Son and the Holy Spirit; and, if you want I am determined and willing to confirm all these with the help of the Holy Book.”

6. Then, when the Emir heard all this, asked to prove only by reasoning and through Law (the Pentateuch) that Christ is God and that is born of the Virgin and that God has a son. - And His Holiness said that not only Moses, but all the holy prophets prophesied and wrote these about Christ. One wrote of His birth of a virgin, another one that He would be born in Bethlehem, another (wrote) about his baptism; all, so to speak, (wrote) about his redeeming passion, about His life-giving death and His glorified resurrection from the grave after three days; and he began to testify these things after all the prophets and Moses, at the same time.<sup>31</sup>

And the illustrious emir did not accept the words of the prophets, and asked only Moses to show them that Christ is God; and His Beatitude, with many other things, quoted this passage from Moses: *Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven*.<sup>32</sup> The Emir asked them to be shown even in the book, and our father has shown, without mistake, in the complete Greek and Syrian books. Many Agarians were present with us there, and saw, with their own eyes, these passages and the glorified name of the Kings and of the Lord.<sup>33</sup> The Emir called a Jew considered a connoisseur of the Scripture,

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Deuteronom 6, 4.

<sup>31</sup> F. Nau, *La Didascalie de Jacob. Première Assemblée*, in R. Graffin, F. Nau, *Patrologia orientalis*, Tomus octavus, Firmin - Didot et C<sup>ie</sup>. Imprimeurs-Éditeurs, Paris, 1912, p. 711-780 (fascicolul 5). Was written in the same period, namely, in 640.

<sup>32</sup> Genesis 19, 24.

<sup>33</sup> This send us to Genesis 19, 18: «And Lot said to them: “No, Lord!”», in which, although Lot sees many people, he addresses only to one, patriarch John I drawing attention upon the way in which the Christians see the Holy Trinity: three Persons and one being. In French there is the version “le nom glorieux du Seigneur et encore du Seigneur”, the repetition of the name “Lord”.

and asked him if it was literally so in the law. And he answered: "I do not know exactly."<sup>34</sup>

7. Hence, the Emir came to inquire about the laws of Christians; which they are and how they are; if they are in the gospel or not? He added: If a man dies and leaves sons or daughters and a wife and a mother and a sister and a cousin, how do they agree on the division of his inheritance?<sup>35</sup> - When our father said that the Gospel teaches divine and heavenly teachings and the life-giving precepts; that it blames all sins and evils; it teaches good and justice and that many things have been cited in this respect - there were gathered crowd not only noble Agarians but rulers and governors of cities and faithful people and friends of Christ, Tanukats, Tuaitis and Aqulaitis<sup>36</sup> - the illustrious Emir said: "I ask you to do one thing of the three: to show me that your laws are written in the Gospel, and you lead your life through them, or adhere to Muslim law (Mahgrâ)". And when our father said that we have laws, Christians who are just and fair, and that they are consistent with the teachings and precepts of the Gospel and the apostolic canons and laws of the Church the meeting of this first day was dissolved here, and we could not appear before the Emir, again.

8. The Emir also asked to come some key holders of the Council of Chalcedon and all who were present, Orthodox or Chalcedonians,<sup>37</sup> prayed for the life and safe keeping of the Patriarch; they were praising and magnifying God who abundantly gave word of truth in his mouth and That filled him with His power and grace, after His promises when He said: *And when they shall deliver you into their hands, do not care how or what ye*

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<sup>34</sup> This makes us suppose that the Pentateuch was not translated into Arab, and there was no version to consult.

<sup>35</sup> *Un colloque du patriarche Jean avec l'émir des Agaréens...*, in "JA" 5 (1915), pp. 270-271. In this case one can easily notice the difference between Christianity and Islam, the Islamic outlook, even if referring to metaphysical problems bends towards law, the laws in life, the laws of marriage, divorce and heritage.

<sup>36</sup> These are the three main Christian (Jacobite) Arab tribes. Regarding their conversion and praise see F. Nau, *Histoires de l'Ahoudemmeh et de Marouta*, Métropolitans jacobites de Tagrit et de l'Orient; *Traité d'Ahoudemmeh sur l'homme*, in R. Graffin, F. Nau, *Patrologia orientalis*, Tomus tertius, Firmin - Didot et C<sup>IE</sup>. Imprimeurs-Éditeurs, Paris, 1909, pp. 21-33.

<sup>37</sup> For the Jacobite patriarch John I "the Orthodox" are the Jacobites who refused the the Fourth Ecumenical Council from Chalcedon, whereas the "Chalcedons", that is, those who accepted the dogmatic decisions of Chalcedon, the present Orthodox, are for him heretical.

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*shall speak, for it shall be given you in that hour what to speak. You are not ye that speak, but the Spirit of your Father Who speaks in you.*<sup>38</sup>

9. We send Your Love these few words about the many things that were discussed at the moment, to pray unceasingly for us, diligently and carefully to ask the Lord, in His mercies, to investigate the Church and His people, and Christ should give this problem the solution that pleases Him to help His Church and comfort His people. - Even those related to the Council of Chalcedon, as I said above, pray for His Beatitude, the Patriarch, for speaking for all the gathering of Christians and because he brought them no damage. They constantly sent people to ask his goodness to speak for the whole company and not to stand against them, because they know their weakness and the extent of the danger that threatens them, if the Lord, on His mercies, does not examine His Church.<sup>39</sup>

10. Pray for the illustrious Emir, for God to give him wisdom and enlighten him on what pleases the Lord and help him. - His Beatitude of the (Christians) congregation and the holy Fathers who are with him Abba Mar Thomas, and Mar Sever, and Mar Sergius and Mar Atilaha, and Mar John and their holy accompanying leaders and believers who gathered here with us; and especially the beloved and wise leader, guarded by God, Mar Andrew, and we humble in the Lord, we ask your greetings and your holy prayers, forever.

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<sup>38</sup> Mathew 10, 19-20.

<sup>39</sup> This end of the meeting shows that the dialgue was held in the year 639, when the Arab victories frightened all the Christians. It was the period in which Christians still had not entered into dispute with each other before the Muslim authorities, as it would happen a few years later, i.e. in June 659, with the dispute between the bishops Jacobite Theodore and Sebkit and the Chalcedon monks of (Maronite) St. Maron Monastery in front of Muawia in Damascus, an opportunity for the latter to give a fine to the Jacobites. See in this regard F. Nau, *Opuscules maronites - texte syriaque autographe et traduction française*, I și II, Chez Ernest Leroux, Paris, 1899 și 1990.