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A Lesser Known and Hotly Debated Hagiographic Episode in the Life of St. John of Damascus

Caius CUȚARU

Caius CUȚARU

“Hilarion V. Felea” Faculty of Orthodox Theology, Arad, Romania

Email: c.caius@yahoo.com

Abstract

The present study presents a lesser-known hagiographic episode from the Greek Life of St. John of Damascus, which deals with the cutting of the saint's hand by Caliph 'Umar II following woven intrigues at the Byzantine court of Emperor Leo III Isaurus and the miracle of its sticking back by the Mother of God during a sleep following the intense prayer of the Syrian father. This episode is a controversial one, being harshly disputed and denied by many specialists, who do not give it any scientific value due to an obvious anachronism; when St. John of Damascus began the fight against iconoclasm – after 726, the year when Leo III took the first iconoclastic measures, the Syrian Father was no longer governor of the Caliphate of Damascus court, but a monk at St. Sava Monastery near Jerusalem.

Keywords

The life of St. John of Damascus, Caliph Umar II, Byzantine Emperor Leo III Isaurus, iconoclasm

I. Introduction

The hagiographic episode in question in this study, which refers to the cutting off of St. John of Damascus's hand by the caliph following intrigues woven at the Byzantine court and the wonder of its being put back during a sleep by the Mother of God, following the intense prayer of her father has as protagonist St. John of Damascus, the Muslim caliph 'Umar II and Emperor Leo III Isaurus, and is mentioned in the Holy Father's Greek writig *Life*. Several specialists have written about this document and currently *The Greek Life* is included in the *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. XCIV, Coll. 429-489 and is said to have been written by Patriarch John of Jerusalem¹, based on an *Arab Life*.

It is a creation of the hagiographic genre, with all that it entails, but a closer look reveals the questions asked by those who created the *Arab Life* of the last Holy Father of the patristic period, a document that underlies the *Greek Life*.

From the beginning, however, it should be noted that this episode is controversial, being harshly disputed and denied by many experts due to an obvious anachronism; when St. John of Damascus began the fight, by preaching and writing against iconoclasm – after 726, the year when Leo III took the first iconoclastic measures, the Syrian Father was no longer governor of the Caliphate of Damascus (it seems that in 718 ended his activity in Damascus), but was a monk at the Monastery of St. Sava near Jerusalem. So it would be an inconsistency of at least eight years between one moment and another, which casts a serious shadow of doubt on the veracity of the story. However, I would like to mention this lesser known episode of his life, but perfectly possible in terms of performing a miracle, that is, viewed in the logic of faith.

¹ Several hypotheses have been made about this Patriarch John of Jerusalem, according to which it would be John VII (964-966) or John VIII (1106-1156). At the beginning of the last century, an 11th-century *Arab Life* of St. John of Damascus was discovered, leading us to the conclusion that the author can be only Patriarch John VIII. The discussion is open, however, because two manuscripts of *Greek Life* date back to the 10th century, a date that is not out of the question, but it is possible that an older *Arab Life*, lost at the present, to have been this manuscript, which implies an even older manuscript of *Greek Life*. See in this regard Fr. Andrew LOUTH, *Ioan Damaschinul. Tradiție și originalitate în teologia bizantină – cu câteva scrieri inedite*, transl. pr. Prof. Ioan Ică sn. and deac. Ioan I. Ică jr, Deisis Publishing House, Sibiu, 2010, p. 37, note 2.

St. John of Damascus was one of the strongest defenders of the cult of the Holy Icons of the Byzantine Empire, in a time of persecution against them, even though the last great Holy Father of the patristic period was not a resident of the empire, but of the expanding Arab Caliphate and in whose court he grew up².

Unfortunately, for the Orthodox believers inside the borders of the Byzantine Empire, but also outside them, the situation was somewhat similar, because during this period we can speak both of a Byzantine iconoclasm, but also of an Arab one, and if the former appears as a heretical movement inside Eastern Christianity, the latter was absolutely natural and in accordance with the more general Islamic doctrine, the prohibition of iconographic representation being a normal consequence of the belief in an absolutely transcendent and unincarnated God, therefore impossible to be represented iconically.

From 723 onwards, the influence of the Monophysites, who opposed Byzantine Orthodoxy, increased, and by the fact that in addition to the heresy of annulling human nature in the Divine-Human Person of the Savior Jesus Christ, they were also refractory to the worship of the Holy Icons. And the other branches born of Monophysitism, respectively monoenergism and monothelism, acquired a greater influence in the imperial court and in some Eastern patriarchs. Among the many causes of Byzantine iconoclasm we can add this, because in the next period, the Byzantine emperor Leo III Isaurus will enter into a theological dialogue with the caliph ‘Umar II. In fact, it is about an exchange of letters between the two, to the caliph’s perplexities, expressed in the form of questions and requests for clarifications, the Byzantine emperor answering like a true theologian³.

² St. John Damascene lived all his life under Muslim rule, and his criticism of the iconoclasts provoked extreme dissatisfaction with the iconoclastic Byzantine emperors, who could not take any direct action against him because he was not under their direct jurisdiction. See in this regard “John the Damascene (ca. 657-ca. 749)”, in David Hugh FARMER, *Oxford Dicționar al sfinților*, transl. Mihai C. Udma and Elena Burlacu, Univers Enciclopedic Publishing House, Bucharest, 1999, p. 282. See in this sense also the Priest. Prof. Dr. Emanoil BĂBUȘ, *Bizanțul – istorie și spiritualitate*, Sophia Publishing House, Bucharest, 2010, p. 273.

³ It was not from the beginning that Emperor Leo III embraced the iconoclastic heresy, but it can be said that, initially, this emperor heresiarch not only professed the Orthodox faith, but was also an ardent apologist of it, having a very broad theological erudition concerning the doctrinal points he addressed, as evidenced by the exchange of letters with Caliph ‘Umar II.

At least from this exchange of letters, if it is really authentic⁴, it appears that Emperor Leo III still had in this period a teaching of the Orthodox faith, in which he defended the icons and especially the honesty of the Holy Cross. But, unfortunately, the emperor remained in the memory of the history of the Church of Christ as an iconoclastic emperor, as the one who started the first persecution against the worshipers of the Holy Icons.

Regarding the veneration of icons, both the iconoclastic emperor and the caliph considered that the veneration of icons in the Church violated the second commandment of the Decalogue. On the other hand, the Isaurian dynasty, from which Leo III came, was influenced by Islam,

“Because there is a direct relationship between the precepts of the Qur’an that forbid the representation and worship of any human image that would represent divinity, and the iconoclastic heresy that forbids any representation of Christ the Savior, the Virgin Mary, and the saints in Christian worship. This heresy was intended to be a protest against an alleged violation of monotheism by the Christian Churches and was a response to the claim announced by Muhammad, who would have abolished idolatry, destroying from its foundations even the most insignificant vestiges of it”⁵.

II. The emperor and the caliph in a first attempt of a theological dialogue

Caliph ‘Umar II was a special man, an atypical Muslim leader, wanting to win the emperor for the cause of Islam. This caliph was more willing to proselytize than to fight with a weapon against unbelievers (non-Muslims). It is known that ‘Umar II wrote a dogmatic letter to the emperor to make him embrace his religion, but the Greeks did not tell us anything about the Byzantine emperor’s response. An 8th-century Armenian historian named

⁴ There are several discussions on the authenticity of this epistolary exchange, the specialists in the field being in different positions, some being favorable to the authenticity of the epistolary dialogue between the two, others denying its authenticity.

⁵ See in this regard Félix NÈVE, “St. Jean Damascène et son influence en Orient sous les premiers Khalifes”, in: *Revue Belge et Etrangère* (from now *RBE*), Numérisation et mise en ligne par Albocicade. Les notes et regroupées en fin de document, Tome XII, Bruxelles, 1861, I.

Leontiū or Ghevond the priest recounted the dialogue between the two in writing, and G. Chahnazarian published the two pieces of correspondence in the second half of the 19th century⁶.

After expressing his desire to know the Christian dogmas, and to study the various aspects of the faith in Christ, the caliph confesses that he did not have the opportunity to do so, which is why he asks the emperor to give him the necessary clarifications. Naturally, his ambiguities concern the Person of the Savior Jesus Christ, the Old Testament prophecies about the coming of the Messiah, Christ's testimonies of Himself, which apparently would not be enough for Christians, so look for evidence of the incarnation in the Old Testament. The statement is false, because the Savior Christ revealed Himself as the Son of God, consubstantial with God the Father: "And I and my Father are one" (John 10, 30), the Old Testament testimonies coming to confirm His proclamation, by prophets, and being used initially in the apostolic kerygma, as we see in the Holy Apostle Paul in his missionary travels, and in this case in the dialogue with Islam, when the interlocutors demanded such evidence. On the other hand, Old Testament prophecies fulfilled in the person of the Savior Jesus Christ came to invalidate the mission of Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, whose life and activity had not been foretold. Hence the lack of the revealed character of the Islamic religion, incriminated by the representatives of Christianity.

One of the favorite points of the Islamo-Christian controversy also appears in 'Umar II's letter: how can God touch man? – confusion expressed by the caliph by the expression: "is it possible that God dwelt in the flesh and blood, as well as in the dirty entrails of a woman?"⁷ This accusation against the possibility of the incarnation of the Son of God is in accordance with the teaching about God in Islam, called *tawhid*⁸: "He does not give birth, and is not born, and no one is like him" – according to the Qur'an⁹.

⁶ *Correspondance entre Omar II, VIII^{ème} calife Omeyade et Léon III l'Isaurien, empereur de Constantinople, sur la foi des chrétiens*, de GHÉVOND, Numérisé et mis en ligne avec une introduction par Albocicade, 2009, d'après l'*Histoire des guerres et des conquêtes des arabes en Arménie*, traduite en français par Gerabed V. SCHAHNAZARIAN, Librairie de Ch. Meyrueis et Compagnie, Paris, 1856, note 249.

⁷ See *Correspondance entre Omar II, VIII^{ème} calife Omeyade et Léon III l'Isaurien, empereur de Constantinople, sur la foi des chrétiens*, de GHÉVOND.

⁸ Tawhid (taw-HEED) is a teaching frequently mentioned in the Qur'an, a word that can be translated as "monotheism" or, literally, "to make one". This is one of the fundamental teachings of Islam, namely, the existence of an absolutely unique deity.

⁹ Qur'an 112: 3-4, cf. *Qur'an*, Arabic translation by George Grigore, Herald Publishing

Muslim theology disagreed with Christian triadology, which spoke of one God in three Persons, Muslims not accepting Jesus' status as "partner (associate) and equal of the one and omnipotent God", confusing the triumphant monotheism of Christianity with tritheism¹⁰.

Another accusation made by Caliph 'Umar II concerned the falsification of the Scriptures, a common accusation in the Muslim world when Christians proved to Muslims that neither in the Old nor in the New Testament are there any indications of Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, of his person and prophetic mission.

Another aspect of the Christian-Islamic controversy was the mission of the Paraclete or Comforter, of whom Jesus spoke about, and whom the Muslims identified with Muhammad. The Caliph demanded clarification on this doctrinal aspect.

The practical issues are addressed by the caliph in his questions, asking for clarification on "arbitrary changes in the laws, such as the circumcision of baptism, the sacrifice in the Eucharist, the Sabbath on Sunday". "Why do you honor (worship) the bones of the apostles and the prophets, as well as the paintings and the cross, which he used in the past, according to the law, as an instrument of torture?" As for the interpretation of the prophecy of Isaiah "when he speaks, in his vision, of two horsemen, mounted, one on a donkey, the other on a camel", this would testify, according to Muslim exegetes, about the equality between Jesus Christ, the rider of the donkey, and Muhammad – the rider of the camel. But as can be seen from the *Apology for Christianity* of Timothy I, the Nestorian patriarch, before Caliph al-Mahdi¹¹, the meaning is quite different. The letter ends with the request of the caliph to receive, from Emperor Leo III, explanations on all these points, in order to understand the Christian teachings.

Particularly interesting is the answer of the emperor, which is much more extensive and has an Orthodox character in terms of teaching. In the elaborate response of Emperor Leon, which turns out to be a true apologetic treatise, the emperor firmly rejected the Qur'an's morality regarding marriage and male-female relations, which he declared legitimate for believers. But his controversy is worthy of all attention to most of the House, Bucharest, 2015.

¹⁰ See *Correspondance entre Omar II, VIII^{ème} calife Omeyade et Léon III l'Isaurien, empereur de Constantinople, sur la foi des chrétiens*, de GHÉVOND.

¹¹ TIMOTHY I, *Apology for Christianity*, Translated with a critical apparatus by Alphonse MINGANA, coll. *Woodbrooke Studies*, vol. 2, Reprinted from the "Bulletin of the John Rylands Library", Volume 12, Cambridge W. Heffer & Sons Limited, 1928.

issues raised by the caliph. If we were to believe the historian Ghevond, the controversy produced a vivid impression on the caliph, who began to treat Christians with more benevolence, improving their living conditions¹².

Emperor Leo III will reply to Caliph Umar II that he is not at all ashamed of his religion, although he is not in the habit of writing about divine things. He will repeat point by point the objections and challenges of his adversary, proving the authenticity of the Holy Scriptures, the value of their prophecies, the agreement between the two Testaments, showing the work of salvation Mysteries and ordinances of the Church. At the same time, the emperor inquired about the teachings of Muhammad, because on several occasions, knowingly, he moved the attacks to the opponent's field. In this way, he rejects blasphemies against the Holy Trinity as well as the claim of Muslim theology to find either in the promise of the Paraclete or the Comforter, or in a vision of Isaiah, the proclamation of Muhammad's personal mission. The emperor also opposes the caliph's accusations of idolatry with his own accusations of Arab superstition, such as the worship of black stone in Mecca and many of their practices, but also objects to the multitude of sects and schisms that have arisen in such a recent religion, professed by a single nation. The crude conception of eternal life, of the resurrection, and of the pleasures that await the righteous in Paradise, is criticized¹³.

In the treatise can be read a short reply from the emperor, a very clear one, concerning the cult of icons, which the caliph attacked, mentioning them among the errors of Christians:

“As for the paintings”, the emperor wrote to him, after justifying the practice of honoring the Holy Cross, “we do not give them a similar respect, we do not receive from the Holy Scripture any commandment concerning it; yet finding in the Old Testament the divine commandment authorizing Moses to have the cherubim made in the tabernacle of witness; and, animated by a sincere attachment to the disciples of the Lord, burning with love for the incarnate Lord Himself, I always felt the need to preserve their faces which have come down to us from that time as their living

¹² F. NÈVE, “St. Jean Damascène et son influence en Orient...”, in: *RBE*, XII, 1861, II.

¹³ F. NÈVE, “St. Jean Damascène et son influence en Orient...”, in: *RBE*, XII, 1861, II.

representation. We are delighted with their presence; and we praise God who saved us through His only begotten Son, who came into the world in a humble way, and we honor His saints; but in regard to wood and color, we give them no honor. But as for you, you were not ashamed to sacrifice the house called Ka'bah, the dwelling of Abraham, which he did not actually see, not even in his sleep, with its barren and diabolical desert. This house existed long before Muhammad, and it was worshiped by your fellow citizens, and Muhammad, far from forbidding it, called it Abraham's home¹⁴.

This letter, which dates back to before 720, the year of the death of Caliph Umar II, shows that the Byzantine emperor did not come to the idea of leading a so-called reform of the Christian cult until later, following its theological controversy, through intrigue, threats and the use of force¹⁵.

The exchange of letters by Ghevond's Correspondence, and relatively recently republished by G. Chahnazarian's History, brings to light probably the oldest Christian-Islamic controversy in the century in which St. John of Damascus lived, and shows a trained theologian and full of zeal in the person of Emperor Leo III Isaurus, but who will later usurp the role of theologians giving rise to iconoclastic heresy starting from a doctrinal point (the cult of the Holy Icons), which in the past he confessed and defended, John of Damascus being his fiercest opponent¹⁶.

III. St. John of Damascus between the two empires

III.1. The persecution of Leo III Isaurus against St. John of Damascus

In 726, Emperor Leo III issued an edict against the icons, marking the beginning of the Byzantine imperial iconoclasm. The situation of the patriarchal see of Constantinople in the face of iconoclastic imperial power was particularly difficult. Andrew Louth pointed out that after the iconoclasm, the Byzantine patriarchal court rewrote the history of the

¹⁴ *Histoire des conquêtes et des guerres...*, pp. 89 sq.

¹⁵ F. NÈVE, "St. Jean Damascène et son influence en Orient...", in: *RBE*, XII, 1861, I.

¹⁶ F. NÈVE, "St. Jean Damascène et son influence en Orient...", in: *RBE*, XII, 1861, II.

period, highlighting the heroic role of the Constantinopolitan patriarchs Gherman, Tarasie and Nichifor in preventing a complete collapse in the face of the imperial will¹⁷. Although Leo III sought an official justification for the iconoclasm, he failed to win either Pope Gregory II (715-731) or Patriarch German I of Constantinople (715-730)¹⁸.

At the call of Patriarch John V of Jerusalem (705/6-735), St. John wrote three resounding speeches in support of the icons – “Treatises Against Those Who Attack the Holy Icons”¹⁹. St. John writes the first treatise against iconoclastic heresy, then writes the second for believers who did not understand the first treatise, and then writes the third, systematizing the ideas of veneration of the holy icons in the first and second treatises²⁰. St. John stated that the Savior can be represented by the icon, because he took on a human face, and the icons fulfill in the Church an educational – instructive, an aesthetic – role of adorning the holy places, a cultic role – of accompanying church services and to intercede for the graces of the Holy Trinity to the faithful²¹.

St. John of Damascus is not only content with writing, but understands to participate in the fight against iconoclasm, being one of the synod fathers and, moreover, presiding over the anti-iconoclastic synod of the Eastern bishops of 730-731 AD, even if he was a simply a hieromonk, his role in the debates of this synod being overwhelming, so that posterity considered him to be the one who formulated the anathematizations against

¹⁷ A. LOUTH, *Ioan Damaschinul. Tradiție și originalitate...*, p. 33.

¹⁸ See in this regard *Istoria bisericească universală*. Vol. 1. *De la întemeierea Bisericii până la anul 1054*, Coordonator Pr. Prof. Dr. Viorel IONIȚĂ, Editura Basilica, București, 2019, p. 517.

¹⁹ According to Martin Jugie, it was not Patriarch John V who determined St. John of Damascus to write the famous treatises for the defense of the Holy Icons, the chronicler Theophanes the Cretan bringing an argument: In the Syrian Damascus distinguished himself through his life and his writings the son of Mansur, John Chrysorrhoeas, priest and monk, extraordinary father... United with the bishops of the East, John (this is of course John Damascene and not the patriarch John V of Jerusalem, according to Le Quien) subjected the unbeliever (Leon III Isaurus) to anathema”, cf. Saint THEOPHANES THE CONFESSOR, *Cronografia*, transl. Mihai Țipău, Basilica Publishing House of the Romanian Patriarchate, Bucharest, 2012 (year 13 of Leo III Isaurus, ie 730 AD.).

²⁰ According to experts, the three treatises against the iconoclasts are the only works that can be dated with some certainty, because they are concerned with Byzantine iconoclasm, most likely not Arabic, then they must have been written after 726, the year of the iconoclastic crisis. Cf. A. LOUTH, *Ioan Damaschinul. Tradiție și originalitate...*, p. 26.

²¹ See in this sense Sfântul IOAN DAMASCHIN, *Cultul Sfințelor icoane (Cele trei tratate contra iconoclaștilor)*, translation and introductory study by D. Fecioru, Bucharest, 1937.

the emperor Leo III Isaurus²². He was the most representative father of this synod, being strongly involved in the anti-iconoclastic struggle, just as St. Athanasius the Great was involved in the fight against Arianism at the First Ecumenical Council in 325²³.

In the Greek *Life* of St. John of Damascus there is also an account of an episode related to his fight against the iconoclasts. The determination and success of the Holy Father in the fight against the new heresy reaches the ears of the iconoclastic emperor Leo III Isaurus, who is terribly angry but unable to punish the hieropoly monk in the Arab Caliphate. In order to take revenge, the emperor, after procuring one of the saint's autographs, gathers the best of his calligraphers and has them forge a letter written in the hands of the monk John. In this letter, John warned the Byzantine emperor, telling him that Damascus was badly defended and that he could hand it over to the Byzantines²⁴.

In possession of this forgery, Leo III sent the letter to the caliph, as an expression of friendship and respect for the treaties. The Caliph made available to his vizier the false document received from Constantinople, and he could not deny that the handwriting did not resemble his handwriting, but he pleaded not guilty to the contents, which did not belong to him. However, his protests did not have the power of impressing the caliph, and he, furious at the disloyalty of his trusted official, ordered his right hand to be cut off, which will be exposed in public, but John asked the caliph to return his hand in order to bury it. Receiving it, St. John placed it in front of the icon of the Mother of God as he prayed in anacreontic verses,

²² To consult *PG* XCIV, 1284, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca Prior*, Accurante J.-P. MIGNE, *Patrologiae Graecae*, Tomus XCIV, S. Joannes Damascenus, Paris, 1864. See also note 114.

²³ Father Dumitru Stăniloae also considers him the most important defender of the cult of the Holy Icons, pointing out that: "He gave the hardest blows to this heresy (iconoclasm, n.n.)". See *Filocalia sfintelor nevoiște ale desăvârșirii*, translation, introduction and notes by Fr. Professor Doctor Dumitru Stăniloae, vol. 4, Harisma Publishing House, Bucharest, 19942, p. 201.

²⁴ For such a gesture, Islamic law punished death or exile, as this meant that non-Muslims broke the pact with Muslims in the caliphate, a pact by which they obtained the right to remain in Muslim territories, protecting their lives and property. For this, see Antoine FATTAL, *Le statut légal des non-musulmans en pays d'Islam*, Imprimerie Catholique, Beirut, 1958, p. 83 and Rev. E. Băbuș who presents the acts of *dhimmi*, that is the tolerated, as the Christians were called, who automatically drew the death penalty. Among them he mentions the following: "the killing of a Muslim, the refusal to pay taxes, the espionage in favor of an adversary – as is the case – and the most serious crime was the blasphemy of the Prophet Muhammad", cf. Prof. Dr. E. E. BĂBUȘ, *Bizanțul – istorie și spiritualitate*, p. 271, note 1.

asking her to put his amputated hand back. The Mother of God receives his prayer, has mercy on him, and when he falls asleep he is shown in a dream, the image of the Blessed Virgin coming to life before his eyes, and with a graceful smile, the Virgin will stick his hand again. Waking up and seeing himself healed by an extraordinary miracle, the Saint prays and sings hymns to the Mother of God for the rest of the night. In the morning, being summoned by the caliph and seeing his hand back, he realizes that he had been innocent, makes him recount what had happened during the night and wants to restore him to his former dignity²⁵.

The miracle of the restored hand will give rise to a special shape of the icon of the Mother of God called Theotokos Tricherousis, meaning “Mother of God with three hands”, because St. John, in gratitude for the miracle performed, made a silver hand to be placed on the icon that had performed the miracle. Following this episode, St. John asks permission to leave the court and follow the monastic life, permission finally received²⁶.

We have discussed this episode of The Greek *Life* of St. John of Damascus, because, although this source of information is not usually used, it is generally ignored by specialists, as does Fr. A. Louth, in the first chapter of his book on the Syrian Holy Father, however, indicates its importance and we agree with this argument. He shows that:

“Even though Greek *Life* is worthless as a historical source for John’s life, it is not without interest. As is the case with most hagiography, if we stop looking at it as a kind of window that opens out to the historical landscape of John’s life and look at it instead as a mirror that reflects the late attitudes toward John and of course compared to Christian holiness as such, then it becomes not only interesting, but even informative”²⁷.

²⁵ The miracle of the restored hand has circulated for hundreds of years, sometimes with various variations, some strange, both in Eastern and Western hagiographic writings. Unfortunately, the textual criticism did not give it the slightest historical value. See in this sense *Speculum historiale* by Vincent DE BEAUVAIS, in *PG XCIV*, 497-500. One of the counter-arguments in favor of the veracity of the story is the fact that at the time of writing the dogmatic treatises against the iconoclasts, St. John was already a priest and monk at St. Sava’s Monastery and had long since left Damascus. The quality of monk and priest is evident from the text of the treatises, as well as the fact that he already lived in or near Jerusalem. Expressions such as “humble and useless servant of the Church of God” or “ambassador of the Mother Church to her children” appear in these treatises.

²⁶ For the story of this episode see A. LOUTH, *Ioan Damaschinul. Tradiție și originalitate...*, pp. 38-39, 41.

²⁷ A. LOUTH, *Ioan Damaschinul. Tradiție și originalitate...*, p. 37.

The author of this opinion shows that beyond the historical aspect, which has its relevance, it is important to analyze a character in the history of the Church and according to the way the believers later looked at him, dressed in the robe of holiness, „mythical” and stop this process of a continuous demystification, which empties everything of meaning and holiness. The religious man of the past charged with holiness a man or a historical event, he felt the need to sanctify everything, while the secularized and desecrated man of today demystifies everything, even the sacred, reducing everything to the judgment of an autonomous reason, broken from God and under the power of senses. If we look at the event we were referring to in this regard, then we understand its meaning and we can excuse its anachronism.

On the other hand, the anachronism is explained if we consider that those who wrote the *Arab Life of the Saint*, the Arab Christians on the threshold of 1000 AD, could not conceive how Leo III Isaurus, the persecuting emperor of the Holy Icons, did not know their greatest defender, St. John of Damascus, and then they put them together, weaving this beautiful hagiographic narrative. They thought a posteriori, in the logic of the fame acquired in the meantime by the aghiopolit monk, and the relatively friendly relations between the emperor and the caliph seen through the prism of the other debated document, the epistolary exchange between the two subsequent. As for the miracle of John’s hand restored to its place by the Mother of God, this event is the basis for the painting of the “Icon of the Mother of God with three hands”, the so-called icon *Theotokos Tricherosis*, because in gratitude for the miracle, St. John make a silver hand to be attached to the miracle-working icon, and later copies of the icon have been preserved. Thus, the episode in the life of St. John of Damascus would represent the “legend”, the reason for painting the icon of the *Mother of God Tricherosis*. As for the original icon, it is said that it was brought to the Serbian Hilandar Monastery on Holy Mount Athos by Sveti Sava, the saint of the Serbs, in the 13th century, and is still there today.

It appears that St. John of Damascus served at the Caliphate court in Damascus between 690 and 718, succeeding his father Sarjun, a man with senior positions in the Syrian tax administration²⁸. In the year 718, Caliph

²⁸ The authors of the chapter entitled *The Life and Work of John Damascene* in *Complete Works I*, claim that the future Father of the Church “pursued a career in the Umayyad

‘Umar II started an anti-Christian policy that also targeted the Christians in the administration of the caliphate. Other sources suggest, however, that the removal of John of Damascus from office was due to intrigue²⁹. Father A. Louth claims that somewhere “in the second decade of the eighth century, John resigned from his position in the Damascus administration and became a monk in Palestine”³⁰, which confirms the year 718 AD. as the year of leaving the capital of the caliphate and its office.

“After the loss of the rectory, John of Damascus divided his fortune among the poor, freed his slaves, and retired with his adopted brother, Cosmas, to St. Sava’s Monastery in Palestine, where he would remain until the end of his life”³¹.

III.2. Persecution of Constantine V Copronymus against St. John of Damascus

Not only the iconoclastic emperor Leo III Isaurus, who died in 741, persecuted the monopolistic monk, but also his son and successor to the throne, Constantine V Copronimus, emperor between 741-775, with an interruption between 741-743³², who could not punish him directly, sometimes reserved slander, sometimes anathema. In all his years he had the monk John of St. Sava in Constantinople solemnly anathematized, and in particular St. John of Damascus will be anathematized by the iconoclastic

tax administration, most likely during the caliphate of al-Walid (705-715)”, cf. Sfântul IOAN DAMASCHIN, *Opere complete I*, introduction, translation and notes by Adrian Tănăsescu, Cornel Coman, Cristian Chivu, Gândul Aprins Publishing House, Bucharest, 2015, p. 11, leaving it in 706, when the respective caliph changed the official language of civil administration from Greek to Arabic. These translators, although they do not give credit to biographical sources written in hagiographic style, “which do not give scientific rigor to our brief introduction” (cf. p. 9), still recall the episode with the cutting of St. John Damascene’s hand, narrated in Greek *Life* from PG 94, 456. It seems that these authors do not notice very well the anachronism of the overlapping events.

²⁹ “Umayyad Caliphate”, in: *World History Encyclopedia*, Benjamin de Lee, Ed. Alfred J. Andrea and Carolyn Neel, Vol. 7: Era 4: Expanding Regional Civilizations, 300-1000, Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2011, pp. 286-288.

³⁰ A. LOUTH, *Ioan Damaschinul. Tradiție și originalitate...*, p. 23.

³¹ “Ioan Damaschinul”, on the website https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ioan_Damaschinul, consulted on 27.01.2022, at 17:02.

³² For the reign of Constantine V Copronim consult Charles LE BEAU, *Histoire du Bas-Empire commençant a Constantin-le-Grand*, Tome Sixième, livre XLIV, Chez Ledoux et Tenré, Libraires, Paris, MDCCCXIX, pp. 387, u.

synod at Hieria, which took place between February 10 and August 8, 754, and is considered a supporter of the Saracens and a teacher of iniquity, of paganism. In fact, by supporting the cult of the Holy Icons, the Holy Father was in conflict with both empires at the same time, as the Byzantine Empire, through persecuting emperors, became an iconoclast, and the Muslim Arab Caliphate was, by definition, against any anthropomorphic representations, Islam being a religion. iconoclastic by virtue of the belief in a God who did not reveal himself personally, through the incarnation, but through a writing (the Qur'an). Perhaps for this reason, St. John considered Islam more as an iconoclastic Christian sect than as a separate religion, with its own specificity.

The way in which it was received by the fighters against the Holy Icons results from the anathemas with which the iconoclastic synod of Hieria in the year 754³³ "endowed" the Syrian Holy Father:

"You (the emperors) have destroyed the heretical ideas of Gherman, George and Mansur. The anathema of the indecisive, wood-worshipping enemy Gherman. George's anathema of the same thought as him, who falsified the teachings of his parents. Mansur's anathema with a bad name, cursed and favorable to the Saracens; image worshiper and forger; the insulter of Christ and the enemy of the empire. Mansur's anathema is the teacher of iniquity and the false interpreter of the Holy Scriptures"³⁴.

We see how insistently the name of Mansur is remembered, that is, that of St. John of Damascus, given his importance in the fight against the iconoclasts.

³³ The synod was convened by Emperor Constantine V Copronymus at Hieria, on the eastern shore of the Bosphorus, near Chalcedon. Constantine wanted to impose his iconoclastic program and receive the endorsement of a synod. In order to prepare the synod, the emperor personally composed 13 theological works, leaving to posterity only two of them, and these fragmentary. The synod considered by the participants as ecumenical was attended by 338 bishops, a record number of synods. The documents regarding the development of the works were destroyed during the period when the cult of icons was restored, but the dogmatic conclusions synthesized in a *horos* (dogmatic definition) were preserved, decisions later fought against at the VII Ecumenical Synod of 787. In that period many icons were destroyed and many priests executed, exiled or blinded.

³⁴ To consult *PG* 94, 1256 A, 1297 B, 1301 A.

“The anathemas of this synod are the most brilliant apology of the struggle that St. John of Damascus led against iconoclasm. German of Constantinople and George, bishop of Cyprus, otherwise unknown, are barely mentioned. However, a damned anathema is reserved for John of Damascus, honoring him with the title of teacher of iniquity”³⁵.

Even though the three defenders of the icons were anathematized by the iconoclastic synod of Hieria, they were rehabilitated and honored by the VII Ecumenical Synod of Nicaea in 787 with the formula: “The Holy Trinity glorified the three”, which comes to repair which ruined the synod of Hieria by the formula of their condemnation: “The trinity has deposed all three”. From this formula we deduce that the three were dead in the year 754, when the works of the synod took place.

But St. John of Damascus must not be separated from the context of the Palestinian monasticism in which he was formed, lived a part of his life and to which he belonged entirely, as did the late Byzantine tradition, which treated the Holy Father isolated from the context in which he manifested himself. Palestinian monasticism as a whole, not just a single monk, had shown itself to be a powerful defender of Orthodoxy, of the worship of the Holy Icons, which Constantinople found more difficult to accept, as resistance here was very weak, reduced to a few people.³⁶ Therefore, it was easier to accept the resistance of one man and not a phenomenon like that of Palestinian monasticism. On the other hand, the monastic community of which he was a part was particularly important for St. John himself, as he was not an “isolated genius, but a participant in an extensive collaborative exercise”³⁷. He wrote for his contemporaries, even though his works became more difficult in Constantinople, almost a century after his writing. However, in the Palestinian monastic environment, they enjoyed a rapid and wide circulation.

St. John of Damascus proved to be a valiant defender of other heresies within Christianity that were active in his day, such as Monophysitism,

³⁵ Rev. Ph.D. Dumitru MOCA, *Opera liturgică a Sfântului Ioan Damaschin*, “Aurel Vlaicu” University Publishing House, Arad, f.a., p. 17.

³⁶ Cf. A. LOUTH, *Ioan Damaschinul. Tradiție și originalitate...*, p. 32.

³⁷ A. LOUTH, *Ioan Damaschinul. Tradiție și originalitate...*, p. 33.

Nestorianism, Jacobism, Manichaeism, but he also fought against Islam and superstition³⁸.

His status as a teacher and teacher of dogmas, an authentic authority in the field, is recognized by the Syrian theologian by his contemporaries in the patriarchates of Jerusalem and Antioch, who seek his advice on various doctrinal issues. Thus, Peter, Metropolitan of Damascus, addresses him to fight the Jacobite bishop of Darius, and the monk Comitas also expresses his perplexities about Lent. Many others ask him to write their confessions of faith, as is the case with the Monothelite bishop Elijah of Jabrud, a confession that he had to read in front of Metropolitan Peter of Damascus. From this evidence we discover the recognition that St. John of Damascus had gained during his lifetime.

From some of the expressions used in his books and some of the titles of the manuscripts, we can conclude that St. John of Damascus was a teacher in the true sense of the word. He possessed the qualities of a true teacher: clarity, precision of the terms, conciseness in exposition, inclination towards distinctions and arguments, the habit of resorting to comparisons to make himself understood, his Dogmatics being able to be constituted as a true textbook of Orthodox doctrine, by its scholastic character, in the good sense of the word.

IV. Conclusions

St. John of Damascus, the last Holy Father of the patristic period, was the foremost representative of the struggle against the iconoclastic heresy of the eighth century, with his fellow Palestinian monks, but in conflict with the powerful of the day, both in the Arab Caliphate, which started a fight against the Holy Icons because of Islamic doctrine, and with the Byzantine Empire, which slipped into iconoclasm through the ruling of the Isaurian dynasty. Both Emperor Leo III Isaurus and his son and successor, Constantine V Copronimus, will try to persecute him by all means.

Among the methods of persecution are the slanders, the anathemas uttered in Constantinople annually, during the reign of Constantine V Copronimus to discourage him, and especially St. John of Damascus will

³⁸ Ioan G. COMAN, *Patrologie. Manual pentru uzul studenților Institutelor Teologice*, Publishing House of the Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1956, p. 291.

be anathematized by the iconoclastic synod at Hieria, being considered a supporter of the Saracens and a teacher of iniquity, of paganism, but will be rehabilitated by the Seventh Ecumenical Council of Nicaea. Therefore, it would not be impossible to accept the reality of the false incriminating document sent from Constantinople to Damascus to endanger the life of the hieropoly monk, even if the authenticity of this document is questioned by critics due to an obvious anachronism; when St. John of Damascus begins the fight against iconoclasm – after 726, the Syrian Father was no longer the governor of the Caliphate of Damascus, but a monk at the Monastery of St. Sava near Jerusalem.

Despite these persecutions unleashed against him, St. John will confess Orthodoxy with the word of his fiery sermon in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, but also in writing, leaving to posterity a beautiful doctrinal, normative legacy.