

# MODUL II – ISTORIA APOLOGETICII

## Lectia 3 - PERIOADA MEDIEVALA (AD 600-1500)

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## Dispute Islamice

*Dispute islamice în teritoriul islamic: 600—1000, Ioan Damaschinul, Teodor Abu Qurrah și Timotei I al Bagdadului*

Ioan Damaschinul (c. 674—c. 750)

Born in Damascus, John Damascene as a youth probably assisted his father, who was a Christian employed by the Saracen caliph to collect taxes from the Christian community.

John first attracted attention about 727, when he wrote a striking defense of the **veneration of images** against the Iconoclastic emperor Leo the Isaurian. About 745 he entered the monastery of Mar Sabbas, near Jerusalem, where he composed his masterpiece, *The Source of Knowledge*. The third part of this work, entitled *The Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, was to become very influential in the West in a twelfth-century Latin translation.

At the opening of his *Orthodox Faith* John Damascene gives some comments on the relationship of natural knowledge to divine faith.<sup>1</sup> After affirming that **all people “naturally” know God**, he specifies as channels of this knowledge the existence, conservation, and government of created things; the Law and the Prophets; and finally the only begotten Son of God, Jesus Christ, whose revelation is disseminated through the Evangelists and Apostles. Accepting the biblical revelation as the highest disclosure of God, John Damascene then proceeds in his treatise dogmatically rather than apologetically. Only toward the end of Book 4 does he pause briefly to refute Jewish objections that Christians disregard the law of the Sabbath and of circumcision.<sup>2</sup>

**John Damascene’s view of Islam** can be gathered from chapter 100 of his book **On Heresies**<sup>3</sup> and from his brief apologetical Dialogue between a Saracen and a Christian.<sup>4</sup> He regards Islam as an **Arian heresy** because it treats Christ only as a servant and creature. He depicts Muhammad as misguided and dismisses the Qur’an as an empty dream. He criticizes Islam for encouraging **polygamy and divorce** and cultivating licentious sentiments toward women. In his Dialogue the Christian interlocutor answers

questions and objections presented by the Muslim. He explains that evil is not due to God but to the free will of creatures. He contends that God was patient toward the Jews, in giving them time to repent and be converted before the destruction of Jerusalem. Venturing into Christology, he explains that, while Christ can eat and drink, suffer, and die in his human nature, Christ does none of these things in His divine nature: He is the eternal Word of God. He shows how John the Baptist, even though he baptized Christ, was inferior to Him.

For the next two centuries Christianity remained a vocal presence in the Arab world. The Muslim rulers were relatively tolerant, not wishing to alienate their Christian subjects, who provided them with needed medical and other professional services. The constant struggle against Islam was an additional reason for wishing to retain the loyalty of the Christian population. For this reason dialogues were still possible between Christians and Muslims in this part of the world.

### Patriarch Timothy I (c. 727—823)

About 781 or 782 the Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I (c. 727—823) carried on an interesting dialogue extending over two days with the Caliph Muhammad al-Mahdi in Baghdad.<sup>5</sup> According to his written account of the debate, the two parties agreed **on the authority of the Torah, the Gospel, and in some sense the Qur'an.**

They were eager to understand and appreciate each other's arguments. Timothy argued for Christianity on the grounds that the Old Testament prophecies were fulfilled in Jesus, not in Muhammad, and that the mission of Jesus, unlike that of Muhammad, was accredited by numerous miracles. His apologetic method, attuned though it was to a Muslim audience, **tended to depict Christianity as a religion of the book rather than a religion of the living Word.**

### Theodore Abu Qurrah (740-820)

Probably the most accomplished apologist of the early Middle Ages was John Damascene's disciple Theodore Abu Qurrah, the Melchite bishop of Kara (or Harran) in Mesopotamia.

A native of Edessa, he lived c. 740 to c. 820. Although he wrote extensively against the Christian heretics and the Jews, he is best known for his treatises in Arabic against the Muslims. His **God and the True Religion**, as J. H. Crehan remarks, "shows that Eastern Christians were at this time far ahead of the West in the depth and range of their apologetics."<sup>6</sup>

In this treatise Abu Qurrah confronts squarely the problem of choosing among the various religions that claim to be revealed: Zoroastrianism, the Samaritan religion, Judaism, Christianity, Manichaeism, and the sects of Marcion, Bardesanes, and Muhammad.

After examining the points of similarity and difference, Abu Qurrah proposes an allegory. A certain king, he narrates, had a son who had never seen him. In a foreign land the son fell ill and sent to his father for medical advice. Several messages came, one from the father, the others from the latter's enemies. The son, assisted by the advice of a doctor, scrutinized each message from the point of view of what it indicated about the author, the understanding of the disease, and the reasonableness of the proposed remedy, and he accepted the prescription that best satisfied all three criteria. Applying the allegory to the choice of a religion, Abu Qurrah tries to show that Christianity presents the most plausible idea of God, exhibits the fullest understanding of humanity's actual religious needs, and prescribes what appear to be the most appropriate remedies. As auxiliary evidences, Abu Qurrah invokes the traditional arguments from miracles and from the expansion of Christianity.

Abu Qurrah's method was not universally approved by his fellow apologists. He was criticized as too rationalistic by contemporaries such as 'Ammār al-Basrī, who relied solely on miracles, and by Abū Rā'itah, a Jacobite who regarded Abū Qurrah as a sophist. But another Jacobite, Nonnus of Nisibis, who composed an apologetical treatise in Syriac a generation later, appealed predominantly to reason. A number of these apologists made the point that Christianity, unlike Islam, had not extended itself by the power of the sword.<sup>7</sup>

### *Dispute islamice și iudaice în Europa de Vest: 600—1100,*

#### Isidor din Sevilla

like his Eastern counterpart John Damascene, is chiefly distinguished as a transmitter of the patristic heritage to the Middle Ages. His encyclopedia, the twenty books of Etymologies, is a disorderly compilation of miscellaneous information and misinformation. At the request of his sister Florentine, Isidore composed a work **Against the Jews: On the Catholic Faith from the Old and New Testaments**.<sup>9</sup> Like Cyprian's Testimonies, it lines up a multitude of proof texts, but, unlike Cyprian, Isidore arranges the texts in a somewhat logical order and points out briefly how each of them bears on the point at issue. The treatise was evidently written more to support Christians in their encounters with Jews than with the direct aim of converting the latter.

During the Carolingian era the energies of the Western Church were chiefly consumed with civilizing and evangelizing the barbarians—a task scarcely calling for learned apologetical treatises. The period did witness the publication of some vehement diatribes against the Jews, such as those of Agobard, Archbishop of Lyons, who composed tracts **On the Insolence of the Jews** and **On the Judaic Superstitions**.<sup>10</sup> Both of these were written about 826—827. No less fierce is the Book against the Jews by Agobard's successor, Amulo, who was archbishop from 841 to 852.<sup>11</sup>

During the eleventh century, as the level of culture was rising, Christians began to support their attacks on the Jews with more rational exposition of the supposedly messianic texts of the Old Testament. Fulbert of Chartres (d. 1028) in his brief Tract against the Jews<sup>12</sup> dwells particularly on the implications of the text "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples" (Gen 49:10).

#### Peter Damian (1007—1072),

notwithstanding his deep involvement in the practical reformation of the Church, found time to study Origen and the other Church Fathers.<sup>13</sup> Since he was no friend of purely rational explanation, his work is not the place to look for detached philosophical arguments in favor of Christianity.<sup>14</sup> He did, however, compose two polemical opuscles against the Jews. In the first of these, A Reply to the Jews,<sup>15</sup> he begins by admonishing his fellow monks that it is more important to make war upon the vices of the flesh, which are always with us, than upon the Jews, who are all but extinct; but still "it is unfitting for a churchman to be silent out of ignorance in the face of calumniators, and to flee, conquered and confused, from the insults of the enemy. In many cases such lack of skill and such inordinate simplicity not only stimulate rashness in infidels but also beget error and doubt in the hearts of the faithful." Shunning all vain disputes, as Holy Scripture bids us, we should therefore set forth before the Jews the most evident prophetic testimonies to the Christian faith. With this introduction Peter goes on to comment on a series of Old Testament texts that, to his mind, clearly refer to the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the sufferings of Christ.

In a sequel to this tract, entitled **A Dialogue between a Jew Asking Questions and a Christian Responding**,<sup>16</sup> Peter Damian replies to ten difficulties raised by the Jew against Christianity. Most of these difficulties have to do with nonobservance of laws such as those prescribing circumcision and

observance of the Sabbath, dietary prescriptions, and laws concerning animal sacrifices. At the conclusion of this dialogue Peter impatiently scolds the Jews for their incredulity.