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John of Damascus, The Council of Nicaea, and The Islamic Challenge: a Theological Discourse on Christology and its Contemporary Relevance

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Abstract

John of Damascus (JD), as one of the foremost Christian theologians of the early medieval period, played a crucial role in defending Nicene Christology against theological challenges, particularly from emerging Islamic thought. This article explores the intersection of JD's theological contributions with the doctrinal affirmations of the First Council of Nicaea, particularly concerning the divinity of Christ, His consubstantiality with God the Father, and His eternal pre-existence. The study contrasts these affirmations with Islamic perspectives that regard Jesus (Isa) as a mere human prophet, distinct from divinity and created rather than eternally begotten. By analyzing JD's apologetics, this article demonstrates how he sought to uphold Nicene orthodoxy amidst the rise of Islam, which presented a monotheistic framework rejecting Trinitarian theology. Furthermore, the study examines the enduring relevance of JD's theological approach in contemporary interfaith dialogues between Christianity and Islam, particularly in addressing Christological differences. By revisiting his arguments, this article underscores the significance of historical theological discourses in shaping modern religious discussions and fostering a deeper understanding between Christian and Muslim communities.

Keywords:

John of Damascus; Nicene Christology; Islamic Theology; Christological Debates; Divinity of Christ; Interfaith Dialogue

INTRODUCTION

The historical figure of John of Damascus (JD) stands as a pivotal link between classical Christian theology and the challenges of the early Islamic world. Born in the 7th century in Damascus, JD lived at a time of dramatic political and religious shifts, notably the expansion of Islam and the establishment of the Umayyad Caliphate. His family's close ties with the Islamic administration, along with his own service under the Caliphate, placed him at the crossroads of two great religious civilizations. However, JD ultimately chose the monastic life, dedicating himself to the defense of

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Christian faith through theology, philosophy, and writing.

JD's major works, especially *The Fountain of Knowledge*, mark him as one of the last great Fathers of the Eastern Church. His theological framework upheld the doctrines established at the First Council of Nicaea (325 AD), particularly the divinity of Christ and the Trinitarian nature of God. In his writings, JD classified Islam among the heresies, drawing comparisons between Islamic monotheism and earlier Christian heterodoxies such as Arianism. At the same time, his theological methods reflect the influence of the rationalist Islamic school of Mu'tazilah, illustrating a rare intellectual exchange between Christian and Islamic thought.

This paper examines how JD preserved Nicene orthodoxy in his polemics against Islam, defended the veneration of icons against iconoclasm, and modeled a rational and dialogical apologetics still relevant for contemporary interreligious engagement.

SHORT BIOGRAPHY OF JOHN OF DAMASCUS

John of Damascus (hereinafter abbreviated as JD) was a Christian theologian who was one of the last of the Greek Church Fathers.[1] He was born in the seventh century in the city of Damascus, which during his lifetime experienced significant changes due to the expansion of Islam. The city was conquered by the Arabs in 635 and later became the center of the Umayyad Caliphate in 661. This background gave JD a unique life experience in the context of a multicultural and interfaith society.

JD's family had close ties to the Islamic government. His father and grandfather served under Muslim rule as high-ranking administrative officials. JD himself followed in their footsteps and held an important position in the Umayyad government. This position gave him the opportunity to witness firsthand the development of Islam from its early days. His closeness to the Islamic environment allowed him to understand Muslim religious teachings and practices well.

However, despite his strategic position in the Islamic government, JD remained steadfast in his Christian faith. He then chose to leave his position and live a religious life as a monk at the Mar Saba Monastery, near Jerusalem. There, he devoted himself to theology, philosophy, and Christian literary works. In his works, JD tried to defend

[1] Peter G. Riddell, "Foreword," in *John of Damascus, First Apologist to the Muslims: The Trinity and Christian Apologetics in the Early Islamic Period*, by Daniel J. Janosik (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2016), xi–xii.

the Christian faith amid theological debates with Islam and in the iconoclasm controversy that occurred in the Byzantine Empire.

One of JD's most important contributions is his work entitled *The Source of Knowledge*, which consists of three main parts. The first part discusses philosophy, the second part describes the heresies that were prevalent in his time, and the third part, the most famous, is the *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*. This work became one of the most influential systematic theological texts in the Eastern Christian tradition. In addition, he is also known as a defender of icons in the iconoclasm controversy that hit the Byzantine Church in the eighth century.

As a theologian, JD displayed a unique approach to theology in the midst of a situation of religious pluralism. He not only debated Islam, but also contributed to the formulation of Christian doctrine with systematic and rational methods. His influence is still felt in the Christian theological tradition, both in the East and the West. JD died around 749, leaving an intellectual legacy that survives to this day. The Church honors him as a saint and doctor of the Church for his great contribution to Christian theological thought.

JOHN OF DAMASCUS AND THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA

The Council of Nicaea was an important event in the history of Christianity that established the basic teachings of the faith. This council was first held in 325 AD on the initiative of Emperor Constantine (d. 337) to reduce the division caused by the teachings of Arius (d. 336), who denied the divinity of Christ. The main result of this council was the Nicene Creed, which affirmed that Christ is of one substance with the Father (*homoousios*). The Council of Nicaea was later strengthened by the First Council of Constantinople in 381 AD, which supplemented the creed with the teaching on the Holy Spirit.[2]

JD, as a theologian and Church Father of the Greek tradition, was not directly involved in the Council of Nicaea, but he maintained the teaching established at the council. His thought often reflected a combination of the Nicene Creed and theological developments affirmed at the Council of Constantinople. He affirmed the divinity of Christ and rejected views that deviated from official Church teaching.

[2] Philip Schaff, ed., *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 14, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, II (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1900), 39.

One of JD's greatest contributions was his efforts to combat various heretical teachings that were developing at the time. He opposed Monophysitism, which taught that Christ had only one divine nature, and Manichaeism, which separated the world into a dualism of light and darkness that contradicted the Christian teaching of good creation. Islam, which was still in its early stages of spread, was also seen as a form of Christian heresy, given that it had a different view of Christ and divine revelation.

In his famous work, *De Haeresibus* (*On Heresies*)[3], JD included Islam in the list of heresies, considering it a deviation from true Christianity. He considered that the Islamic teaching about Christ as a prophet, not as the Son of God, was contrary to the doctrine that had been confirmed at the Council of Nicaea. Therefore, his work had a great impact in strengthening the orthodox understanding in the Eastern Christian world.

JD is also famous for his polemics against Iconoclasm, the movement that rejected the veneration of icons. In this case, he defended the Church tradition that allowed the veneration of images of Christ and the saints, arguing that Christ's incarnation allowed for his depiction in art. This debate culminated in the Second Council of Nicaea (787 AD), which finally reaffirmed the legitimacy of icon veneration in the Church.

Thus, JD can be seen as the guardian of the theological heritage of the Council of Nicaea, even though he lived several centuries after it. His systematic and apologetic thinking proves that the teachings affirmed in the council remain relevant in facing theological challenges of his time. His side with Christian orthodoxy makes him one of the important figures in the history of the Church, especially in maintaining and developing the heritage of faith that has been established by the Council Fathers.

[3] "De Haeresibus" translated into English as "On Heresies" (hereinafter abbreviated as OH). OH was originally written in Greek and has been translated into various languages. Throughout this thesis, the author refers to one of the English translations, namely John of Damascus, *The Fathers of the Church: Saint John of Damascus Writings*, trans. Frederic H. Chase, Jr (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1999).

JOHN OF DAMASCUS IN THE CONTEXT OF ENCOUNTERS WITH ISLAM

The Dark Ages of Christianity

The Christian "Dark Ages," [4] spanning roughly the 6th to 15th centuries, provided a complex and often challenging backdrop for the lives and work of theologians such as JD. This era, marked by the collapse of the Western Roman Empire in 475, was one of political, social, and religious conflict and chaos. The collapse of Roman authority left a vacuum that was filled by the emergence of new kingdoms and constant invasion.[5] In this fragile context, Christianity faced powerful internal and external pressures that required theological defense and doctrinal consolidation, and ultimately uniquely influenced the formation of JD's intellectual legacy.

One of the events that occurred during this period was the rise of Islam. The power of this new religion expanded rapidly throughout the Mediterranean, encroaching on traditionally Christian territories. The conquests of the Islamic empires quickly led to the integration of historic Christian strongholds, such as Syria and Palestine. The Umayyad Caliphate brought Christians under Islamic rule and subjected the Christian faith to political control and oppression.

Writing from the heart of the Islamic empire, JD responded to this challenge directly by engaging Islamic teachings in his works, particularly in chapter 101 of *On Heresies*[6] (OH), from *The Fountain of Knowledge* and *Disputation between a Christian*

[4] The concept of the "dark ages" was first coined by an Italian scientist named Petrarch. He considered the period after the collapse of the Western Roman Empire to be "dark" because of the economic, intellectual, and cultural decline. Petrarch contrasted it with the classical antiquity which he considered "bright" because it was marked by advances in knowledge and culture. See Bard Thompson, *Humanists and Reformers: A History of the Renaissance and Reformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 13. Modern historians also contrast the dark ages with the "light" of the Renaissance era which was marked by the growth of humanism and human rights. See Michael J. Decker, *The Byzantine Dark Ages* (London; New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 1.

[5] Theodore E. Mommsen, "Petrarch's Conception of the 'Dark Ages,'" *Speculum* 17, no. 2 (1942): 227–28.

[6] In fact, the "Ishmaelites" heretical sect was numbered 100 by JD and placed at the end of the OH chapter. In addition, the review of this sect was originally the longest among the other heretical sects. This is evidence that for JD it was very important to refute several Islamic teachings that were considered to attack Christian teachings. However, several editors and translators of his work included several other heretical sects attributed to JD (although their authenticity is somewhat doubtful), so that the Ishmaelites sect was not always numbered 100 and was also not placed at the end of the OH chapter. Because this article uses Chase's translation book which places the Ishmaelites heresy at number 101, the author follows Chase's numbering. Regarding the length of the explanation of the heretical sects, there are also several sects that are described at length in Chase's translation version, but in JD's original work they are only explained briefly. Several translators and editors added

and a Saracen. He framed Islam as a heretical sect by highlighting the differences between Christian teachings on the Trinity and Islamic monotheism. Apologetics and Islamic studies scholar Daniel J. Janosik points out JD's approach as a systematic defense of Christian doctrine in response to Islamic criticisms. At the same time, he sought to clarify and preserve core Christian beliefs in the face of emerging alternative theological schools.[7]

The Dark Ages were also marked by theological conflicts within Christianity, most notably the iconoclasm controversy that erupted in the Byzantine Empire in the 8th century, marked by an edict by Emperor Leo III (d. 741) prohibiting the veneration of icons.[8] Overshadowed by theological concerns about idolatry and pressure from the iconoclastic Islam, the Byzantines moved to eliminate the use of religious images in worship. Iconoclasts argued that the veneration of icons violated the commandment against idolatry. [9]

This view was strongly opposed by JD. In his treatises defending icons, JD articulated a theology that sanctioned the veneration of images, asserting that icons serve as spiritual aids that help believers connect with God. This position was deeply rooted in his belief in the Incarnation, which he argued made possible the depiction of Christ and other holy figures. An expert in Orthodox Christian theology, Andrew Louth elaborates JD's defense of icons by noting his view that icons have been an integral part of the Christian tradition of piety and doctrine for centuries.[10]

Further shaping the intellectual context of JD was the role of the Church as a central institution in the preservation of knowledge and the continuity of culture.[11]

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these explanations from other sources (although, once again, their authenticity is somewhat doubtful) for practical reasons, namely to summarize the thoughts of JD (or Pseudo-JD) in one place.

[7] Daniel J. Janosik, *John of Damascus, First Apologist to the Muslims: The Trinity and Christian Apologetics in the Early Islamic Period* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2016), xiii.

[8] Warren Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 350, 352–53.

[9] Brenda Mariana Méndez-Gallardo, "Imago Dei: The Functionality of the Divine Image in John of Damascus," in *John of Damascus: More than a Compiler*, ed. Scott Ables (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2023), 172–75.

[10] Andrew Louth, *St John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 11–14, 27, 193–208.

[11] While some historians consider the Middle Ages to be the dark ages of Christianity, others see it as a bright side. This is because during this period, monastic communities grew up that played a role in preserving and even developing science so that its legacy can be enjoyed by human civilization to this day. See Kathleen Verdun, "Medievalism," in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, ed. William C. Jordan (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2004), 389–97. This is to show that historical facts are something

With political fragmentation throughout Europe and the East, monastic communities emerged as guardians of Christian education and learning. Monasteries became centers for the copying of manuscripts, the preservation of theological writings, and the development of monastic intellectual traditions. This environment provided the resources JD needed for his extensive theological work, most notably The Fountain of Knowledge. In this work, he synthesized centuries of Christian doctrine, offering a comprehensive systematization of theology that clarified the faith and served as a teaching tool.[12]

Byzantine historian and scholar Vassa Kontouma highlights the importance of monastic support in the thought of the JD. She notes that the JD's systematic theological vision reflected the preservation of knowledge that flourished in monastic monasteries amid the Dark Ages of Christianity.[13] This allows JD to address complex doctrinal issues and answer practical theological questions, especially for Christians living under Islamic rule.

John of Damascus's life and writings underscore the resilience of Christian thought during the Dark Ages. His works reflect a period in which Christianity, despite the threats of Islamic expansion and internal doctrinal conflicts, found ways to defend, articulate, and preserve its faith. In his introduction to *John of Damascus: More Than a Compiler*, Oregon State University scholar Scott Ables explores JD's unique position as a synthesizer of patristic wisdom and a reformer of contemporary theology. Ables argues that JD's contributions helped shape Christian doctrine and provided the intellectual foundation for later Byzantine and Eastern Orthodox theological developments.[14]

In short, the dark ages of Christianity provided the context for JD as a theologian who bridged the legacy of classical Christian teaching with the challenges of a changing world. Theological apologetics, especially against Islam and iconoclasm,

complex so they should not be simplified into just black or white. See Rabia Umar Ali, "Medieval Europe: The Myth of Dark Ages and the Impact of Islam," *Islamic Studies* 51, no. 2 (2012): 155–68.

[12] Robert Volk, "The Greek Lives of St John Damascene: Common Information, Differences, and Historical Value," in *John of Damascus: More than a Compiler*, ed. Scott Ables (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2023), 24–27, 34–35; Janosik, *John of Damascus, First Apologist to the Muslims: The Trinity and Christian Apologetics in the Early Islamic Period*, 31–35.

[13] Vassa Kontouma, *John of Damascus: New Studies on His Life and Works* (London; New York: Routledge, 2016), bab 1, 18–23.

[14] Scott Ables, "Introduction," in *John of Damascus: More than a Compiler*, ed. Scott Ables (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2023), 3–4.

embodies the adaptive power of Christian doctrine over time. Through his works, JD upheld and preserved the core beliefs of Christianity and ensured their continuity despite the challenges of the era. His efforts not only helped shape Byzantine theology but also ensured that the Christian intellectual tradition survived beyond the Dark Ages.

The Golden Age of Islam

While on the one hand Christianity experienced darkness, on the other hand Islam created a strong and dynamic intellectual and religious culture. Islam, which flourished since the seventh and eighth centuries, became a unique context for the life and thought of JD. The expansion of the Islamic Caliphate brought together various cultural and intellectual traditions from the former territories of the Byzantine Empire and Persia. The Islamic Caliphate established itself as a significant political and cultural force, stretching across the Middle East, North Africa, and parts of Europe. This period was the era of the transformation of Damascus—the origin of JD himself—into the capital of the Umayyad Caliphate.[15]

This era gave birth to a society marked by the idea that religion and philosophy were intertwined and developed in unprecedented ways. This early Islamic society valued learning, encouraging the translation and study of Greek, Persian, and Indian texts. In this environment, thinkers sought to combine rational thought with Islamic theology, and the Islamic world witnessed the development of innovative schools of thought, one of the most influential of which was the Mu'tazilah.[16]

The Mu'tazilah movement emphasized the use of reason in understanding theological principles and was instrumental in the intellectual achievements of Islamic civilization, contributing to the period known as the Golden Age of Islam. The Mu'tazilah school, which emerged in the 8th century, championed reason and rationalism, asserting that human intellect could be used to understand the nature of God and the ethical dimensions of life. This rationalist approach was an important development in Islamic thought, as the Mu'tazilah emphasized the oneness of God, human free will, and the importance of ethical action. Their approach fostered an

[15] Janosik, *John of Damascus, First Apologist to the Muslims: The Trinity and Christian Apologetics in the Early Islamic Period*, 25–29.

[16] Janosik, 80–81.

environment for the development of systematic theological discourse, prioritizing coherent and logical beliefs of faith and individual moral accountability.[17]

As Kontouma notes in his writings, the theological climate under Islamic rule was one of intellectual dynamism. At that time, rational inquiry was a respected and encouraged means of exploring religious truth. This rationalist discourse influenced Islamic society more broadly and created an environment of scholarly dialogue that would influence JD's approach to religious debate and apologetics.[18]

JD himself lived and worked within the Umayyad Caliphate. Society at that time generally valued intellectual engagement, although JD approached it from a Christian monastic tradition. His works, especially those on Islam, reflect a distinctive understanding of Islamic theology. It is likely that this was influenced by his exposure to the rationalist discourse that existed in society at that time.

In his texts, such as *The Heresy of the Ishmaelites* and *Disputation between a Christian and a Saracen*, JD criticized aspects of Islamic belief with an emphasis on logical analysis and theological rigor. This approach reflected the intellectual culture of the time, which was partly shaped by the Mu'tazilite emphasis on reason. Daniel J. Sahas, an expert on Byzantine and Islamic history, notes in his study that JD's apologetic writings used systematic arguments and logical critiques.[19] This is in line with the rationalist methods valued in the Islamic intellectual tradition. It can be underlined how JD adapted his arguments to appeal to the society of that time which was heavily influenced by rationalist theology.

The Mu'tazilite contribution also led to the codification and systematic development of Islamic theology (*kalam*) which created a theological framework for engaging in interfaith discourse. This codified theology became an important part of Islamic intellectual life, encouraging structured debates on the attributes of divinity, human responsibility, and the nature of good and evil. These topics would have been familiar to JD as he composed his responses to Islamic criticisms of Christianity. The influence of the Mu'tazilite rational approach extended to debates on the nature of the Qur'an, namely whether it was created or not, and other complex theological questions.[20] In his book, Louth discusses how the cultural environment shaped by

[17] Janosik, 84–87; Daniel J. Sahas, *Byzantium and Islam: Collected Studies on Byzantine-Muslim Encounters* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2022), 325.

[18] Kontouma, *John of Damascus,* bab 2, 15.

[19] Sahas, *Byzantium and Islam*, 367, 369–71.

[20] Sahas, 376–79.

Islamic theological rationalism likely influenced JD's strategy of engaging with Islamic beliefs through critique and comparison. This enabled him to engage effectively with the evolving intellectual climate while preserving Christian doctrine.[21]

Thus, the intellectual brilliance of early Islamic civilization, fueled by the Mu'tazilite commitment to rationality, provides the context for the depth and complexity of JD's theological work. He engaged with Islamic beliefs not only as a defender of Christian doctrine but as a thinker operating within a rationalist framework that was in tune with the values of his time. The Islamic world's dedication to scientific inquiry and rationalism indirectly shaped JD's apologetic method, ensuring that his responses were strong, logically grounded, and relevant to his contemporary audience. Peter Schadler, a scholar of Byzantine and Early Christian history, notes that JD's engagement with Islamic thought demonstrates his capacity to adapt Christian theological defense to meet the demands of a rapidly evolving religious intellectual landscape.[22] His works testify to the unique intellectual exchange between Christianity and Islam during the early centuries of the Islamic faith. They also reflect the profound influence of Islamic rationalist thought on Christian theologians living under the political rule of the Islamic caliphate.

The rise of Islam and the triumph of its rationalist movement, particularly through the contributions of the Mu'tazilite school, created fertile ground for theological debate and interfaith exchange. JD, living in the heart of this cultural and intellectual center, responded to this environment with theological insights shaped by the Christian tradition and a keen awareness of Islamic rationalist principles. For JD, this meant that the context of his theological work was shaped not only by Christian doctrinal concerns but also by the need to respond to Islamic theological and philosophical advances. As Janosik explains, JD's engagement with Islamic beliefs was not merely reactive; rather, it was a proactive effort to defend Christian doctrine in a rapidly evolving Islamic intellectual environment that questioned key tenets of Christianity, such as the divinity of Christ and the Trinity.[23]

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[21] Louth, *St John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology*, 10–12.

[22] Peter Schadler, *John of Damascus and Islam: Christian Heresiology and the Intellectual Background to Earliest Christian-Muslim Relations* (Leiden; Boston, MA: Brill, 2018), 6, 11.

[23] Daniel J. Janosik, "John of Damascus: Preparing Christians for the Coming Age of Islam," in *The History of Apologetics: A Biographical and Methodological Introduction*, ed. Benjamin K. Forrest, Josh Chatraw, and Alister E. McGrath, edisi e-pub (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 282–85.

JOHN OF DAMASCUS' EFFORTS TO MAINTAIN THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA IN DIALOGUE WITH ISLAM

In his writings, namely *On Heresies* and *The Orthodox Faith*,[24] JD defends the teachings of the Council of Nicaea which affirms the divinity of Jesus Christ. This view clashes with Islamic teachings which view Jesus as a prophet who is only fully human. JD not only defends the Christian faith, but also shows how Christian doctrine contradicts the Islamic understanding of Jesus.

One of the main things that JD maintains is the divinity of Jesus Christ as the Son of God. The Council of Nicaea affirmed that Jesus was not just an ordinary human being, but also truly God. JD rejects the Islamic view that considers Jesus only as a blessed prophet.[25] For him, the recognition of the divinity of Jesus is not merely dogma, but the core of the Christian faith. JD argued that if Jesus were only a man, then His work of salvation would not have the divine power to save humanity as Christians believe.[26]

In addition, JD also defends the unity of the essence of Jesus with God the Father. The Council of Nicaea stated that Jesus was "of one essence" with the Father (*homoousios*), meaning that He had the same divine substance. This view is contrary to Islamic teachings which reject the concept of the Trinity and affirm the absolute oneness of God (*tawhid*) both in essence and in person.[27] JD sees this difference as a fundamental theological issue. In Islamic belief, Jesus is a human being who is blessed and elevated by God, but is not united with the divine essence. JD asserts that without this unity, the salvation offered by Jesus would lose its meaning.[28]

In addition to defending the divinity of Jesus, JD also rejects the idea that Jesus was a created being, which is commonly believed by Muslims. The Council of Nicaea asserted that Jesus was "begotten, not made," meaning that he existed from eternity and was not part of creation. Islam, on the other hand, teaches that Jesus was a

[24] "The Orthodox Faith" (hereinafter abbreviated as TOF) is a commonly used abbreviation of the full title "An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith". TOF was originally written in Greek and has been translated into various languages. Throughout this article, the author refers to one of the English translation versions, namely *The Fathers of the Church: Saint John of Damascus Writings*.

[25] Al-Qur'an Surah (hereinafter abbreviated as Q.S.) 19:4,16. All references to the Qur'an in this writing refer to *Al-Qur'an dan Terjemahannya* (Jakarta: Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf al-Qur'an Badan Litbang dan Diklat Kementerian Agama RI, 2019).

[26] TOF, book 4, chapter 1, par. 1.

[27] Q.S. 112.

[28] TOF, book 1, chapter 2, par. 2.

creature created by God like the other prophets.[29] JD rejects this view by asserting that Jesus has always existed from the beginning with the Father, not created at a particular point in time.

One of JD's sharpest criticisms of Islam was his assumption that Muhammad was influenced by a monk who held Arian beliefs.[30] Arianism itself is precisely the heretical teaching that was rejected by the Council of Nicaea because it stated that Jesus was only a created being.[31] Even though he is superior to humans in general, the essence of Jesus is still lower than God. JD sees similarities between the teachings of Islam and Arianism in the rejection of the divinity of Jesus. He argues that Islam, like Arianism, fails to understand the true nature of Christ and falls into the same doctrinal error.[32]

From JD's various defenses of the teachings of the Council of Nicaea, it is clear that he not only defended the Christian faith, but also placed Islam in the broader context of theological history. He saw Islam as a theological challenge that had to be answered with arguments that had been formulated in previous church debates. Therefore, JD was not only a Christian apologist, but also a thinker who tried to bridge the debate between two different religious traditions.

THE RELEVANCE OF JOHN OF DAMASCUS' THOUGHTS TO THE CURRENT SITUATION

Although more than twelve centuries have passed, JD's thoughts remain relevant in the context of modern times, especially in facing theological challenges and interfaith dialogue. One of the main lessons from his approach is a new way of dealing with theological differences, especially for minority groups amidst the dominance of the majority. In an increasingly pluralistic world, the Christian apologetic approach no longer relies on political power or coercive action, but rather emphasizes intellectual dialogue and the delivery of rational arguments.

[29] Q.S. 19:4,16

[30] OH, no. 101, par. 1.

[31] Scott Ables, "Development in Theological Method and Argument in John of Damascus," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 28, no. 4 (2020): 629, https://doi.org/10.1353/earl.2020.0043; Leo Donald Davis, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils (325-787): Their History and Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1988), 61–62.

[32] Janosik, *John of Damascus, First Apologist to the Muslims: The Trinity and Christian Apologetics in the Early Islamic Period*, 237–66.

JD shows that fighting heresy should not be done with violence, but with mature thinking and constructive dialogue. In the modern era, this approach is increasingly important because religious conflicts are often accompanied by polarization and social tension. The church and any religious institution can no longer (and is also irrelevant) to rely on political authority to suppress teachings that are considered deviant. Instead, strong and rational arguments become the main weapon in defending the faith.

One strategy taught by JD is to deeply understand the teaching that is being challenged before attempting to refute it. This requires serious intellectual effort in getting to know the opponent's thoughts fairly and objectively. Misunderstanding the theological position of the other party can lead to weak and ineffective arguments. With better understanding, dialogue not only becomes more meaningful, but also has a better chance of producing constructive understanding.

In addition to being a form of defense, apologetics also serves to strengthen faith and build the collectivity of the people proactively. Fighting heresy is not only about maintaining orthodoxy, but also strengthening the understanding of faith for the existing community. When a teaching is tested with critical arguments, the faithful actually have the opportunity to deepen their beliefs. Healthy theological discussions can also form a more solid religious identity and be aware of its doctrinal foundations.

However, JD also provides an important lesson in approaching religious differences. Rather than exaggerating differences polemically, he teaches the importance of finding common ground as a basis for dialogue. In a multicultural and multireligious society, a more open approach and seeking common ground will be more effective in building harmonious relationships.

Finally, an attitude of respect for the differences in other religious views is also an important part of the modern world. JD himself, although critical of Islam, lives in coexistence with the Muslim community without inciting violence. In an increasingly global society, this attitude is becoming increasingly relevant. Recognizing differences and tolerating their existence to some extent is the key to peace and a prosperous life together.

Thus, JD offers a model of apologetics that is not only defensive but also constructive. He teaches that defending the faith is not only about denying other teachings, but also deepening one's own beliefs, building healthy dialogue, and

encouraging peaceful coexistence. In a world full of differences, this approach is increasingly important in building a harmonious religious life.

CONCLUSION

John of Damascus emerges as a key theological figure who bridged the patristic legacy of the Church with the intellectual challenges posed by the rise of Islam. His defense of Nicene orthodoxy, especially the divinity of Christ and the unity of substance with the Father, directly opposed Islamic conceptions of Jesus as merely human. JD's engagement with Islam was not simply polemical; it demonstrated a deep understanding of Islamic theology and employed rational argumentation characteristic of the Mu'tazilite influence of his time.

His writings show that theological defense need not rely on coercion or political power, but on intellectual clarity and respectful critique. JD offers a model of apologetics that is both firm in faith and open to rigorous dialogue—qualities urgently needed in today's religiously diverse and often polarized world. In this sense, his thought provides a valuable resource for contemporary Christian theology, especially in contexts of interfaith relations, where understanding and coexistence are as important as doctrinal fidelity.

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