

The Rise of Orthodoxy's Encounter with Islam

Alexander Kariotoglou

Abstract: The Orthodox Church was the first to come into contact with Islam. The presence of the Byzantine Empire, and therefore of the Orthodox Church in the northern regions of Arabia, created some of the presuppositions for the Church's influence upon the Islamic tradition, as also did the presence of Christian communities in the south. The present article will examine echoes of the Orthodox Christian tradition that can be detected in the verses of the Koran.

MODERN TECHNOLOGY and the way in which relations between peoples are formed have created numerous dilemmas for leaders of the great religions and their representatives in general. All proceed towards creating openings and highlight the need for rapprochement and bilateral dialogue so that they can confront foundational questions and problems that arise in the contemporary human context. Knowledge of the past is mandatory for the survival of the present and for the mapping out of a strategic plan for the future and for the development of theological thought.

The Orthodox Church, which not only neighbours the Islamic world, but whose members also live in predominantly Muslim inhabited communities, is conscious of the need to approach Islam in ways different from the past¹ for the following reasons:

- a) it is the first of the Christian Churches to come in contact with Islam;²

1. The Ecumenical Patriarchate has for some years now undertaken an intense activity of dialogue with Islam. In February, 2002, the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew visited Iran (at this visit, the writer was also present) and came into contact with officials of Shi'ite Islam with the aim of commencing dialogue. The need for meetings of theologians, scholars and people of the arts was emphasised so that discussions could take place on matters common to both parties.

2. "Living closer to the cradle of the Islamic world, the Byzantines were able to come to know Islam from their own sources, something which took place much later in the case of the Christians of the West, who geographically and socio-politically lived further away" (Anastasios, Archbishop of Tirana and Albania, *Globalisation and Orthodoxy* [Athens: 2000] 200).

- b) the Orthodox faithful were the first to receive the invitation from Islam and developed their own mechanisms of defence or dialogue with Muslims;³
- c) Orthodoxy's wounds are fresh regarding the wave of conversions to Islam;
- d) Islam has been influenced by Orthodoxy in many respects in relation to its religious traditions and customs;
- e) both religions, attached as they are to their customs, confront common problems in their encounter with modern civilisation;
- f) the need for sufficient knowledge of the history of the relations of Orthodoxy with the Islamic world is great. This has particular significance not only for the Orthodox, but also for the Western world, as it could lead to a deeper knowledge of the history of relations between the Eastern and Western Churches.

1. GENERAL PRINCIPLES ON THE RELATION OF CHRISTIANITY WITH ISLAM

Islam is considered the third in the order of Abrahamic religions. The term "Abrahamic religion" comes from the fact of being founded on a monotheistic character of religion which Abraham was the first to form and from which Judaism arose, on which the "Revelation in Christ" was sustained, and lastly on which the foundations of the Islamic religion are constituted. A common point of reference for all three religions is *the acceptance of the one God*, revealed in the Old Testament as Creator who sustains the world, as revealing his will to human beings through the prophets and other signs. A common point for Christianity and Islam is the *universality and ecumenicity* of their teaching as a basic message of God towards the world. A basic difference of Christianity from Islam and Judaism constitutes the person of the incarnated Logos, whom the latter two religions fail to understand as God Incarnate. Therefore, as we have noted above, the common points of reference of all three religions were able to create a historical symbiosis, but at the same time equally fostered an unhealthy religious intolerance at the phenomenological level.

To appreciate the historical difference of action taken between these two worlds – the Orthodox and the Islamic – mention must be made of the entirely different way in which they understood their presence in the world. Christianity understood and understands the role of religion as a clearly spiritual event. The Orthodox, in particular, made a clear

3. C. Guterbock, *Der Islam im Lichte der byzantinischen Polemik* (Berlin: Guttentag, 1912); W. Eichner, "Die Nachrichten über den Islam bei den Byzantinern", *Der Islam* 23 (1936), 133-62, 197-244; J. Meyendorff, "Byzantine views of Islam", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 18 (1964), 115-32; Adel Théodore Khoury, *Les théologiens byzantins et l'Islam. Textes et auteurs* (VIIIe-XIIIe s.) 2e triage, (Louvain and Paris: Editions "Nauwelaerts", 1969); idem, *Der theologische Streit der Byzantiner mit dem Islam* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1969).

distinction between the political and the religious authority: the political authority was distinguished from the religious as to its aims and its nature.⁴ The political authority is self-existent; it aspires to the direction of human society by the merciful God.⁵ That is to say, there exists a sanctification of the political power without its being identified with the religious authority. In Islam, on the contrary, the political and spiritual authorities are identified. The Caliph is at the same time a political figure, the protector and guarantor of the harmony of the teachings of the Koran.⁶ The ideal system by which Islamic societies are governed is theocracy⁷ and tolerance of otherness is minimal.⁸ Outside of the Christian and Jewish societies, in respect to which there does exist a relative tolerance, every other religious group is not welcomed.⁹

2. THE CHRISTIAN PRESENCE IN NORTH ARABIA

The area of North Arabia, a place that belonged many times to the Byzantine Empire, saw many a contest between Christian groups, with a variety of dogmatic nuances. Sparse references in several ecclesiastical

4. Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972) 49.

5. Steven Runciman, *The Byzantine Theocracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) 5.

6. On this issue we point out that German scholarship widely differs from that of English speaking scholars. Whereas the German school of thought would contend that the development of the Islamic religion coincided with political expansion, English-speaking scholars would argue that the sources reveal that any form of religious development is purely speculative and not historically based. Tilman Nagel maintains: "So kann der von den alten Prophetengenossen gestiftete Herrschertitel 'Kalif', auf Mu'awija angewandt, nicht mehr den 'Stellvertreter des Gottesgesandten' meinen, sondern den 'Stellvertreter Gottes' (*halifat Allah*), ganz wie es die omajjadische Hofdichtung bezeugt. Gott selber, und zwar ohne Vermittlung durch den Propheten, hat den Omajjaden die Herrschergewalt anvertraut." *Geschichte der islamischen Theologie: Von Mohammed bis zur Gegenwart* (München: C. H. Beck, 1994) 42. The same author notes: "die These vom Zurückbleiben der religiösen Entwicklung, die den Islam auf die ihm angesonnene gesellschaftliche Funktion schrumpfen lässt, scheint in der Auffassung einiger vorwiegend englischsprachiger Autoren nachzuklingen, die gesamte Frühgeschichte des Islams sei ein Hirngespinnst des 8. und 9. Jahrhunderts. Da die Quellen dieser "speculative reconstruction of the evolution of the religion" entgegenstehen, müssen sie für später Erfindung erklärt werden." *Geschichte der islamischen Theologie*, 274.

7. T. W. Arnold, *The Caliphate*, New Edition with a Concluding Chapter by S. G. Haim (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1966); Ulrich Schoen, "Die Gesellschaft im Islam: Theokratie", in Michael Fitzgerald, Adel Théodore Khoury and Werner Wanzura (eds.), *Mensch, Welt, Staat im Islam* (Graz-Wien-Köln: Verlag Styria, 1977) 103-49.

8. The Greek word "theocracy" is generally understood as that system of government in which "God rules", meaning that the law of God is the basic law of government. That which Islam understands and which, according to our opinion, is one perspective of theocracy, is described by the Islamic scholar, Muhammad Hamidullah, in his book, *Der Islam – Geschichte, Religion, Kultur* (1968), cited in Schoen, "Die Gesellschaft im Islam", 106.

9. One must admit, however, that today conditions have changed in many countries of South and South-Eastern Asia, with many other countries inclining towards this change.

writers of the first centuries indicate the appearance of organised Christian communities in the area that is now southern Syria.¹⁰

In the time of Origen (third century, CE) many Christian communities are mentioned in cities south of Charan and the Dead Sea, organised in dioceses. Well known to historians of the Church is the episcopate of Bostron, which Eusebius the historian characterises as a "metropolis of Arabia". The same writer mentions bishop Beryllos of Bostron, known from letters and writings, who in 240 caused a sensation for his position on the christological question: he rejected the pre-existence of Christ before the time of his divine Incarnation. In examining this event, the historian, Adolf von Harnack argued that the support of such a position on the side of the Arab Christians has to be understood as "an expression of one ethnic Christian spirit". By this he meant that it is an expression of an Arabic spiritual understanding of the christological dogma which came into confrontation with the Greek mode of thought, with which the teaching on the pre-existence of Jesus Christ was always in agreement.¹¹

The existence of Christian communities in cities which were found in southern and south-eastern regions of the Dead Sea is attested also by the *Onomastikon* of Eusebius (fourth century)¹² and from the Minutes of the First Ecumenical Council in Nicaea (325). Finally Epiphanius (fourth century) mentions that there were Christians in the city of Gerasa (according to Eusebius and Ieronymos, a "city of Arabia"). The Symbol of faith of Seleukia¹³ (mid fourth century) provides evidence of a diocese in that city since the minutes are signed by Bishop Exeresius.

The presence of Christians in south Arabia before the appearance of Islam¹⁴ is supported by two other facts. The first is that Arabia found itself in constant contact with the Byzantine eparchies of the Middle East on account of Christian and Jewish merchants, always factors in the spread of religious ideas.¹⁵ The second is that Mohammed in his preaching attempted to give answers to particular tensions existing among Christians, answers recorded in the Koran in order to confront the tensions of the Christians, many of whom lived in these regions.

10. A. N. Stratos, *Byzantium in the VIIth Century* (Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 1968); Chrysostomos Papadopoulos, *History of the Church of Alexandria* (Alexandria: 1935); El Hasan bin Talal, *Christianity in the Arab World* (New York: Continuum: 1998).

11. A. Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries* (Enlarged and revised edition; 2 vols. London: Williams and Norgate, 1908) 1.40.

12. Eusebius, *Onomastikon, Stoicheion* 3. See Erich Klostermann, *Eusebius Werke. Bd. III: Das Onomastikon* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1904).

13. See J. Labourt, "Le Christianisme dans l'Empire perse", *Annuaire pontifical catholique* ([Paris] 1914), 450-54, 471-72.

14. J. Spencer Trimingham, *Christianity Among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times* (London and New York: Longman, 1979). See Irfan Shahid, *Byzantium and the Semitic Orient before the Rise of Islam* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1988) 25-94.

15. See I. M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 198.

To the question as to why the Christian communities were not able to increase, so that the Church might blossom in these areas of northern Arabia, several considerations may be urged.

First, Islam swept through every religious community which existed before in the region of Arabia, forcing the adherents to become Muslims. Resistance to this sweep of Islam was inhibited by the fact that north Arabia constituted the place of refuge of all those exiled from the Byzantine state¹⁶ who were bearers of heretical religious ideas and dogmatic tenets. A variety of heretical teachings existed in that region and it is for this reason that the Arabs gained a confused image of the Christian teaching.¹⁷ The neo-Nestorians and the Monophysites had, it is true, developed significant missionary activity a century before the appearance of Islam. Many Arab tribes had welcomed Christianity and had indeed established two Christian states: the Monophysite state of Gasanides, east of Palestine, and the neo-Nestorian state of Lahmides near the Euphrates, with the city of Chira as its centre. The people of Gasanides fought on the side of the Byzantines and those of Lahmides on the side of the Persians. Scholars speak of a chain of misinterpretations which poisoned the relations of the Byzantines and Arabs and prepared the way for the subsequent rallying of the latter around Islam.

3. CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES IN THE PRE-ISLAMIC REGION OF SOUTH ARABIA

The region of South Arabia, known to the Greco-Roman world as Eudaimon Arabia or Arabia Felix, was the epicentre of cosmetic trade between the Red Sea and India. It is for this reason that the great powers of the ancient world saw it as a geographic region of military significance. The privileged position of this region favoured the creation of states with a long life lasting up to the seventh century CE. The important kingdoms were those of Ma'in with capital city Qarnaw, of Saba with capital city Ma'rib, and of Qataban with capital city Shabwah. From 115 BCE the tribe of Himyar reigned in the kingdom of the Himyarites, the capital city being Tadar.

16. R. Bell, *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment*, (London: Macmillan, 1926); François Nau, *Les Arabes Chrétiens de Mesopotamie et de Syrie du VIIe VIIIe siècle* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1933); John F. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century: the Transformation of a Culture* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 348-50; Isrun Engelhardt, *Mission und Politik in Byzanz. Ein Beitrag zur Strukturanalyse byzantinischer Mission zur Zeit Justins und Justinians* (MBM 19; München: Institut für Byzantinistik und neugriechische Philologie der Universität, 1974) 12-16.

17. One such image of confusion may be given to us by the information of Epiphanius who states that "the Virgin was venerated at a pagan temple within the city of Petra (the major city of Arabia) and she was addressed by the name of 'Chaabou' which in the Arabic dialect means 'Daughter' which furthermore means a 'virgin'; and the one who was born of her was called 'Dousaris' which means 'the only begotten of the Lord'." (51, 22).

As to the religious identity of south Arabia, we must note that, besides idolatry, Judaism had been introduced there by Jews who had established themselves in the region and attempted to spread their faith. From the fourth century many historians mention the presence of Christians. During the fifth century Christian communities had been formed from Southern Arabs primarily in the city of Najran and perhaps in other regions. As to the way the Christian faith was spread in the region of the Himyarites, the different sources do not agree since they come from different religious environments.¹⁸ In the "Nestorian Chronicles" we find mention of a certain Chanan, who was a merchant from Najran and carried out some missionary work in his country. Parallel to this, the Arab tradition considers the Monophysite monk Faymiyun as the missionary of the Southern Arabs, whereas the Ethiopian edition informs us the bearer of the Good News in Najran was some Azkir who preached and was martyred in the fifth century. For many researchers Chanan was Orthodox since he was active before the synod of Ephesus and Chalcedon.

In the middle of the sixth century, king Dhu-Nawas of the Jewish religion of the state of the Himyarites, proclaimed a persecution against the Christians.¹⁹ Justinian, the Byzantine Emperor, urged Elesbaan, the leader of the Ethiopians, to mobilise against the Himyarites to protect the Christians. Two expeditions in 520 and 525 were crowned with success and the first Christian Himyarite State was formed with Esimaphaeus as the first Himyarite Christian king. This state lasted until 570-75 when it was destroyed by the Persians. The successor of Esimaphaeus, Abraha, "connected his name with attempts of self reign of the country from the Ethiopic guardianship and attempted to bridge Himyarite and Byzantine relations, to turn over the official religious politics from monophysiticism to Chalcedonian Orthodoxy and to Christianise the surrounding peoples".²⁰ Another name appearing in this same period is that of Bishop Gregentius, the first Archbishop of the Christian Himyarite State, who is considered the Evangelist of the Himyarites. To him is attributed the compilation of a series of laws with the title, "Laws of the Himyarites",²¹ which formed the basis for an organised Christian state in Southern Arabia. One could claim that

18. Athanasios Papathanasiou, *The Laws of the Himyarites: A Missionary Approach and a Historical-Legal Contribution* (Athens-Komotini: 1994).

19. J. W. Hirschberg, "Nestorian Sources of the North-Arabian Traditions on the Establishment and Persecution of Christianity in Yemen", *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* (Krakow) 15 (1949), 335-338.

20. Athanasios Papathanasiou, *Laws of the Himyarites*, 38.

21. The "Leges" have been published in PG 86: 567-784. See also J. B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire from the Death of Theodosius I to the Death of Justinian (A. D. 395 to A. D. 565)* (2 vols.; London: Macmillan, 1923) 2.327, 412-13; Irfan Sahid, "Byzantium in South Arabia" in *Byzantium and the Semitic Orient before the Rise of Islam* (note 14 above) 25-94.

these laws established a type of “religious totalitarianism” based entirely on a theocratic totalitarian establishment.

King Abraha wanted to destroy the pre-Islamic temple of Kaaba and to this end launched a campaign against Mecca, which was governed by the Quraysh tribe from which Mohammed had his origins. During these battles the army of the Himyarites was destroyed. An echo of this event is mentioned in 105 *Surah* (chapter) of the Koran (The Elephant):

Have you not considered how God dealt with the Army of the Elephant? Did He not confound their stratagem and send against them flocks of birds which pelted them with clay-stones, so that they became like the withered stalks of plants which cattle have devoured?²²

The above text of the Koran maintains that the Southern Arab Christians were conquered because the holy city of Mecca was protected by God on account of the Kaaba. The Quraysh had to reject idolatry and to worship the only true God whom the prophet of Islam proclaimed.

As mentioned above, the Christian state of the Himyarites was destroyed with the capture of Southern Arabia by the Persians around 570-75. The Christian community of Najran, on the other hand, prospered until 641 CE when Caliph Umar persecuted the Christians and forced them to leave their country. They migrated into today’s Iraq and Syria. In the city of San’a the Christian Church continued until the ninth century.

4. THE ECHOES OF THE CHRISTIAN ORTHODOX TRADITION WITHIN THE SACRED BOOK OF ISLAM

The Koran preserves a series of biblical narratives and Christian traditions foundational for the Islamic religion. Moreover, despite the fact that many Koranic texts reflect origin in a Nestorian or Monophysite environment, it is possible to ascertain a presence of Orthodox Christian elements that are indicative of a Byzantine influence in the milieu from which the Koran emerged.

Beyond any doubt, the Koran echoes a multitude of Christian concepts.²³ The traditions that mention the relation between Mohammed and a certain Nestorian monk by the name of Bahira, and consequently also of other Christian monks from the East, as described by many Byzantine writers, are not far from the truth, though various scholars

22. For the Koran I have used the fifth revised edition of N. J. Dawood’s translation: *The Koran* (reprinted with minor revisions; London: Penguin Books, 2003).

23. See J. Henninger, *Spüren christlicher Glaubenswahrheiten im Koran* (Schöneck Beckenried: 1951); H. Speyer, *Die biblische Erzählungen im Qoran* (Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1961).

remain sceptical concerning these.²⁴ Nevertheless, Sprenger thinks that Bahira remained with Mohammed, and that there is an allusion to a monk in the Koran, *Surah* 16, 105: "We know they say 'A mortal taught him'."²⁵ This is one of the many instances in which a Koran text that has no *Sitz im Leben* is given a plausible one in the exegetical tradition.

When we examine the basic theological line of thought of the Koran, we ascertain that there is "a constant mystical dialogue between the author and Christian concepts",²⁶ though many of these ideas remain undeveloped and do not follow what would seem to a Christian reader the logic of the thoughts enunciated.

In the following I shall attempt to present certain brief references that can be ascertained within the Koran, affirming the fact that to a certain degree these are founded on the theological and ecclesiastical tradition of Orthodoxy.²⁷

4.1 The Theotokos and Jesus

Of particular interest is the narrative that specifically refers to the mother of Christ and to Jesus himself:

24. F. Buhl, for example, expresses doubt over Mohammed's commercial visits to Palestine (*Das Leben Muhammads* [Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Gesellschaft, 1961] 391). However, it is important not to overlook the fact that many traditions are grounded historically. As the well-known historian on Islam, Ira M. Lapidus states, "Mohammed worked as a caravaner.... The revelation in the Koran bore important similarities to Christianity and Judaism. For Mohammed the revelations came from the same source. Christian parallels are evident in the articulation of Mohammed's vision of the last judgement – the prediction that it would come with thunder, trumpets, and earthquakes, that the world would be destroyed and the dead resurrected, that it would be a terrifying moment when, one by one, all men passed before God, the angels interceding only for the good. These details were found in the preaching of itinerant Syrian monks and missionaries at the fairs of Arabia" (*History of Islamic Societies*, 20). Besides, the unquestionable presence of Christian monks in the desert of the North Arabian region particularly created the biblical "wilderness" tradition which was of particular significance in sectarian history as (retrospective) program for reform and the restoration of earlier (and better) times. And, as John Wansbrough adds, "in the several patterns of sectarian formation during and after the period of Hellenist hegemony in Palestine the "wilderness" syndrome was a constant. Its presence therefore in the *sira-maghazi* (literature on Mohammed's life) literature is not without interest" (*The Sectarial Milieu* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978] 47). The lack of information regarding the presence of Christians who could have exercised an influence in the region of Hijaz during Mohammed's lifetime has perplexed scholars. However, one cannot deny that "the argument regarding the Hellenistic/Roman/Byzantine legacy was a major formative factor in the development of Islam" (*The Sectarial Milieu*, 126).

25. See Thomas Patrick Hughes, *Dictionary of Islam* (New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1885, repr. 1977) 30.

26. Anastasios, Archbishop of Albania, "The Dialogue with Islam from an Orthodox point of view" in *The Dialogue of Christianity-Islam as a Duty*, Series Oecumene 2: Dialogue and Problematic Issues 2 (Thessalonica: Paratiritis/Pro Oriente Stiftung, 1998) 82.

27. See Wilhelm Rudolph, *Die Abhängigkeit des Qorans von Judentum und Christentum* (Stuttgart: 1922) 77-80; D. Sidersky, *Les origines des légendes musulmanes dans le Coran* (Paris: Geuthner, 1933) 142.

And you shall recount in the Book the story of Mary: how she left her people and betook herself to a solitary place in the east. We sent to her Our Spirit in the semblance of a full-grown man. And when she saw him she said: "May the Merciful defend me from you! If you fear the Lord, [leave me and go your way]." "I am but your Lord's emissary," he replied, "and have come to give you a holy son." "How shall I bear a child," she answered, "when I have neither been touched by any man nor ever been unchaste?" "Thus did your Lord speak," he replied. "That is easy enough for Me. He shall be a sign to mankind and a blessing from Ourselves. Our decree [the word here is *amr*] shall come to pass'." Thereupon she conceived him, and retired to a far-off place.... Such was Jesus son of Mary. That is the whole truth, which they still doubt.²⁸

In the above narrative, the scene of the Annunciation of the Theotokos is described. Hence we are able to delineate the following points:

- a) Mariam is considered a pure daughter;
- b) An angel of God tells her that she will give birth to a "pure son";
- c) Mariam's astonishment as she has not known a man;
- d) The birth of Jesus is considered as a "Divine Sign" and "Mercy" for the Muslims. At the same time, it is the will of God.

A further point that is of great interest is the specific characterisation of Jesus as the "word of truth", whose person is considered as a "sign of contradictions". In the following verses of the *Surah*,²⁹ the Koran alludes to certain heresies that give an indication of the disputes surrounding the person of Jesus, which possibly Mohammed came to know first hand within the areas of northern Arabia. According to Western exegetes the use of the term "word" ("*amr*" in Arabic)³⁰ at specific points "seems to express a meaning of a particular cosmological hypostasis similar to that coined by the Greeks and furthermore is also identified with the judaeo-aramaic word '*memra*'."³¹ We may further note: "He sends down the angels with the spirit of his command (*amr*) upon whom he will."³² Likewise: "Yet your Lord is God, who in six

28. *Koran*, 19: 16-22, 34.

29. See the comments of Rudi Paret, *Der Koran. Kommentar und Konkordanz* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1981) 325.

30. The term "*amr*" in the language of the Koran has various meanings: "command", "decision", "principle", "object", "providence".

31. See Paret, *Der Koran*, 25.

32. *Koran*, 16:2. See Thomas O'Shaughnessy, "The Spirit from the *Amr* of the Lord", in *The Development of the Meaning of the Spirit in the Koran*, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 139 (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 1953) 33-42. J. M. S. Baljon, "The '*Amr* of God' in the Koran", *Acta Orientalia* 23 (1959), 7-18.

days created the heavens and the earth and then ascended the throne, ordaining the command (*amr*)."³³

We may delineate the deep influence that Christian teachings had upon the Koran from the following verse: "Jesus is like Adam in the sight of God. He created him from dust and then said to him: 'Be', and he was."³⁴

This parallelism between Christ and Adam constitutes a significant motif within Christian and in particular Orthodox theology. The liturgical texts of the Orthodox Church emphatically express the peculiarity of Jesus as the second Adam. Heinrich Speyer believes that such a parallelism inherent in the Koran is a direct influence of Christian teachings on Mohammed.³⁵ Another interpretation for such a parallelism is given by Thomas O'Shaughnessy, who thinks that there is a Nestorian influence within the teachings of Mohammed:

The comparison, probably based on a misinterpretation of Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15, existed in precisely that form in Nestorian teaching, as Cassian notes in attacking Nestorius: "You [Nestorius] assert the Lord Jesus to have been like in all and equal to Adam: Adam indeed (created) without seed and Jesus too without seed; the first only a man and the second, too, a man and nothing more" (Cassian, *De Incarnatione Christi*, lib 7, cap. 6 M.G. 50, col. 214).³⁶

Moreover, we are able to observe that during the period of Mohammed's ministry, many Orthodox monks within the area around Palestine were involved in a bitter struggle against the Monophysite teachings, and hence, prevalent within their teachings was the notion of Jesus Christ as the second Adam. A characteristic example that expresses this notion is the theological and spiritual work of St Anastasius the Sinaite. His work, entitled "Guide" and structured in a question and answer format, affirms: "Our Lord Jesus Christ as the second Adam, the first among our race, transformed us to be immortal, and through him the power of the ancient curse was destroyed. As death was introduced into humanity, so through humanity the resurrection of life is thus accomplished."³⁷ Therefore, the argument posed by O'Shaughnessy somewhat lacks credibility since the specific Koranic verse seems to refute ("he created him from dust") the teaching concerning the divinity of Jesus, a teaching which was not accepted by Nestorian circles. On this issue one cannot argue with utter certainty for an entirely

33. *Koran*, 10:3.

34. *Koran*, 3:59.

35. Speyer, *Die biblische Erzählungen im Qoran*, 43.

36. O'Shaughnessy, "The Spirit from the *Amr* of the Lord", 60; see also his, *The Koranic Concept of the Word of God* (Biblica et Orientalia 1; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1948) 55.

37. *PG*, 89.

“Orthodox” or “Nestorian” hermeneutic. Whatever the case may be, we can state that the Koran, in this case, was profoundly influenced by the Christian doctrinal tradition.

4.2 Hymnological and Liturgical Texts

The Koran is made up of 114 chapters, which are called *Surahs*. Many of the *Surahs* of the Koran are considered by exegetes to be liturgical texts. According to Muslim tradition certain of these, such as the first *Surah*, were used by Mohammed during public prayer and continue to be used in this context today.

We may discern an echo of Orthodox Christian liturgical practice embedded within the first *Surah*, known as the Al-Fatihah (The Opening):

Praise be to God, the Lord of the Universe, the Merciful, the Compassionate, Sovereign of the Day of Judgement! You alone we worship, and to You alone we turn for help. Guide us to the straight path, the path of those whom You have favoured, not of those who have incurred Your wrath, nor of those who have gone astray.³⁸

To clearly illustrate the influence of Orthodox liturgical texts we need only compare this Islamic liturgical text to a particular prayer from the service of Matins:

We praise you, we hymn you, we bless you, we give thanks to you, O God of our fathers, for you have brought us in safety through the shades of night and have shown to us once again the light of day. And we entreat your goodness: Be gracious to our sins, and receive our prayer in your great tenderness. For we flee to you, the merciful and almighty God. Illumine our hearts with the true Sun of righteousness; enlighten our mind and guard our senses, that walking uprightly as in the day, in the way of the commandments, we may attain life eternal, for with you is the fountain of life, and may graciously be vouchsafed to come to the fruition of the light unapproachable.³⁹

A further example may show the influence of Christianity on Islam especially in regards to theological terminology:

All that is in the heavens and the earth magnifies God; He is the almighty the All-wise. To Him belongs the Kingdom of the heavens and the earth; He gives life, and He makes to die, and He is powerful over everything. It is He that created the heavens and the earth in six days then seated Himself upon the Throne. He knows

38. *Koran*, 1:1-7

39. Prayer of the Orthros. See *The Leitourgikon. The Book of Divine Services for the Priest and Deacon* (New Jersey: Antakya Press, 1989) 134.

what penetrates into the earth, and comes down from heaven, and what goes up into it. He is with you wherever you are; and God sees the things you do. To Him belongs the Kingdom of the heavens and the earth; And unto Him all matters are returned. He makes the night to enter into day and He makes the day to enter into the night. He knows the thoughts within the breasts.⁴⁰

The prayer of the "bending of the knees" during the feast of Pentecost consists of the following verse:

Chaste, Pure, Beginning less, Invisible, Incomprehensible, Inscrutable, Unalterable, Insuperable, Immeasurable, Forbearing Lord; the Only One possessing immortality, dwelling in the unapproachable light; the Maker of Heaven and Earth and Sea and of everything created in them.... God the Great and Eternal One, the Holy and the Charitable, the One who has enabled us at this hour to stand in front of Your inaccessible Glory in order to praise and sing Your wonderful ones, have mercy on us, Your unworthy servants.

4.3 An Orthodox Hagiological Tradition in the Koran

In order for us to see that even the hagiological tradition of the Orthodox Church has significantly influenced the "prophet of Islam", we need only to look at a particular extract from the sacred book of Islam.

In the following text, it becomes apparent that during his visits to Byzantine areas of Palestine, Mohammed had heard many Christian religious traditions at liturgical ceremonies or in his private conversations with clerics and other intellectuals. Certain of these, it seems had influenced him considerably, and were a pattern for reflection, which he later used for his own preaching:

Did you think the Sleepers of the Cave and Al-Raqim a wonder among Our signs? When the youths sought refuge in the Cave, they said "Lord, have mercy on us and guide us through our ordeal." We made them sleep in the cave for many years, and then awakened them to find out who could best tell the length of their stay. We shall recount to you their story in all truth. They were young men who had faith in their Lord, and on whom We had lavished Our guidance. We put courage in their hearts when they stood up and said, "Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and earth. We call on no other god besides Him: for if we did we should be blaspheming. Our people serve other gods besides Him, though they have no convincing proof of their divinity. Who is more wicked than the man who invents a falsehood against God? "When you depart from

40. *Koran*, 57:1-4

them and from their idols, go to the Cave for shelter. God will extend to you His mercy and prepare for you a means of safety".... You might have thought them awake, though they were sleeping.... We roused them that they might question one another. "How long have you been here?" asked one. "A day, or but a few hours," replied another.... Some will say: "The sleepers were three".... And yet others: "Seven". Say: My Lord best knows their number.... Some say they stayed in the cave three hundred years and nine. Say: "None but God knows how long they stayed in it. His are the secrets of the heavens and the earth."⁴¹

According to scholars⁴² the above Koranic narrative refers to the well-known story of the life of the Seven Ephesian Youths as described in the Synaxarion of the Orthodox Church. According to this narrative, the seven Christian youths (Maximilianos, Exakoustodianos, Iamblichos, Martinianos, Dionysios, Antoninos, and Konstantinos, respectively, are the names attributed to the seven youths in this narrative) hid themselves in a cave during the persecutions of the Emperor Decius in 252, and asked God to "be loosed from the bond of the body" in order that they would not give themselves over to the persecutors. In the meantime, the youths fell into a deep sleep miraculously. Decius commanded that the entrance of the cave be sealed and as tradition affirms, after 194 years during the reign of Theodosios the Young in 446 CE, the youths awoke from their sleep showing that the resurrection of the dead was indeed a potential reality, a concept severely questioned by heretical circles during that period. The substantial influence of this specific hagiological text of the Orthodox Church upon the formation of the Islamic narrative is patent. A common opinion affirms that Mohammed made use of this hagiological tradition, as the Koran explicitly indicates, in order to respond to the provocations of the pagan Quraysh of Mecca, and the Jews and Christians of Medina. His intention is to emphatically express the reality of the resurrection. This was also the same point affirmed in the story for the Orthodox,⁴³ and, as a contemporary Muslim theologian affirms: "the preservation of this legend in the Koran imparts to the Arabic language a new Byzantine treasure, whose meaning aims at the ennobled uplifting of the soul and intellect, insofar as it is a matter pertaining to the question of the Resurrection".⁴⁴

41. *Koran*, 18, 9-26

42. See R. Paret, *Ashab al-Kahf*, "Les sept dormants d'Ephese (Ahl al-kahf) en Islam et en Chretiente, in *Revue des Études Islamiques* 22 (1954), 59-112. Nadwi, Abu l-Hasan 'Ali, *Faith versus materialism (The message of Surat-ul-Kahf)* (Lucknow: Academy of Islamic Research and Publication, 1972). R. Gramlich, "Fahr ad-Din: ar-Razis Kommentar zu Sure 18, 9-12", *Asiatische Studien/Études asiatiques* 33 (1979), 99-152.

43. Rudi Paret, *Der Koran*, 310.

44. Aly Nour, *Koran and Byzantium* (Athens: University of Athens Dissertation, 1970) 66.

5. CONCLUSION

It is possible to affirm that Orthodoxy came in direct contact with the Islamic world from the very beginning of Islam's formation. Even before Mohammed began his religious mission to preach to his fellow countrymen, he had built up relations with both Byzantine orthodox and heretics within the areas of northern Arabia. A large Christian presence in northern and southern Arabia, and the Christian minorities in Mecca and in particular Medina, acted as a pretext for the prophet of Islam to absorb teachings and traditions, with the intention of promulgating to his nomadic fellow countrymen a monistic and uniform concept of God, the role of the prophets, Jesus, the Virgin Mary, the teaching concerning the resurrection and the future judgement. It is evident that the Eastern Orthodox tradition was amongst the first religious traditions with which Islam came into contact, the latter being influenced both directly and indirectly. Perhaps, information pertaining to all of these is somewhat scanty. However, an in-depth study of the Koran, the Islamic tradition and Byzantine theological sources may lead us to new insights. I believe that the contribution of the Orthodox, and generally of the Eastern theologians, including the Orientalists, may offer a better understanding concerning these two great spiritualities of our age, Christianity and Islam. We must not forget the fact that the Islamic world, during the first eight centuries of its life did not cease to find itself within a creative dialogue with its great and esteemed neighbour, Orthodox Byzantium. Many aspects of Islamic literature, and even the methods of interpretation applied to the Koran, as expressed in the commentaries (*tafsir*), the technical reproductions of the manuscripts, microtechnics, music, melodic reading, give witness to the assimilated qualities inherent within Islam and the appropriation of the sophisticated culture of Byzantium.⁴⁵

45. Anastasios, Archbishop of Albania, *Globalisation and Orthodoxy* 162.