
The Fountain of Wisdom

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Introduction

The first significant Christian theological and apologetic answer to Islam, *The Fountain of Wisdom*, was a defence of the doctrine of the Trinity penned by John of Damascus in 717. John (675–c.749) was born in Damascus, to an Arab Christian family, thirty nine years after its capture by Arab Muslims. The Byzantine Empire of the Eighth Century that lost Damascus not only struggled to maintain its territory. It was also racked by civil war. Byzantium divided between supporters of the use of icons and the iconoclasts who likened the practice to idolatry. The subject divided both the church and state, bringing an end to the ecumenical councils and most of the creative development within the church. The Orthodox, consequently, sought a theological common denominator that could provide a foundation for stability and eventual unity. John, living between two worlds, both as a Byzantine and as a Christian citizen of a Muslim State, was able to produce a work that served both as a backward-looking preservation of accumulated truth and as a defense against the incursions of Islam.

The Fountain of Wisdom

The work was divided into three parts, 'Philosophical Chapters' modelled on Aristotle, 'Concerning Heresy', a version of a similar book by Epiphanius updated to include Islam, and Iconoclasm, and 'An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith'. The latter served as the Eastern Church's first summary of connected theological opinions. John wrote against two great threats to Byzantine Theology. The first threat was posed by iconoclast authorities threatening to tear down his carefully constructed traditionalism. The second was posed by Islam. John sought to confront the Koran's misunderstanding of Christian doctrine. He also attacked actively Islamic practices he thought had pagan antecedents, such as the correlation between the Kaaba at Mecca and the worship of Aphrodite located in the same place before the coming of Mohammed.

Philosophical Section: John uses this section to define terms such as 'substance', 'accident', 'form' and 'hypostasis' that he will use to articulate his doctrine of the Trinity. These definitions were essential because he justified Trinitarian theology as Monotheism largely on the basis of their correct understanding. His methodology in this section points out something quite distinctive about his approach. His book is full of scriptural references for those that accept the authority of the Bible. On the other hand, he makes full use of philosophical constructs, logic and language to appeal to those who do not accept the Bible.

On Heresies: John describes Muslims as not only failing to appreciate these theological distinctives, but exhibiting superstition in general. They are the antithesis of knowledge and forerunners of Antichrist. John claims, on the basis of an extensive reading of the Koran, that Islam is fundamentally not really monotheistic itself and carries with it the vestiges of the worship of the morning star and Aphrodite. In other words, Islam does not really promote or defend Monotheism, only Orthodox Christianity does.

An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith: John states that the Godhead is essentially incomprehensible. We cannot penetrate within so that we may examine its

relationships and inner workings. Not even angelic beings that attend the throne of God, such as the cherubim and seraphim truly understand God. The real essence of God is far beyond us. Every attempt to grasp his nature ends in failure. He defies categorisation because he does not belong to the orders of beings, 'not because he does not exist, but because he transcends all beings and being itself.' We, therefore, struggle to find language to describe God. This forces us to use images, types and symbols that correspond to our nature, but are of limited use in understanding God, or we describe God through negation. We describe him with terms such as 'timeless', 'without beginning', or 'invisible', because they are the opposites of our nature. We also use terms such as 'mind', 'reason', or 'spirit' because God causes these things. Even if you used virtuous terms such as 'good, or justice, or wisdom, or something else of the sort, you will not be describing the nature of God, but only things relating to his nature.' Even the titles of Father, Son and Holy Spirit do not describe the essence of God, but the mutual relationships and manner of existence within the Trinity. Therefore, in a real sense, God is nameless to us.

Additionally, God is absolutely without beginning or end. On one hand, this mysteriousness coincides with the Koran's description of God as sovereign and omniscient. God would be unknowable if it were not for God revealing himself. 'The divine nature is like a sea of essence, indeterminate and without bounds, which spreads far and wide beyond all notion of time or of nature.' The Koran is loaded with the language of revelation. On the other hand, John can use this as a foundation of a defence of Trinitarian orthodoxy. In this sense, Islam displays the lethal combination of ignorance and arrogance.

John points out that this unknowable God has already revealed himself as one God in three persons. He is, in fact, one substance in three persons. These three are the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. John categorised everything as either created or uncreated. The Trinity being uncreated remains unchangeable. 'Only the Divinity is unmoved, and by his immovability he moves all things.' This answered the Muslim charge of tritheism. Muslims had posited that a 'son' of God must mean 'created', therefore changeable and not God. If the Christians insist on giving the Son and the Holy Spirit the same essence of the Father, in other words, if the Christians were correct about Christ being God, either they are incorrect about the essence common to all three or there really are three separate gods. John points out that there really is only one God, perfect and undivided. He states that the presence of several gods would imply imperfection in all of them. Rather, he sees one essence and three different subsistences. There is 'one substance, one godhead, one virtue, one will, one operation, one principality, one power, one domination, one kingdom; known in three perfect Persons and adored with one adoration, believed in and worshipped by every rational creature, united without confusion and distinct without separation, which is beyond understanding.'

The focal point of the Trinity is the monarchy of the godhead. Though all three members are eternal God, the Father is the cause. Gregory Nazianzus states this monarchical principle clearly. 'And the union is the Father, from whom and to whom the order of Persons runs its course, not so as to be confounded, but so as to be possessed, without distinction of time, of will, or of power.' John of Damascus mirrors this thought. 'The Father derives from himself his being, nor does he derive a single quality from another. Rather he is himself the beginning and cause of the existence of all things both as to their nature and mode of being. All then that the Son and the Spirit have is from the Father, even their very being; and unless the Father is, neither the Son nor the Spirit is.' Therefore, do not call the Father, Son and Holy Spirit three gods (since their names do not refer to separate essences, but to a mutual relationship), but one God in Holy Trinity, 'in

whom the Son and the Holy Spirit are related to one Cause without any composition or blending.' God the Father is clearly the centre and cause of all things. It is not only the focal point of Trinity, it is the governing principle for the universe. It creates the harmony within the universe. John describes this in terms of overcoming contrary natures within creation. 'What is it that combined and arranged them? What is it that set them in motion and put them on their unceasing and unhindered courses? Or is it that they had no architect to set a principle in them all by which the whole universe be moved and controlled.' To John's non-Christian world, the creating and organising principle is God. To the Christian, who by virtue of adoption is granted insight into the Trinity, there is an even more refined answer. There is a centre to God.

The Damascene is careful to note that the mutual relationship within the Trinity takes place without any change or division in substance, such as that noted by Arius and criticised by Muslim apologists. John elaborates by saying that the Son and Spirit are uncreated because this hypostatic relationship exists in eternity. Interestingly, the Muslims conceded that Jesus was not just a great prophet, but the Logos of God. They differed from the Greeks, however, in seeing the Logos's begetting as his creation by the Father. This does appear, however, to insinuate a potential weakness in John's theology of the Trinity because it seems to imply an order based on chronology. I am not convinced that John's focus on the Father did not doom him to maintaining a defensive posture, forcing him to fend off the logical charges of the Muslims.

'An Exact Exposition' also dedicated a great deal of effort to expositing the exact nature of humanity and deity in Christ. Part of John's answer was that he simply did not know how God became man. On the other hand, he attempted to at least describe the relationship. Christ, John asserted, was perfect God and perfect man with one compound hypostasis. He is consubstantial with the Father, and as such is beyond time and without any sort of beginning. 'He is before all ages, we mean that his begetting is outside of time and without beginning.' He is not created brought into being *ex nihilo*. 'For the Father never was when the Son was not.' In other words, John insists that 'in God begetting (the Son) cannot mark a change or a beginning. Begetting is not creation; neither is procession (of the Spirit).' John also adds that he does not understand these doctrines, he simply accepts them because they have been handed down from Scripture.

John spent a great deal of time elaborating the relationships within the Godhead. They are of the same essence. 'We confess that the nature of the divinity is entirely and completely in each one of its persons.' 'The Son is the image of the Father, and the image of the Son is the Spirit, through whom the Christ dwelling in man gives it to him to be the image of God.' They are not, however, the same. 'The abiding and resting of the Persons in one another is not in such a manner that they coalesce or become confused, but, rather, so that they adhere to one another, for they are without interval between them and inseparable and their mutual indwelling is without confusion.' John's description of each member of the Trinity exposed further weaknesses. He seems to have difficulty attributing personhood to the Holy Spirit. 'He is the median of the Unbegotten and the Begotten, joined with the Father through the Son. It is no wonder that Muslims failed to see any personhood in the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, John is quick to counter the Koranic view that the Holy Spirit is some sort of immediate force which was given by God to aid Christ. 'Now a spirit which is sent, and acts, and strengthens, and maintains is not breath which dissipates any more than the mouth of God is a bodily member.'

John also wishes to rob Islam of the complaint that Christianity is nothing more than innovation. John countered that 'The God proclaimed by the Old Testament and the New

is one. He who is celebrated and glorified in Trinity, for the Lord said: "I am not to come to destroy the law, but to fulfill." In other words, the Trinity had always been the God of the Old Testament, but Jews and Muslims failed to see it because they would not accept the key to unlocking the mystery, Christ. Faith in Christ gave a believer the means to see God, in part, as he really is, Father, Son and Spirit.

Evaluation

John of Damascus demonstrated great strengths in developing a Trinitarian theology capable of surviving the onset of Islam and the internal jihad of the iconoclasts. His work consistently relied on a scriptural defense. It also included the careful assimilation of centuries of theological study, much of it forged in battle with heresy. It is careful work. On the other hand, it spent little time on an understanding of the Holy Spirit. In particular, it overlooked any developed personhood concerning the third member of the Trinity. John needed a stronger defense against the Muslim idea of a disembodied 'spirit'. It also had to labour under Origen's concept of Trinity, with its priority given to the Father. As a consequence, John constantly had to fend off Muslim contentions that his methodology led to a natural, ontological subordination of the Son (and the Spirit) to the Father. John could have used more emphasis on the relationships within the Godhead, but his heavy focus on subsistence placed too much focus on the persons rather than the unity. Finally, the work has the feel of a rather ponderous defence rather than an evangelistic bridge. He wrote the *Fount of Knowledge* as Eastern Christendom was shifting from a forward-looking, evangelistic movement to a highly conservative imperial religion with an increasing dependence on Liturgy. This backward-looking tendency became synonymous with orthodoxy and placed Christians in a permanent defensive posture in their continuing dialogue with Islam.

We now live in a world not all that incomprehensible to John. Christianity is an embattled faith. It has grown inward-looking in an effort to rediscover both spirituality and a sense of transcendence. Its missionary zeal, at least in the West, has abated. It is once again faced with an aggressive Islam, seeking to convert the West. We need to rediscover the best that is found in the history of earlier conflicts and build a stronger, more biblically assertive, apologetic on top of it.

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