Byzantium and Its Neighbours
Religious Self and Otherness in Dialogue
edited by Luisa Andriollo and Luigi D'Amelia

Introduction

Luisa Andriollo
Università di Pisa, Italy

Luigi D'Amelia
Sapienza Università di Roma, Italy

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1 Byzantium and the Religious Other in Dialogue: A Research Background

Byzantium – Bridge Between Worlds: the 'motto' of the 24th International Congress of Byzantine Studies (Venice-Padua, 22-27 August 2022) gave pride of place to the position, at once central and liminal, of the Eastern Roman empire, situated at the heart and crossroads of traditional historiographical periodisations, geocultural boundaries, and disciplinary divides. It was under the auspices of this event – in which "reflections on the connection between Byzantium and other cultures and peoples" took centre stage –,[1] that the idea of exploring new hermeneutic approaches to the question of inter- and intra-religious interactions in the Byzantine cultural space first emerged.

The object of inquiry itself is not new, and indeed there is no shortage of studies on theological debates and religious polemics in Byzantium throughout the ages. Scholars have extensively discussed controversies over Christian dogma in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, which led to the dialectical formation of competing

1 Rigo 2022, XII.

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orthodoxies, as well as the long-standing confrontation with non-Christian religious communities, such as Jews and Muslims. However, most analyses have focused on individual religious challengers to Byzantine orthodoxy, often without extending beyond the specificities of each single debate. A comparative and broader methodological perspective has been less frequently adopted.[2] The thematic session of the Venice-Padua Congress, from which this volume of collective studies takes its title, aimed to foster such collaborative efforts and methodological reflection. The papers in this book build upon some of the subjects raised and the variety of approaches presented on that occasion.[3]

With regard to the thematic and chronological scope of this volume, we have chosen to privilege the middle and late Byzantine periods – approximately from the seventh to the fourteenth century. We have also decided to concentrate on the primary religious Others with whom the Byzantines – both intellectuals and ordinary believers – engaged, specifically Jews, Muslims, Latins, and Armenians. While a wider diachronic span is not excluded when warranted by the subject matter – such as in the case of anti-Jewish polemics –,[4] we have deliberately left aside the first Christian centuries. This choice is not only dictated by the research background and interests of the volume's editors. Our primary intention is to explore how the literary forms of religious confrontation sedimented within a cultural and political space durably and cohesively defined by its Eastern Mediterranean gravitation and adherence to Constantinopolitan orthodoxy.[5] However, it should be borne in mind that this very connotation of medieval Byzantium is itself a cultural construct, shaped by converging views of the post-classical

2 Averil Cameron's studies on the use of dialogue and possible forms of debate in late antiquity and twelfth-century Byzantium are an exception to this trend (Cameron 2014; 2016; cf. also Cameron, Gaul 2017). In the past, two volumes have accounted for Byzantine perspectives on various Christian heresies and non-Christian religions (Eleuteri, Rigo 1993, on abjuration formulas, and Rigo, Ermilov 2010, on heresy and orthodoxy in Byzantium). Additionally, in the field of Eastern Christian and Islamic studies, several collective works have taken a comprehensive approach to issues of interreligious debate: e.g. Lazarus-Yafeh et al. 1999; Cameron, Hoyland 2011; Ruani 2016.

3 Due to various reasons, it was not possible to obtain the written versions of some papers delivered in Venice for inclusion in this volume. Nevertheless, we wish to thank the colleagues who participated in the session for their valuable contributions to the debate. In particular, we would like to acknowledge Marie-Hélène Blanchet for her presentation "Labelling the Orthodox Unionists 'Latinophrones', 'Greco-Latins', or 'Latins': A Making Process of 'Otherness'?", Joe Glynias for "Asceticism Across Religious Barriers on the Black Mountain Outside Antioch", and Manolis Ulbricht for his participation in the joint paper with Marco Fanelli, "A Diachronic Evaluation of the Islamic Rites in Byzantine Anti-Islamic Literature from the 7th to the 15th Century".

4 See the chapter by Vincent Déroche in this volume.

5 On orthodoxy as a form of cultural identity in Byzantium, cf. Magdalino 2010; additional bibliography in D'Amelia's paper in this volume.

Eastern Roman empire. These views include the East Roman self-conscious claim to right belief and a role of spiritual leadership within Christianity; Western perceptions of the empire's 'Greekness' and cultural alterity; and our modern understanding of Byzantium as a space of imbrication and entanglement between East and West, geographically, politically and culturally.

Despite the ambiguities that these overlapping understandings of Byzantium may entail, they serve our purpose insofar as, during the period under consideration, the Eastern empire emerges as a distinct cultural subject through processes of exclusion, differentiation, and opposition to neighbouring cultural and religious communities. The latter included Christian Churches not in communion with the patriarchate of Constantinople, such as the non-Chalcedonian Church of Armenia and the Latin Christianity loyal to the papacy, as well as non-Christian groups like Jews and Muslims.[6] This chosen focus thus enables us to observe tendencies and practices in both intra- and inter-religious debate from a *longue durée* perspective, spanning linguistic divides and constantly shifting geopolitical boundaries. Within this range of cross-cultural interactions, which can be considered significant though not exhaustive, we sought to highlight the following two main issues.

On the one hand, it is significant to observe how parallel processes of self-definition and 'othering' operated at conceptual, logical, and discursive levels, and in relation to various interlocutors. Broadly speaking, collective identities are constructed through the acceptance of and adherence to a set of values that are typically aligned with the interests and ideologies of a dominant social and cultural elite.[7] These factors of collective self-identification become clearer and more effective when placed in dialectical relationship to alternative or conflicting worldviews and beliefs. As Paul Magdalino has noted, consensus around models of correct doctrine is both exclusive and reactive: "it must exclude dissent, but it depends for its existence on the continued presence, within or beyond its territorial boundaries, of the dissenters or their proxies".[8] The confrontation with competing religious traditions provided the Byzantines with 'negative' touchstones for self-definition: it allowed them to reinforce or redefine group identity by pointing to instances of conformity and nonconformity with the upheld religious norm.

6 The relationship on the ground between Constantinopolitan orthodoxy and the Eastern Christian Churches – the Nestorian Church of the East and, notably, the Syrian Orthodox (Jacobite) Church and the Egyptian Coptic Church – would deserve further investigation: for some references, see Andriollo's paper in this volume.

7 On the conceptual connection between the notions of collective identity and dominant ideology, see D'Amelia in this volume.

8 Magdalino 2010, 21.

On the other hand, it is worth considering how this dialectical relationship was translated into discursive forms and textual typologies. Which literary genres, rhetorical tropes, and linguistic registers were employed to articulate the relationship and communication (imaginary or real) with religious Others into writing? Under what circumstances, and for what reasons, were certain linguistic and textual modes prioritised over others? Simon Goldhill and Averil Cameron have respectively questioned and defended the possibility of a genuine debate and open-ended dialogue in post-classical culture and Christian literary production.[9] We might ask, following Cameron, whether Christians truly engaged in dialogue; but, more importantly, we should ask why Christians continued to compose polemical and apologetic dialogues addressed to a variety of religious interlocutors, even when these texts appear to be little more than fictional and repetitive rhetorical exercises. Was this 'thinking (and writing) with the Other' – in the form of dialogues, letters, and treatises – merely "a cognitive exercise of Christian self-definition", in the words of Averil Cameron,[10] or did it serve other needs and functions as well?

In addressing these questions through a selection of case studies or by outlining specific research paths, our aim was not primarily to provide a further review of the themes and arguments used in debates with particular religious groups. Rather, we sought to shed light on the cross-cutting conceptual dynamics and recurring rhetorical structures that underpin different instances of interreligious confrontation. While these were the initial questions that prompted our initiative, the studies collected in this volume raise a number of additional, related issues.

2 Methodological Approaches and Open Questions

The case studies or research avenues discussed in this volume provide examples of possible approaches to the sources under consideration and address fundamental methodological problems. These approaches pertain both to the texts as literary objects and to the contexts in which they were written and read.

A first question concerns the definition and classification of literary debates within specific genre categories. The sources examined in the following chapters demonstrate that different textual typologies could express a fundamental dialogical impulse. For instance, texts styled as dialogues could include sections that are closer to short treatises or invectives, as shown in the examples studied by

9 Cf. Goldhill 2009; Cameron 2013; 2014.

10 Cameron 2016, 130.

Luisa Andriollo and Marco Fanelli. Vincent Déroche discusses typical polemical dialogues *adversus Ioudaeos*, but also texts that resist easy labelling, such as the *Doctrina Jacobi nuper baptizati*. Gioacchino Strano reconstructs the negotiations and debates between the Armenian and the Byzantine Churches, which unfolded through the exchange of diplomatic letters, the writing of dogmatic treatises, and the recording of actual historical debates. While we can still wonder why a specific textual format, especially the dialogue, was chosen over other literary alternatives, it may be methodologically and heuristically useful to adopt a broad understanding of dialogue literature and to regard it as a "discursive matrix" open to generic contamination and variation.[11] What Luigi D'Amelia, building upon Ioannis Polemis' considerations on Byzantine invective, contends about the linguistic expressions of hate speech could also apply to dialogue broadly defined: without denying the existence of canonical model texts, generic labels most often amount to theoretical abstractions,[12] whereas what is found in literary practice is the application of more flexible textual and linguistic 'modes'.

This observation raises two further issues. On the one hand, it is worth considering the relationship of Byzantine inter- and intra-religious polemics to tradition and the meaning of 'originality' in this context. On the other hand, the potential 'openness' of these texts invites us to reconsider notions of authority and authorship in relation to them.

In his chapter, Marco Fanelli discusses Adel-Theodore Khoury's widely accepted interpretation of the historical development of Byzantine anti-Islamic polemical literature. He questions a concept of 'originality' that largely overlaps with ideas of cultural identity and adherence to a tradition untainted by external (especially Western) influences. Fanelli argues that changing historical contexts may leave discernible marks on Byzantine anti-Islamic polemics, resulting in novel interpretations of Muslim practices and new arguments. Yet even when our sources seem to rehearse familiar *topoi* and traditional themes, innovation can emerge through the variation, selection, recombination, and resemantisation of inherited material.[13] Vincent Déroche illustrates a wide range of possibilities for such selective reuse of anti-Jewish arguments, showing that even the most 'timeless' and trivial ones can be decontextualised and find renewed relevance when circumstances allow. Thus, anti-Jewish *topoi* can be sharpened as weapons against the iconoclasts and, similarly, derogatory

11 Cf. Papadoyannakis 2006, 98.

12 Agapitos 2003, 10-11.

13 For such an understanding of innovation, which seems a more appropriate concept than the anachronistic one of originality, cf. Agapitos 2003, 9-11.

epithets and expressions already applied to Muslims can be reused against other enemies. As Luigi D'Amelia recalls, examples of such a process of 'cross-fertilisation of hate words' could extend further, being directed at different polemical targets at various times.

If, as we have seen, polemical literature stands at the crossroads of multiple genres and textual forms, the structural connection between polemical dialogues and question-and-answer literature[14] may help elucidate the mechanisms underlying the narrative construction of these texts and their subsequent reworkings. Notably, both types of texts seem to share a "loose structure and add-on nature".[15] Thus, a significant portion of the anti-Jewish literature discussed by Vincent Déroche, as well as the anti-Islamic *Dialogue* analysed by Luisa Andriollo, appears open to the recombination of arguments from earlier works, to rephrasing, rewriting, and the inclusion of more or less discernible additions. The pseudepigraphic attributions under which many of these texts circulated may account for their survival and continued transmission. However, this did not prevent significant editorial interventions, so that polemical works often appear as stratified textual constructions; in such cases, we might aptly resort to the concept of a 'distributive authorship'.[16]

Of course, it is not enough to identify recurring structural features in our sources. Interpretations are needed that relate the production of these works to the historical circumstances and social contexts in which they were written and read. It is crucial to identify the audiences initially addressed by this literature, as well as its subsequent *milieux* of circulation and reception. Indeed, geographical, social and chronological factors played a fundamental role in determining the aims and functions of these texts, and how they could be updated or reinvented over time. The studies collected in this volume clearly demonstrate, if further proof were needed, that context shapes meaning: gaining insight into the concerns and interests of the readers enables us to look beyond the often repetitive and conventional surface of much Byzantine theological polemics, thereby revealing its significance and urgency for its Byzantine audiences.

14 Papadoyannakis 2006; Efthymiadis 2017.

15 Papadoyannakis 2006, 94.

16 Toth 2014, 101-2, and Andriollo in this volume, 15-92.

3 Acknowledgements

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