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# Turkish-Islamic Customs and Rites in the Byzantine Apologetical-Polemical Literature (Fourteenth Century) A Preliminary Survey

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**Abstract** Adel Theodor Khoury critiqued the anti-Islamic literature of the Palaiologan era as lacking in originality, arguing that it deviated from earlier Byzantine models by incorporating Western influences. Concurrently, studies on the processes of Islamisation and Turkification in Anatolia have variously emphasised episodes of coexistence and the mutual exchange of religious practices. In this paper, the Author aims to reassess Khoury's assumptions by analysing several case studies in which the direct encounter by the Byzantines with Turkish and Islamic practices enabled Palaiologan writers to introduce novel polemical arguments – arguments that were neither rooted in earlier traditions nor derived from Western sources.

**Keywords** Byzantine anti-Islamic literature. Late Byzantium. Ottoman studies. Palaeologan literature. Polemical literature. Turkish customs.

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## 1 State-of-Art: Khoury's Thesis

In his studies on Byzantine apologetical and polemical literature, Adel Theodor Khoury excluded works produced from the thirteenth century onward.<sup>1</sup> This exclusion is predicated upon his contention that the anti-Islamic literature of the last centuries of Byzantium exhibits a discernible decline in originality and innovation. Khoury argued that, in the Palaeologan period, authors simply rehashed ideas and arguments from earlier works, without introducing innovative and significant contributions to the ongoing Byzantine debate on Islam. To sum up, he addressed the issue, asserting:

Au début du XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle paraît un ouvrage latin sur l'Islam écrit par le dominicain florentin Ricoldo da Monte Croce. [...] L'ouvrage de Ricoldo fut apprécié à Byzance, il exerça en particulier sur Jean Cantacuzène une influence que celui-ci reconnaît expressément. [...] L'influence de Ricoldo ne détermina certes pas un bouleversement dans le jugement des Byzantins sur l'Islam, mais désormais la littérature byzantine relative à l'Islam ne peut plus être considérée comme absolument originale. [...] D'autre part, dans leurs relations politiques avec les musulmans, les Byzantins adoptent une attitude plus conciliante que celle de leurs devanciers des siècles précédents.<sup>2</sup>

In essence, Khoury delineates two factors contributing to the emergence of a new trend of anti-Islamic literature during the Palaeologan period. Firstly, the scholar underscores the influence of Riccoldo's *Against the Law of the Saracens*,<sup>3</sup> translated into Greek by Demetrios Kydones (c. 1320-1398),<sup>4</sup> on the intellectual milieu engaged in disputations on Islam in the middle of the fourteenth century. Secondly, Khoury highlights the impact of political-military relations with the neighbouring Turkish emirates - especially during the years of the second civil war (1341-47) - on Byzantine perception of Islam. Consequently,

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Khoury 1969; 1972; 1982.

<sup>2</sup> Khoury 1969, 43. It should be noted that Norman Daniel (1960) also pointed out a lack of originality in Western anti-Islamic literature from the fourteenth century onwards. In my opinion, however, Khoury's and Daniel's observations are not overlapping, since they imply a different meaning of the term 'originality'. Daniel observes, in fact, that Western authors from the fourteenth century onwards re-propose arguments and themes that are characteristic of the previous tradition; differently, Khoury notes that Byzantine literature against Islam from the same period partially departs from its own models, opening up to contaminations that mostly come from the West.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Mérigoux 1986.

<sup>4</sup> Demetrios Kydones, *Translation of Friar Riccardo's Book Against Muhammad's Followers (Libri fratris Richardi contra Mahometem assecclas translatio)*, PG 154, coll. 1035-170.

Khoury argues that the convergence of these two factors, diminishing the degree of 'originality', deviated the Byzantine anti-Islamic literature from the distinctive Byzantine tradition, and aligned it closer with analogous genres in neighbouring cultural milieus.

In my view, Khoury's thesis warrants only partial endorsement. Firstly, his definition of 'originality', based solely on adherence to traditional argumentations, overlooks the nuanced historical and social contexts in which the anti-Islamic works were written. Khoury's thesis appears to be consistent with the writings composed during the eleventh and twelfth century. It can be observed that the here-siological collections (*panopliae*), such as those compiled by Euthymios Zigabenos (eleventh-twelfth century)<sup>5</sup> and Niketas Choniates (c. 1155-1217),<sup>6</sup> drew upon apologetic and polemical materials from earlier texts composed by John of Damascus (670/80-749),<sup>7</sup> Theodore Abu-Qurrah (c. 750-829),<sup>8</sup> and especially Niketas Byzantios (ninth century).<sup>9</sup> This was done in order to accomplish two distinct functions. Zigabenos' and Choniates' texts not only provided concise summaries for comprehending Islam, but also equipped scholars with tools for engaging in controversial debates and for describing foundational Islamic principles. In this framework, the concept of 'originality', defined as adherence to cultural perception model, intersects with tradition. In regard to the aforementioned texts, it can be posited that Khoury's thesis is acceptable because it legitimises the notion of *taxis* as the principal criterion for evaluating the merit of Byzantine anti-Islamic literature, disregarding any attempt at innovation or departure from the initial model. In this way, Khoury establishes a correlation between cultural 'identity', 'tradition' and 'originality'.

The veracity of this assertion is arguably less apparent when one fails to consider the cultural and social consequences of the Latin conquest of Constantinople after the Fourth Crusade (1204-61). The stable presence of Westerners, the frequency of diplomatic exchanges, and notably, the establishment of Franciscan and especially Dominican communities in the capital and in the territories of the empire<sup>10</sup> facilitated direct and regular interactions. This interaction

<sup>5</sup> Euthymios Zigabenos, *Dogmatic Panoply*, PG 130, coll. 20-1360 (= Förstel 2009, 44-83).

<sup>6</sup> Niketas Choniates, *From the Twentieth Book of the Thesaurus of Orthodox Faith. About the Superstition of the Hagarenes (Ex libro XX Thesauri Orthodoxae Fidei. De Superstitione Agarenorum)*, PG 140, coll. 105-22.

<sup>7</sup> John of Damascus, *On Heresies* (ed. Kotter 1981).

<sup>8</sup> Theodore Abu-Qurrah, *Pamphlets Against Heretics, Jews, and Saracens (Contra haereticos, judaeos et saracenos varia opuscula)*, PG 97, coll. 1461-1602; Graf 1910; Gleis, Khoury 1995.

<sup>9</sup> Niketas Byzantios, *Refutation* (ed. Förstel 2000).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Tsougarakis 2012.

extended beyond the general populace progressively to encompass the intellectual elite.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, this cohabitation produced a burgeoning interest in Western culture, particularly in scholastic theology.<sup>12</sup> This receptivity to Western culture led to a profound reassessment of Byzantine identity and opened a debate that took on conflicting forms between the ecclesiastical and monastic hierarchies, which remained loyal to tradition, and some intellectual circles interested in exploring Latin culture.<sup>13</sup> In this regard, the case of Demetrios Kydones stands out as paradigmatic.<sup>14</sup> After learning Latin, around the mid-fourteenth century he dedicated himself to translating the *Summa Against the Gentiles* and the *Summa of Theology* of Thomas Aquinas under the guidance of the Dominican friar Filippo Bindo de Incontris.<sup>15</sup> Concurrently, he completed the Greek translation of Riccoldo's anti-Islamic pamphlet. The availability of these texts, as well as other translation proofs made by the Greek scholar, confirms the depth of contacts and exchanges between the Dominican community of Pera and members of the Byzantine elite. Significantly, Kydones' translations – as well as those of his colleagues in the following decades – transcended the realm of private exercise, experiencing rapid spread and manuscript circulation. Noteworthy is the case of the translation of *Against the Law of the Saracens*: the emperor John VI Kantakouzenos (c. 1292-1383), who was engaged in the drafting of his four orations *Against Muḥammad*,<sup>16</sup> drew upon materials, argumentations and Qur'ānic quotations from Kydones' translation, thus enriching the now-frustrated traditional Byzantine arsenal.<sup>17</sup> It is noteworthy that Kantakouzenos' case was not an isolated one. The emperor Manuel II Palaiologos (1350-1425),<sup>18</sup> by his own admission, drew upon information and arguments presented by Kydones and Kantakouzenos while composing the 26 *Dialogues with*

**11** The writings published by Antoine Dondaine and Raymond-Joseph Loenertz remain fundamental testimonies of contacts between Western monastic communities and the Constantinopolitan milieu in the thirteenth century; cf. Dondaine 1951; Loenertz 1936a; 1936b; 1959; 1960. Cf. also Congourdeau 1987a; 1987b. For the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, cf. Delacroix-Besnier 1997.

**12** The most recent collective volume on this topic is Athanasopoulos 2022.

**13** Regarding the openness of Byzantine intellectuals in the latter half of the fourteenth century towards Thomistic thought, Mercati 1931, although dated, remains a seminal work.

**14** Cf. Ryder 2010.

**15** Cf. Loenertz 1978.

**16** John Kantakouzenos, *Apologies*, PG 154, coll. 371-584; John Kantakouzenos, *Orationes*, PG 154, coll. 583-692 (= ed. Förstel 2005).

**17** The subject is widely discussed in my forthcoming study, dedicated to John Kantakouzenos' entire anti-Islamic corpus.

**18** Cf. Çelik 2021.

a *Persian*.<sup>19</sup> In our assessment, this underscores that the hybridisation between Latin and Byzantine traditions in anti-Islamic matters during the second half of the fourteenth century represents not a diminishment and impoverishment of the genre, but rather its revitalisation. Key elements, such as criticism of the figure of Muḥammad, negative judgment on the Qur'ān and its theological contents, condemnation of Islamic practices, defence of the divinity of Jesus and the trinitarian doctrine, teleological significance of the Holy Scriptures, remain foundational. However, authors of this period also incorporate new tools, borrowed from the Western tradition, when necessary.

Returning to Khoury's thesis, I argue that a second aspect should be considered when evaluating the level of 'originality' in the anti-Islamic literature of the Palaiologan period. Although there were conflicts in the Byzantine Anatolian border regions before the late thirteenth century that necessitated confrontations between Byzantium and the advancing Turkish groups,<sup>20</sup> a notable escalation of these encounters occurred towards the end of the century. This intensification was driven by the emergence of new semi-independent emirates (Aydın, Menteşe and Ottoman), which established themselves permanently in the provinces of Byzantine Western Anatolia and the Aegean, thereby posing a direct threat to the core regions of the Byzantine empire. The Ottoman emirate emerged as the dominant force among these groups, who quickly occupied Byzantine cities and territories. Following the earthquake in Kallipolis in the spring of 1354, the Ottomans initiated the conquest of the Western territories of the empire, marking the beginning of their expansion into the Balkans. However, the political-military events may obscure the actual extent of the phenomenon that took place between the late thirteenth and the early fourteenth century. Until that date, Byzantium had always had to face the Islamic threat, initially from Islamised Arabs and later from Turks. Thus, coexistence with Muslims or Islamised peoples remains a frontier issue until the thirteenth century,<sup>21</sup> with few exceptions, such as the case of the conquest of Nicaea at the beginning of Alexios I's reign (1081-1118).<sup>22</sup> It was from these contact zones that authors emerged, particularly in the eighth and ninth centuries, who initially presented and debated the foundations of Islam during the first Arab expansion, which encroached upon the Eastern provinces of the Byzantine empire. Their writings, such as Chapter

<sup>19</sup> Manuel II Palaiologos, *Dialogues* (ed. Trapp 1966, 6 ll. 11-17).

<sup>20</sup> For this period, cf. Cahen 1968, a seminal monograph, and recently Peacock's (2014) and Beihammer's (2015; 2020; 2022; 2023) studies.

<sup>21</sup> On the phenomenon of conversions, cf. Beihammer 2016, 83-99.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Foss 1996, 41-9.

100 of John of Damascus' *On Heresies* and the dialogues of Theodore Abu-Qurrah, served to cultivate a knowledge of the Islamic phenomenon, including its dogmatic and ritual aspects. Moreover, the cultural milieu of the border regions, where daily coexistence and mutual understanding between communities are actively experienced, is central to the creation of the mythical figure of *Digenes Akritas*, who is celebrated in the eponymous epic poem.<sup>23</sup> The accumulation of knowledge and information about Islam contributed to the delimitation of arguments and the development of argumentations useful for its doctrinal and canonical refutation, culminating in the comprehensive and synthesised formulation in Byzantine *Abjuration Formula* (*Ritus abjurationis*).<sup>24</sup>

## 2 The Islamisation and Turkification of Asia Minor Since the Late Thirteenth Century: Some Interpretations of a Crucial Phenomenon

From the late thirteenth century onward, we observe that prominent figures of Constantinople's religious and political life are directly engaged in polemical writings against Islam. During these years, the Turkish advance into the Western regions of Asia Minor represents the culmination of the process of 'Islamisation' and 'Turkification' that has been underway in Byzantine Anatolia since the battle of Mantzikert (1071).<sup>25</sup> I assert that the proper evaluation of this phenomenon is crucial for understanding the trajectory of Byzantine polemics against Islam. I consider the phenomenon of Islamisation and Turkification of Byzantine Anatolia as a pivotal theme, essential for contextualising the changes that Byzantine polemical literature underwent during the Palaiologan period. This topic has been the subject of numerous analyses and interpretations, each highlighting various causal factors.

The first studies on this subject date back to the early twentieth century. Firstly, Albert Wächter,<sup>26</sup> basing his analysis essentially on the study of patriarchal registers and the *Lists of bishoprics* (*Notitiae episcopatum*), attributed the crisis of the Christian presence in Anatolia to the collapse of the organisational structures of the local

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Jeffrey 1998; Argyriou 1991.

<sup>24</sup> Montet 1906; Eleuteri, Rigo 1993, 53-7; Niketas Choniates, *Abjuration Formula* (*Ordo qui observatur super iis qui a Saracenis ad nostram Christianorum puram veramque fidem se convertunt*), PG 140, coll. 123-36.

<sup>25</sup> On this topic, cf. first Vryonis 1971a; this will be discussed further below.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Wächter 1903.

Church, thus justifying the progressive de-Christianisation and de-Hellenisation of the area.

Secondly, Frederick W. Hasluck<sup>27</sup> approached the problem from a different point of view: he saw the Turkification and Islamisation of Byzantine Anatolia and the Balkans as the result of a process of interaction and convergence of cult and ritual (beliefs, habits, magical rites, especially among the lower strata of the rural and provincial populace), which generated syncretic forms that,<sup>28</sup> in turn, led to a gradual conversion of large sectors of the Christian communities. The reasons for this process have been identified in the proselytist action practised by the Sufi brotherhoods (Mawlawī and Bektaşī) well rooted in the territory and in the worship of their own saints, often practised in the same Christian worship centres. The very existence of these 'ambiguous sanctuaries' has been recognised as the cause of a religious blending that would have prompted the conversions to Islam of a large part of the Christian communities of Anatolia.

Thirdly, I mention Paul Wittek's Ghazi theory although widely surpassed by subsequent studies.<sup>29</sup> Wittek argued that the *ghazawat* (holy war) was the main motivation for the conquest of Turkish groups (and, therefore, also of the Ottoman emirate) against the Christian people of Western Anatolia.

In the second half of the twentieth century, Byzantine studies on the topic of Islamisation and Turkification of Asia Minor have focused on two opposing solutions that can be summarised in the dichotomy of 'confrontation'-'conciliation'. Spiros Vryonis,<sup>30</sup> in a monumental and fundamental study, greatly expands Wächter's results and identifies the nomadisation of large regions of Byzantine Anatolia as a second factor of depopulation and demographic (and cultural) decline in the area, as well as of progressive economic collapse for Byzantium. In this perspective, Vryonis considers the relationship

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Hasluck 1929. For a recent criticism of Hasluck's thesis, cf. Krstić 2013.

<sup>28</sup> For a more accurate evaluation of the properly 'syncretic' value of the testimonies mentioned by Hasluck, cf. Krstić 2013, 247-9 and Lubanska 2015, esp. 40-54. In accordance with Krstić's argument, I believe it is essential to use the term 'syncretism' with caution when describing and interpreting episodes reported in contemporary sources. There is a tendency to overuse this term, applying it even to simple instances of the mixing and coexistence of rites. I define syncretism, however, as any form of systematic fusion of mythology, dogma, and rituals between two faiths or religious beliefs, cf. Colpe 1997, 40-3. Although intertwined with political and cultural considerations, only the cases of Sheikh Bedreddin (1358/59-1416) and George of Trebizond (1395-1484) can be considered well-developed syncretic theories (Balivet 1980; 1995; Lowry 2003, 137-9; Khoury 1987).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Wittek 1938. Wittek's thesis has been criticised by several studies. A brief list includes: Lindner 1983; Imber 1986; Jennings 1986; Beldiceanu-Steinherr 2002; and Lowry 2003.

<sup>30</sup> First of all, cf. Vryonis 1971a, 498-501; 1976; 1981. For the reception of Vryonis' thesis, cf. Savvides 1981; Werner 1985; Bryer 1975.

between the Byzantine and Christian communities and the Turkish invaders as a conflict, played on a military, ethnic, political and cultural level, which had a devastating outcome for Hellenism in Asia Minor. According to Vryonis, however, it was a complex conflict because the invaders found themselves having to subdue and absorb a vital society, such as the Byzantine Anatolian society. The very nature of the Turkish conquest, its prolongation from the eleventh to the fifteenth century and the settlement of Turkish communities led to the disintegration of Byzantine society, since they generated on the one hand a permanent state of war and, on the other, a corrosion of the Greek identity sentiment. Such causes acted on the stability of the Byzantine administrative system and, in particular, on the ecclesiastical organisation of the Anatolian provinces. Under Turkish pressure and Islamic hegemony, the Christian society found itself progressively isolated from the heartbeat of the empire and deprived of provincial ecclesiastical leadership. In this way, the proselytising action of the Sufi brotherhoods, together with the great military disasters suffered by the Byzantines during the Turkish conquest, created the conditions for the conversion of the local communities. However, this conversion did not produce the total disappearance of the Greek element, since, according to Vryonis, Byzantine culture (political, administrative and above all religious) played a determinant role in Turkish folk culture.

In the 1990s the research line and the results collected from Hasluck's investigations were further developed by Michel Balivet.<sup>31</sup> He focused on the study of individual episodes and opportunities for cultural exchange between the Byzantine population and the Turkish conquerors, narrowing the field of investigation to limited areas. In this way, Balivet conceptualises the Anatolian region as an "espace d'imbrication" in which a reciprocal exchange occurred between the two communities: while Greek populations transformed Turkish customs and traditions, at the same time the Turkish presence would have exerted a profound impact on the Greek-Byzantine cultural substratum, producing a corresponding change in popular culture and everyday practices. According to Balivet, episodes of religious and cultural blending produced a multi-ethnic lifestyle.

The value of Balivet's research is undeniable, but together with Rustam Shukurov and Tijana Krstić,<sup>32</sup> I also observe the limits of this proposal to solve the issue of the Turkification and Islamisation of Byzantine Anatolia. First of all, the cases examined by Balivet are limited to a fragmented microcosm that emphasises the value of the

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**31** Cf. Balivet 1994; 1999; 2002; 2005.

**32** Cf. Shukurov 2016, 6 and Krstić 2011, 16-18. On the same topic, cf. also Beihamer 2023.



episodes themselves but it does not justify a broader view. Secondly, Balivet's proposal does not reach an explanation of the true crux of the matter, namely the fact that the result of this cultural encounter produced the marginalisation and subsequent disappearance of the Greek-Byzantine element to the advantage of the Turkish-Islamic one.

Finally, there is one last aspect that justifies the writing of this paper. As Krstić has already noted, emphasis on episodes of religious blending in the contact zones leads to theorising a coexistence based on the concept of 'toleration'.<sup>33</sup> This conclusion, however, risks ignoring or at least diminishing the dynamics of conquest and resistance that contemporary sources clearly report. In other words, it gives us a distorted picture of the Turkish and Ottoman advance as an inclusive and tolerant movement. On the other hand, emphasis on religious blending practices opens the way for new strands of investigation and interpretation. By this I mean that the focus on these kinds of practices can instead be very useful in capturing more hidden cultural phenomena. Firstly, it draws the Ottomanists' attention to the existence and action of Sufi communities, and opens up questions about their ability and way of converting Christian communities to Islam, and at the same time their relationship with the Sunni religious establishment.<sup>34</sup> Secondly - and this concerns us directly -, it is necessary to remark that instances of religious blending practices and, more generally, of mutual exchange of knowledge are not only the basis for conciliation and tolerance; at the same time, they become a stimulus for harsh expressions of a polemical nature.<sup>35</sup> Precisely, where the two religious traditions (Christian and Islamic or Islamised) share practices and places, and generate overlaps, they simultaneously stimulate rivalries that take shape in the polemical genre. In this context, Krstić presents two examples involving Sarı Saltuk (?-1298/99), a dervish and saint of the Bektāşi brotherhood. His preaching to Christians about the Gospel and the figure of Christ, as recounted in the *Book of Saltuk* (*Saltukname*), transforms themes that might initially seem syncretic into distinctly anti-syncretic ones. The Gospel (*Injil*) that Christians are persuaded to embrace through Saltuk's eloquent discourse is one that explicitly mentions the Prophet. Furthermore, Jesus (*Mesih*) is portrayed with the attributes of the Qur'ānic 'Isa, the apocalyptic figure who presides over the final judgment.<sup>36</sup>

**33** Cf. Shaw, Steward 1994; Viswanathan 1995.

**34** The thesis about proselytising dervishes as primary actors of conversion is based on Köprülü's (2006; 1922-23) and Barkan's (1942, 279-91, 303-4) studies. Krstić (2013, 250, 254-8) provides a critical reconsideration on this subject.

**35** In addition to Balivet's studies, Norris 1993 also deserves to be mentioned, even though he focuses his attention on the Balkan region.

**36** Cf. Krstić 2013, 253-4.

In other words, far from denying the existence of episodes of religious blending and mutual knowledge of lifestyle and practices through intermarriage and professional networks, we believe that it was precisely in the fourteenth century that the contact zones, now so close to the centre of the Byzantine empire, provided the conditions for a revitalisation of Byzantine polemics against Islam. Indeed, unlike in previous centuries, the shifting of the contact line ensured that Byzantine cultural elites (both religious and secular) were variously involved in episodes of encounter and exchange, as they lived in a state of direct contact with individuals and Turkish groups.

Mapping and studying episodes or details of Turkish-Islamic practices and customs contribute to a two-fold objective: on the one hand, they provide first-hand knowledge of customs that are still alive among the Turkish groups in a phase in which there are few written sources in Turkish;<sup>37</sup> on the other hand, they become proof of the transformation taking place within the genre of anti-Islamic literature, determining a factor of ‘new originality’ that is grafted on to traditional models.

### 3 A Preliminary Survey: Some Cases

Polemical literature is the individual and intellectual result of a collective perception, codified according to argumentative mechanisms. This is even more true in particular from the fourteenth century onwards, when this genre is driven by the urgency to answer the pressing question about the survival of the Christian faith and its ethical and dogmatic values in the face of the affirmation of Turkish military superiority and the Islamic religion. Therefore, polemical writings are the point of arrival and confluence of information and themes that have been produced on the ground of the co-existence of different religious cultures, perceived as irreconcilable.<sup>38</sup>

Given this assumption, the investigation we propose must necessarily address a multiplicity of sources. In my view, the initial stage of research should focus on historical works (chronicles, *mémoires*, etc.) produced between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Indeed, these works contain a plethora of episodes and simple details that document instances of cohabitation and record the customs and practices of the Turkish invader. The value of the testimonies contained in these works lies precisely in the collective character of the episodes reported. By this I mean that the persistence of ancient

<sup>37</sup> On daily life customs (clothes, food), cf. Çelik 2024.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Sahas 2022.

historiographical models (Herodotean<sup>39</sup> and Thucydidean<sup>40</sup>) is evidenced in the respect afforded them by authors over time and their occasional adaptation to suit the purposes of each author. These models guarantee the impartiality of the information presented, while at the same time configuring the reported episode or particular behaviour as distinctive and well recognisable for the public addressed by these works.

A second level of research should instead be directed towards the analytical assessment of epistolary production. Despite the apparent lack of impartiality and objectivity in comparison to historiography, the letters offer valuable insights into practices and beliefs of Turkish-Islamic communities. These insights are often based on first-hand and eyewitness accounts. Furthermore, the epistolary collections of the Palaiologan period allow us to trace the circulation of information on Islamic and Turkish customs and practices within restricted circles of intellectuals and prominent religious and secular figures in the society of the time, often responsible for properly polemical writings.

Thirdly, it is my contention that the mapping should be applied to religious works. In addition to homiletics, which in the act of cursing the behaviour of the invaders sometimes reveals information of some relevance, particular attention should be paid to hagiography, and especially to martyrological texts.<sup>41</sup> Although in the lives of saints and martyrs we often witness a 'mythification' of the historical context in which they operated, these kinds of sources often provide us with information and details about the customs of the Turkish and Islamic communities among which the protagonists lived. The significance of this kind of sources is also linked to their dissemination and to the audience to which they are addressed. They often contain, in an embryonic form, episodes of contradiction and debate on controversial issues that find an echo and further elaboration in the great polemical writings.

In my view, the mapping of these sources, coupled with an appropriate contextualisation of the examined passages, can provide a consistent database on the actual knowledge and the real degree of cohabitation that both the intellectual elite of the great centres (primarily Constantinople and Thessalonike) and the Greek-Byzantine communities still active in the contact zones had of the Turks. This data collection will then allow us to identify which themes and which examples connected to them have found space in the polemical and

**39** Cf. Kaldellis 2014.

**40** Cf. Miller 1976.

**41** Cf. Fanelli 2019; 2021; Bayrı 2020.

apologetic literature of this period. The present paper will provide a few examples only.

### 3.1 Athanasios I Patriarch

The first case I propose is taken from the correspondence of patriarch Athanasios I (1289-93 and 1303-09).<sup>42</sup> In his letters, often addressed to the emperors under whose reign he worked (Michael VII Palaiologos and Andronikos II Palaiologos), the patriarch, a fierce opponent of the Union with the Latins, dwells on several occasions on the consequences of the Turkish advance in the provinces of Asia Minor. In the sins of Christians he identifies the underlying cause of the Turkish military assertiveness and expresses hope for a moral conversion that might avert the imminent danger to the Empire (and to Christianity) posed by the Turks (*Epistles* 36-7, 82 and 40). Athanasios is aware of the consequences of the Turkish occupation on Byzantine territories, and in this regard, he directs the pastoral activity that distinguishes his patriarchate. In fact, on several occasions, he complains about the resistance of some metropolitans and bishops to take possession of and return to their assigned seat because it is occupied by the Turkish invaders. He asks for the support of the emperor so that he can put pressure on the reluctant prelates (*Epistles* 30-2, 48, 61-2 and 79). On the other hand, Athanasios is concerned about the social emergency due to the presence of refugees from Asia Minor in the city (*Epistle* 22), requiring that the emperor urge the notables and officers so that they provide money to the needy.<sup>43</sup>

In addition to these passages, special attention deserves what he denounced in *Epistle* 41. Athanasios begins by inviting emperor Andronikos to behave like king Hezekiah, who tore his clothes and donned sackcloth when the Assyrian general Rhapsakes dared to spear forth words of insult against God.<sup>44</sup> The patriarch alleges that the sovereign is excessively lenient towards non-Christian communities: he cites the 'deicide' Jews, who openly sneer at the Christian faith and customs (worship of Christ, veneration of images and celebration of the mysteries). Furthermore, he asserts that the Armenians perpetrate every kind of outrage against their neighbouring orthodox Christians, enjoying the meetinghouses granted to them. However, the passage that is of direct relevance to us concerns the conduct of the Muslim community in the city:

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<sup>42</sup> Cf. Talbot 1975.

<sup>43</sup> Greek text of the passage: εὐρίσκονται δὲ καὶ ἐντὸς τῆς πόλεως αἰχμάλωτος λαὸς πολὺς, καὶ ἐνὶ δέον νὰ συναντιλήφῃωνται οἱ δυνάμενοι, ἕκαστος καθὼς προαιρεῖται.

<sup>44</sup> 4 Kgdms (2 Kgs) 18:13-36, and 4 Kgdms (2 Kgs) 19:1-35.

“Οτι δὲ καὶ διὰ τὰς ἐμὰς ἀμαρτίας τῶν Χριστιανῶν ἄρξαντες πόλεις Ἰσμηλιταὶ οὐδὲ σημαντήρος ἤχον παραχωροῦσι Χριστιανοῖς, οὐδεὶς ἀγνοεῖ· ἡμεῖς δέ, καὶ ταῦτα χάριτι Χριστοῦ τοῦ Θεοῦ τὴν ἐν Χριστῷ βασιλείαν πλουτοῦντες, κατεφρονήσαμεν οὐ μόνον ποιεῖν ὅσα ἐποίησαν οἱ τῶν Ἰσμηλιτῶν πρέσβεις - καὶ ταῦτα οὐδαμνοὶ καὶ παρὰ τοιούτων ἀπεσταλμένοι - ἀλλὰ καὶ φανερώς ἐφ’ ὑψηλοῦ ἀναβαίνοντες ὡς ἔθος ἔχουσιν ἐν τῇ χώρᾳ αὐτῶν, τὰ μυσὰ αὐτῶν ἐκφωνοῦσι μυστήρια. Ταῦτα καὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα τολμώμενα συσκιάζουσιν οἱ ὄρωντες καὶ οὐ γυμνῶς ἀναφέρουσι τῇ βασιλείᾳ σου, ἵνα τὸ ἐνθεόν σου ζῆλον ἐνδείξῃς.

Everyone knows that <those> Ishmaelites, who on account of my sins rule Christian cities, do not even allow Christians to strike the *semandron* there. But although we are endowed with this Christian Empire through the grace of Christ our God, not only have we neglected to do what the envoys of the Ishmaelites did (good-for-nothings that they are, and sent by no better masters), but the openly climb up on high, as is the custom in their land, and shout forth their abominable mysteries. Witnesses of these and similar outrages conceal them and do not report the bald facts to your majesty, so that you might demonstrate your zeal inspired by God.<sup>45</sup>

Athanasios informs us of the existence of an Islamic place of worship within the walls of Constantinople.<sup>46</sup> In addition, in this paper I am interested in highlighting the exploitation of this information in a polemical key. Athanasios observes with bitterness how Muslims living in the city are allowed what is not allowed to Christians living in the occupied territories. While the infidels have no qualms about shouting their “abominable” prayers from the top of a minaret, Christians are not even allowed to call to prayer by striking the *semandron*. In this passage, it becomes apparent how the occasions of cohabitation - in this case, within a contact zone that is even the capital of the empire - offer polemical cues. The call to prayer is potentially a point of contact between the religious practices common to the two faiths, but Athanasios employs it to mark a clear asymmetry of treatment between the Muslims living in Constantinople and the oppressed Christians in the areas of conquest, with the clear objective of marking the brutality of the adversaries and, indirectly, the weakness of the Byzantine authority, which he judges unable to manage order and respect for local customs.

<sup>45</sup> Athanasios I patr., *Epistles* 41 ll. 19-28 (ed. and transl. Talbot 1975, 82-5).

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Reinert 1998, esp. 144, and Di Branco 2013, 119-20.

### 3.2 Nikephoros Gregoras

The *Byzantine History* by Nikephoros Gregoras (c. 1295-1360) is a monumental work that, together with the *mémoires* of John VI Kantakouzenos, provides us with a complete, but complex, picture of the historical events of the mid-fourteenth-century Byzantine empire, of which Gregoras was an eyewitness and, at the same time, a protagonist, as a learned man. He remained loyal to the Palaiologos dynasty during the reign of Kantakouzenos, with whom he came into open conflict, in relation to his theological positions contrary to the affirmation of Palamism.

Among the recurring themes in Gregoras' historical work, there are obviously the role played by Turkish mercenaries in the events of the civil war (1341-47) and their advance in the Anatolian provinces of the empire. Although from a different position than his opponent Kantakouzenos, Gregoras denounces the brutality of the conquerors and the dramatic conditions in which the communities of Asia Minor and Thrace live, heavily hit by Turkish pirate incursions.

Among the numerous passages in which the author lashes out against the impious invader, often attributing the freedom of action of the conquerors to the inability and connivance of the usurper Kantakouzenos, we present a very interesting passage that deserves careful analysis:

Καὶ μὲν δὴ πρῶτον ἔστω σοι, θεία μοι κεφαλή, πρὸς ἀκρόασιν τὸ περὶ τῶν βαρβάρων ἐκείνων, οἱ διηνεκῶς καὶ ὅτε βούλονται μετὰ πολλῆς κωμάζουσι τῆς ῥαστώνης εἰς τὰ βασίλεια, μυσταγωγοὶ καὶ πρόεδροι τῆς ἀσεβοῦς θρησκείας ὄντες, καὶ βίον μὲν, ὡς φασίν, ἄσκευόν τε καὶ ἄζυγα βόσκοντες, γαστρὶ δὲ πάντων μάλιστα δουλεύοντες καὶ ἀκρατοποσίας ἠττώμενοι, καὶ ὅσα τὸ τῆς ἐπιθυμίας ἀκόλαστον ἀναφλέγει. Οὗτοι τοίνυν μελλούσης τῆς ἱεῤῥᾶς τελεῖσθαι μυσταγωγίας ἐν τῷ τῶν βασιλείων ἐκτὸς ἱερῷ τεμένει, χοροὺς ἰστώντες ἐκείνοι παρὰ τὰς βασιλείους αὐτὰς ἀντάδουσί τε τὴν γυμνικὴν ἐκείνην ὀρχοῦμενοι ὀρχησιν, καὶ ἀσήμοις κλαγγαῖς τὰς τοῦ Μωάμεδ ἀναβοῶσιν ὧδᾶς καὶ τοὺς ὕμνους, δι' ὧν καὶ ἀνθέλκουσιν πρὸς τῆς ἑαυτῶν μᾶλλον ἀκρόασιν ἢ τὴν τῶν θείων εὐαγγελίων ποτὲ μὲν πάντας ἀπλῶς ποτὲ δ' ἐνίους τῶν ἠθροισμένων ἐκεῖ. Τὸ δ' αὐτὸ καὶ περὶ τὴν βασιλεῖον τράπεζαν δρῶσιν ὡς τὰ πολλὰ μετὰ γε δὴ κυμβάλων καὶ θυμελικῶν ὀργάνων καὶ ἄσμάτων, ὅποσα τοῖς ἀσεβέσιν εἴθισται.<sup>47</sup>

First, my dear friend, listen to what concerns those barbarians, who, continuously and when they want to, with great laziness go in procession in the halls of the palace, to preside over and initiate

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<sup>47</sup> Nikephoros Gregoras, *Byzantine History* 28.41 ll. 12-14 (ed. Bekker 1855, 202-3).

into the mysteries of the impious superstition, and lead an existence, as they say, sober and chaste, but in reality, more than anything else they are slaves of the belly and victims of wine and of what the incontinence of desire burns. These, moreover, while the divine liturgy is being celebrated in the chapel outside the palace, in the royal halls, while they stand in groups, sing in unison and dance that acrobatic dance and sing loudly and with trinkets odes and hymns to Muḥammad, with which they force those who have gathered there to pay attention to them rather than to the divine Gospels. In addition, they do this spectacle also on various occasions in the reception hall of the palace with cymbals, stage instruments and warbling, as is customary among the impious.<sup>48</sup>

This text contains a puzzling account. The episode is reported by Agathangelos, the interlocutor of Gregoras, whose identity is a matter of debate.<sup>49</sup> Setting aside this issue, we recall that the events narrated took place in the winter of 1352-53, based on the context. Gregoras employs this episode to launch his criticism in several directions. Despite being largely ignored by modern commentators and scholars,<sup>50</sup> the quoted passage documents the presence of an unorthodox Islamic group at court. The terms *mystagogoi* and *proedroi* suggest that they were members of a Sufi brotherhood, active in practising their rituals within the imperial palace with the consent of the emperor/ usurper John VI Kantakouzenos. The latter, by his own admission and with the confirmation of his opponents, had distinguished himself during the years of the civil war for having established military cooperation and personal bonds first with the emir Umur of Aydın (?-1348) and then with Orhan I (c. 1281-1362). Therefore, it seems not implausible that members of Sufi communities, active in the territories conquered by the Ottomans, were present in the capital and even welcomed to the palace.

At first glance, the description of collective dance rituals accompanied by musical instruments appears to be a clear reference to the practice of the *sema*, a spectacular mystic ritual distinctive to the adherents of the Mawlawī. This hypothesis is plausible, especially considering that since the time of Jalāl ad-Dīn Rūmī (1207-1273), the founder of the order, the relations between the Mevlevi Sufis and Christian circles, especially the monastic ones, both in the Byzantine provinces and in the capital, were intense and well documented by the hagiographical sources of the order itself.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Author's translation.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Van Dieten 2003, 10-31; Kaldellis 2013, 148-54.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Van Dieten 2003, 357; Shukurov 2016, 375-6.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Rigo 1995.

However, Gregoras/Agathangelos, when presenting the customs of this group, with a scornful tone accuses its members of indulging in the abuse of wine (alcohol)<sup>52</sup> and food, even though they preach abstinence. This detail does not fit well with the practices in use in the Mawlawī, in whose literature there is a metaphorical reference to wine as a tool for initiation and encounter with the divine, and the communal meal has the function of an opportunity for socialisation and group cohesion.<sup>53</sup> In light of this detail, it cannot be ruled out that the author is referring to a different brotherhood. As I said, during its initial expansion phase in the territories of Western Anatolia and the Balkans, the Ottoman emirate supported the proselytising and rooting action on the territory of numerous Sufi groups. In this regard, the case of Geykli Baba (thirteenth-fourteenth century), a member of the Vefāi order and active in the conquest of Bursa, is significant. To Geykli Baba Orhan I donated some territories in the area between Inegöl and Sogut, that is, in the area of origin of the Osmanli family.<sup>54</sup>

Returning to the text, the charge regarding the abuse of food and wine, in my view, could be the voluntary distortion of a rite in use in the Bektaşi brotherhood, which played a pivotal role in the colonisation of the Ottoman Balkans.<sup>55</sup> The presence of members of that community in Constantinople is a plausible hypothesis, based on two elements. Firstly, there is a strong bond between the community and the Ottoman court circles. Secondly, the Bektaşi rites are syncretic in nature, bringing them closer to Christian cult practices. This latter element, in particular, was a significant factor in the widespread diffusion of the rites in the Balkan area during the fifteenth century. In this regard, it is worth noting two significant examples: the confession of sins and ritual ablutions similar to Christian baptism. With regard to the consumption of alcohol and food, I believe that here Gregoras is referring to the rite of the *sofra*.<sup>56</sup>

The ceremony often takes place at the end of the *meidan*, which is an initiation rite that can only be attended by members of the order. The *sofra*, on the other hand, is an open rite. It is structured

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**52** The accusation of alcohol abuse, a particularly stigmatising charge for a Muslim, is well-documented in Byzantine sources. For instance, Anna Komnene (1083-1153) emphasises this aspect in her account of Jalāl al-Dawla Abū l-Faṭḥ Malikshāh's death (1092), cf. *Alexiad* 6.12.6 (ed. Kambylis, Reinsch 2001, 196); similarly, Manuel II Palaiologos also denounces sultan Bāyezid I (1359-1403) as a drunkard (cf. Trapp 1966, 50 l. 5; Çelik 2021, 134, 248-9).

**53** Cf. Özkök et al. 2017.

**54** On Vefāi brotherhood, cf. Ocak 2006; Karakaya Stump 2012-13; on Geykli Baba in particular, cf. Ocak 2006, 129.

**55** Cf. Mélikoff 1998.

**56** Cf. Elias 2020.



according to a ceremonial cadenced by the *baba*. The latter recites some invitation prayers (*gulbang, terceman*), including some verses from the surah *al-Mā'idah*. The participants respond with the cry *Hüüü*. The salt ritual follows, which, in its allegorical-metaphorical interpretation, indicates the balance for moderate and ordered experiences, or the means through which excess is spiritualised and becomes a condition for the experience of unity with the divine. Prayer and the rite for the *dem* follow. The latter is the mixing, managed by the *saki*, of alcohol (wine or, more often, *raki*). In this phase, the *baba* continues to pronounce prayers. Once the ritual mixing is complete, the *lokma*, or meal, follows, accompanied by readings, stories, and sermons by the *baba*, while the *saki* continues to pour drinks according to a strict ceremonial. From here the last phase of the ceremony begins, which is marked by singing and dancing (*sema*) to the sound of *nefes* ('hymns'), with instrumental accompaniment. After the prayer of the *saki baba*, the rite ends.

The description of Gregoras, given the underlying polemical intent, prevents us from asserting with certainty that he attended or became aware of the celebration of the Bektaşî *sofra* rite, but the details provided make this hypothesis, at least, reasonable.

In light of the aforementioned observations, it can be seen that, in this case as well, the Byzantine author, rather than emphasising the similarities between the Sufi banquet and the Eucharistic rite, launches into a harsh condemnation of the perceived vulgarity and baseness displayed by the Muslims. Once again, the opportunity for contact turns into an opportunity for polemics. Here, however, the polemical aggression does not limit itself to the Muslim adversary. In a surreptitious way, Gregoras seizes the opportunity to launch his barbs also against the emperor and the newly elected patriarch Philotheos Kokkinos (c. 1300-1379), mentioned a few lines earlier. Gregoras denounces the weakness of the political authority, now completely subservient to the will and exotic practices of the Turks. At the same time, he also accuses the religious authority of passively accepting these impious ceremonies taking place at the court and, even worse, in conjunction with the celebration of the sacred mysteries. Gregoras' vehemently anti-Palamite position is at the root of his denunciation: indeed, he believes that it is precisely the supporters of Palamism, and first and foremost Palamas himself, who harbour a dangerously conciliatory attitude towards the atheist conquerors.

### 3.3 Gregory Palamas

Gregory Palamas occupied a pivotal position in the religious and political scenario of the early fourteenth century. Beyond his role in the theological dispute that pitted him against Barlaam the Calabrian

and his direct support for the political action of John VI Kantakouzenos, what is of interest here is an episode that occurred during his captivity among the Ottoman Turks (after March 2, 1354-spring 1355). The events of the first part of his captivity (until July 1354) are told in a letter addressed to his community in Thessalonike. This text, which is also handed down to us in a shorter version,<sup>57</sup> stands as an extraordinary autobiographical testimony, as well as a historical account of the condition of the Christian communities in the cities of Asia Minor that Palamas had the opportunity to visit during the transfers imposed upon him by his prisoner officers.<sup>58</sup> The importance of the figure, soon recognised, also gave him the opportunity to meet numerous prominent members of the Ottoman court. First of all, the emir himself, Orhan I, who resided during the summer months in a mountain village along the route to Nicaea (*yayla*). Here, the emir organised a debate between the prisoner and a group of wise men, called *Chionai*.<sup>59</sup> We have a report of this dispute, witnessed by the Greek physician Taronites, which completes the dossier on Palamas's period of captivity.<sup>60</sup> In this mountain village in June 1354, before the dispute with the *Chionai*, Gregory also encountered Ismael, Orhan's grandson, with whom he stopped to talk.

Palamas describes the meeting in great detail, and the setting appears realistic when compared to a similar situation described by the traveller Ibn Battuta a few years earlier.<sup>61</sup> In a meadow, Ismael brings fruit to the archbishop, while he eats sheep meat, brought by servants, in accordance with Qur'ānic restrictions. Here the very fair discussion begins. Ismael wonders if the Christian has ever eaten meat before. Palamas does not answer, perhaps he presumes his readers are familiar with this practice, but this is a prime example of the daily events that can spark such discussions.<sup>62</sup>

Soon after, a servant arrives, apologising to Ismael for his delay: he was busy providing charity. Ismael takes the opportunity to ask Gregory whether Christians also help the poor. Here is the passage that directly interests us:

Ἄδὲ Ἰσμαήλ, οὕτω γὰρ ὁ τοῦ μεγάλου ἀμηνᾶ ὑίδοῦς ἐκαλεῖτο, “σπουδάζεται”, φησὶ πρὸς ἐμέ, “καὶ παρ’ ὑμῖν ἡ ἐλεημοσύνη;” Ἐμοῦ δὲ εἰπόντος τὴν ὄντως ἐλεημοσύνην γέννημα εἶναι τῆς πρὸς τὸν

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Philippidis-Braat 1979, 186-90.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Arnakis 1951.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Wittek 1951; Arnakis 1952; Meyendorff 1966; Prokhorov 1972; Philippidis-Braat 1979, 214-18; Balivet 1982; Miller 2007; Retoulas 2018.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Philippidis-Braat 1979, 109-84.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Gabrieli 1961, 278-9.

<sup>62</sup> On meal in this episode, cf. Çelik 2024, 419-21.

ὄντως θεὸν ἀγάπης, καὶ τὸν μᾶλλον ἀγαπῶντα τὸν θεὸν καὶ μᾶλλον ἐλεήμονα εἶναι καὶ ἀληθῶς, ἐκεῖνος ἤρετο πάλιν εἰ δεχόμεθα καὶ ἀγαπῶμεν καὶ ἡμεῖς τὸν προφήτην αὐτῶν Μεχούμετ.<sup>63</sup>

So, Ismael - that's what the grandson of the great emir was called - asked me: "Is almsgiving also practised among you?". And when I had told him that true almsgiving is the daughter of love for the true God and that the more we love God, the more we are truly merciful, he asked again if we also accept and love their prophet Muḥammad.<sup>64</sup>

The comparison between Islamic *zakāt* and Christian charity/almsgiving is a topic that is not discussed in Byzantine anti-Islamic literature. Some polemicists merely give a passing mention to the ritual practice of *zakāt*.<sup>65</sup> Palamas responds by drawing upon the witness of the New Testament, and at the same time downplays the value of Islamic almsgiving. He states that Christian charity stems from love for God because, in the believer, love for God and love for neighbour are balanced. From this perspective, the customary almsgiving in Islam, driven by the search for salvation and material duties, cannot be compared to the theological nobility of Christian charity. Therefore, Palamas disapproves of Islamic almsgiving, judging it as an ostentation of material wealth.

After a long debate on the figure of Muḥammad and the veracity of the Crucifixion, Ismael quickly changes the subject and he asks for a justification of the worship that Christians reserve for the cross. Here is the passage:

[...] ἐκεῖνος πάλιν ἠρώτα λέγων· “Πῶς τὸ ξύλον ὑμεῖς καὶ τὸν σταυρὸν προσκυνεῖτε;” Ὡς δὲ καὶ πρὸς τοῦτο ἀπολογία ἐποίησάμην, ἦν ὁ θεὸς ἔδωκε, πρὸς αὐτόν, προσθεὶς ὡς “Καὶ αὐτὸς ἀποδέξει δῆπου τοὺς τὸ σημεῖον τὸ σὸν τιμῶντας, τοῖς δὲ ἀτιμάζουσιν ἐς τὰ μάλιστα δυσχερανεῖς, Χριστοῦ δὲ τρόπαιον καὶ σημεῖόν ἐστιν ὁ σταυρός” [...].<sup>66</sup>

[...] he questioned me again, saying: “How can you prostrate before wood and the cross?”. When I had also provided him with the

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<sup>63</sup> Gregory Palamas, *Epistle to his own Church (Epistula ad suam ecclesiam)* 14, ed. Philippidis-Braat 1979, 147 ll. 1-5.

<sup>64</sup> Author's translation.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Niketas Byzantios, *Refutation* 1.382-4 (ed. Förstel 2000, 60) and Theophanes the Confessor, *Chronicle* A.M. 6119 (ed. de Boor 1883, 334 ll. 26-7). For a discussion on this topic, cf. Khoury 1972, 281-2.

<sup>66</sup> Gregory Palamas, *Epistle to his own Church (Epistula ad suam ecclesiam)* 14 (ed. Philippidis-Braat 1979, 149 ll. 12-16).

justification for this, which God inspired me with, adding: “You too will surely approve of those who honour your symbol, while you will be extremely angry with those who dishonour it; now, the trophy and symbol of Christ is the cross” [...].<sup>67</sup>

Ismael asks why Christians worship the cross. This is a sneaky accusation of idolatry. At this point, Palamas withholds the answer he gave to his interlocutor. Given the reticence of the text, it is impossible to definitively ascertain which symbol Palamas is referring to. It cannot be excluded that Palamas is referring to the *tuğ*, a pole with circularly arranged horse or yak tail hairs of varying colours at the top. Employed by Turkic tribes during the period of the Mongol empire, the *tuğ* was later adopted by Ottoman troops. It is highly probable that Palamas, without knowing its name, encountered examples of it in Orhan’s summer camp, where his meeting with Ismael occurred. This interpretation lends considerable significance to the encounter. Both interlocutors reveal a lack of understanding regarding the recognition symbols of their respective communities. Nevertheless, Palamas appears to use the occasion to assert the superiority of the cross, imbued with religious, cultural, and theological meanings. For him the cross represents the memory of the divine sacrifice and, as such, it is not an object of veneration but a medium of adoration.

Before the debate is interrupted by a downpour, Ismael asks about the divine conception of Jesus, a traditional topic of the Christian-Muslim debate. The dialogue ends at this point.

The two passages I have commented on, albeit brief, offer the vivid image of a dialectical exchange and its themes. Specifically, unlike the other topics discussed during the meeting, here I witness how the argument starts or is enriched through a comparison between practices, customs and beliefs that apparently have elements of affinity. Palamas – and in part also Ismael –, instead of exploiting these arguments to reach a point of reconciliation, employs them in order to better anchor his argumentative path, which is all directed to the defence of his own faith and to the demolition of the principles of the opponent.

### 3.4 John VI Kantakouzenos

The *Four Apologies Against Mahomeddanism (Contra sectam Mahometicam apologiae quattuor)* and the *Four Orations Against Muhammad (Contra Mahometem orationes quattuor)*, composed by the monk Ioasaph, more commonly known as John VI Kantakouzenos,

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<sup>67</sup> Author’s translation.

are probably the most important writings against Islam from the Byzantine fourteenth century. In these treatises, the author addresses all the most relevant topics that divide Christians and Muslims. Two elements of innovation stand out when compared with the traditional argumentations: firstly, John adopts a historical approach to downplay Muḥammad's preaching, often comparing it to Jewish rituals; secondly, especially in the *Orations Against Muḥammad*, John makes extensive use of Qur'ānic quotations that he could read in Kydones' translation of a Latin anti-Islamic work, namely the *Against the Law of the Saracens* by the Dominican friar Riccoldo of Monte di Croce, as previously mentioned.

Here, I will examine selected passages of the large corpus where John includes information that is either elaborated in a different manner or completely unknown to the preceding anti-Islamic discourse, and that he derives from his personal experience and knowledge of Islam and its practices.

#### a. Circumcision

The topic of the circumcision had been briefly discussed since the time of John of Damascus,<sup>68</sup> but Niketas Byzantios stated the difference between the Jewish and Muslim rituals: for Jews, circumcision is a sign of obedience to God, while for Muslims it is only the ablation of flesh.<sup>69</sup>

John talks about circumcision in *Apologies* 1 and 4. In the first text, he situates this Islamic practice within the religious rituals shared by Jews and Muslims, such as monarchy, dietary taboos, polygamy, and so forth.<sup>70</sup> He further notes that Jesus' preaching has already superseded all of these. In this way, as he reiterates during the discussion, in highlighting the similarities between Jewish and Muslim ritual practices, John intends to argue that Muḥammad's preaching is directly derived from Jewish beliefs, and as a consequence it is superseded by the Gospel of Christ.

More interesting is what he asserts in the fourth *Apology*. It should be noted that this section, unlike the others, contains numerous passages with a distinctly polemical intent. Moreover, Katakouzenos addresses the theme of circumcision with a different nuance. He approaches the subject from a historical perspective. He explains that the Jews, during the Egyptian captivity, circumcised their children

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<sup>68</sup> John of Damascus, *On Heresies* 100 (ed. Kotter 1981, 67 ll. 152-6).

<sup>69</sup> Niketas Byzantios, *Refutation* 26 (ed. Förstel 2000, 136-8 ll. 26-40).

<sup>70</sup> John Katakouzenos, *Apologies* 1, *Argumentum* (PG 154, col. 373B-C = ed. Förstel 2005, 2-3 ll. 37-47).

in order to distinguish themselves from the Egyptians. Furthermore, this ablation was meant to exert self-control in the face of passions. Jesus cancelled this practice and replaced it with baptism. Here follow some considerations that deserve attention:

“Ὅτι δὲ ἐλθόντος τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἤργησεν ὁ νόμος καὶ οὐδὲ περιτομὴ ἐστίν, ἀφ’ ὧν μέλλεις ἀκούσειν, πρόσσυχες. Τὸ μὲν βάπτισμα παρὰ Θεοῦ δοθὲν ὀρθοδοξίας χάριν ἐδόθη καὶ διὰ τοῦτο πάντες ἄνδρες καὶ πᾶσαι γυναῖκες βαπτίζονται· ὁ δὲ μὴ βαπτισθεὶς οὐκ ἔστιν ὀρθόδοξος. Ἡ δὲ περιτομὴ οὐχ οὕτως, ἀλλὰ μόνοι οἱ ἄνδρες περιτέμνονται, αἱ δὲ γυναῖκες οὐχί. Ἔοικε γοῦν, ἵνα οἱ μὲν ἄνδρες ὡς περιτετημημένοι ὦσιν ὀρθόδοξοι, αἱ δὲ γυναῖκες ὡς ἀπερίτμητοι ἀσεβεῖς.

Βλέπεις, πῶς ἄλλος ἐστὶν ὁ τῆς περιτομῆς λόγος καὶ ἄλλως ποιοῦσιν Μουσουλμάνοι; Οἱ γὰρ αὐτοὶ πάντα ἀπερίτμητον ἀσεβῆ λογίζονται. Καὶ ἴδου αὐτοὶ ἑαυτοῖς μάχεσθε καί, ἅπερ ὀρθοδοξίας χάριν τιᾶτε, ταῦτα ἀπὸ μέρους ἀτιμάζετε. Καὶ οὐ μόνον εἰς αὐτὸ τοῦτο ἀναφαίνονται οἱ Μουσουλμάνοι ἐναντιοφωνοῦντες πρὸς ἑαυτούς, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐν ἑτέροις πολλοῖς, ἅπερ οὐκ ἔστιν τις χρεῖα κατὰ τὸ παρὸν λέγειν περὶ ἐκείνων.

“Ὅμως περὶ ἐνὸς εἴπωμεν. Λέγει ὁ Χριστὸς ἐν τῷ Εὐαγγελίῳ, ὅτι “Ἐὰν μὴ τις βαπτισθῆ, οὐκ ἔστι τοῦ θεοῦ οὐδὲ τῆς σωτηρίας”.<sup>71</sup> Ὁ Μωάμεθ μαρτυρεῖ τὸ Εὐαγγέλιον ἅγιον καὶ τέλειον καὶ εὐθές. Οἱ Μουσουλμάνοι τοὺς περιτετημημένους λογίζονται ὀρθοδόξους, τοὺς δὲ βεβαπτισμένους ἀσεβεῖς. Εἰ μὲν οὖν στέργετε τὸν Μωάμεθ, ὅτι ἀληθῶς λέγει, πῶς ὀνομάζετε τοὺς βεβαπτισμένους ἀσεβεῖς καὶ οὐκ ἀκολουθεῖτε τῇ τοῦ Εὐαγγελίου διδασκαλίᾳ καὶ λογίξεσθε τοὺς μὲν περιτετημημένους κακῶς ποιοῦντας, τοὺς δὲ βεβαπτισμένους εὐσεβεῖς; Ἀλλὰ τάναντία φρονεῖτε. Οὐκ ἔστι πρόδηλον, ὅτι αὐτοὶ ἑαυτοῖς μάχεσθε καὶ αὐτοὶ ἑαυτοὺς ἀνατρέπετε;<sup>72</sup>

With the coming of Christ, the law was abolished and there is no circumcision. Pay attention to the rest of our discourse. Baptism was established as a gift from God for a right faith and for this reason all men and women are baptised. Whoever does not receive baptism is not right in the faith. This is not the case for circumcision, since only men are circumcised and women are not. It therefore seems that men, since they have been circumcised, are right in the faith, while women, since they are not circumcised, are impious. Do you understand then how much circumcision is quite different and how Muslims practise it differently? In fact, they judge

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<sup>71</sup> Mark 16:16.

<sup>72</sup> John Kantakouzenos, *Apologies* 4.2 (PG 154, coll. 537C-540A = ed. Förstel 2005, 180-2 ll. 114-35).

anyone who is not circumcised to be impious. And behold you fight against yourselves and end up despising in part what you judge to be the signs of the true faith. But not only in this do the Muslims seem to contradict themselves, but also in many other questions that it is not necessary to discuss now. We will only cite this: Christ in the Gospel says: "Whoever is not baptised does not belong to God and to salvation". Muḥammad considers the Gospel to be holy, complete and correct. Muslims judge those who are circumcised to be right in the faith and those who are baptised to be impious. If you follow the preaching of Muḥammad that you believe to be true, how can you call those who are baptised impious and not follow the teaching of the Gospel and not think that those who are circumcised act badly, while those who are baptised instead are pious? You think the opposite. Is it not clear that you are fighting against yourselves and misleading yourselves?<sup>73</sup>

The passage is undoubtedly polemical. What I am keen to underscore is that, despite beginning with a well-known theme developed in earlier treatises, John introduces new considerations aimed at demolishing the entire meaning of the Muslim practice of circumcision. Starting from a historical observation, he inserts an argument, I would say, of social and theological character at the same time: circumcision excludes women from full membership of the community, and this, on the contrary, exalts Jesus' introduction of baptism, capable of embracing the entire humanity beyond gender distinctions. As we will see shortly, Katakouzenos will return to the topic of the role of women. Here as elsewhere, he does not position himself as a supporter of a 'social emancipation' of the female figure, but aims to highlight the asymmetry that, perhaps through personal experience, he observes in the religion of his opponents. Recalling the background role that women have in Islamic religious practice and in its foundational models, John exalts the novelty of Christianity, which, starting from the universal message spread by Jesus, overcomes the Jewish law to which, according to him, Islam conforms. Not by chance, in the passage quoted here, John continues and lingers on quotes from the Gospel of Mark to highlight the inherent contradiction in Muḥammad's preaching, who praises the value of the Gospel but seems not to follow its fundamental teachings.

<sup>73</sup> Author's translation.

## b. Human Sacrifices

In the fourth *Apology*, another highly unconventional topic concerning ritual practices is broached. It pertains to human sacrifices. Kantakouzenos charges Muḥammad with imposing his new faith upon others by means of “sword and knife”. Thus, John denounces the murders and raids carried out by Muslims against people of other faiths. Then, he asks how God could send a prophet who promotes submission through violence and oppression. Additionally, he contends that the natural law, as demonstrated by animals, does not endorse such actions. Moreover, he adds:

Οὐ μόνον δὲ μέχρι τούτου ἡ κακία ἔσται, ἀλλὰ καὶ περαιτέρω προέβη. Τί γὰρ τῆς τοιαύτης ὠμότητος καὶ μισανθρωπίας χεῖρον γένοιτ' ἂν, ὥστε φονεύειν μηδὲν ἡδίκηκός τις; Καὶ γάρ, ὅποταν ἀπέλθωσι Μουσουλμάνοι πρὸς πόλεμον καὶ ἐν τῷ πολέμῳ πέσῃ τις ἐξ αὐτῶν, οὐ λογίζονται ἑαυτοὺς ἀξίους μέμψεως ὡς αἰτίους τοῦ πολέμου, ἀλλ' ἐπὶ τὸ νεκρὸν σῶμα τοῦ πεπτωκότος σφάττουσι ζῶντας, ὅσους ἂν δυνηθῇ ἕκαστος, καί, ὅσον πλείους κτείνει, τοσοῦτον λογίζεται ὠφέλειαν τῆς τοῦ τεθνεώτος ψυχῆς. Εἰ δ' ἴσως οὐκ ἔχει ἀνθρώπους εἰς ἐξουσίαν αὐτοῦ ὁ βουλόμενος βοηθῆσαι τῇ τοῦ τεθνεώτος ψυχῇ, ἐξωνεῖται Χριστιανούς, εἴπερ εὔροι, καὶ ἡ ἐπάνω τοῦ νεκροῦ σώματος σφάττει αὐτοὺς ἢ ἐπὶ τῷ τάφῳ αὐτοῦ. Καὶ ὁ ταῦτα νομοθετῶν πῶς ἀπὸ Θεοῦ;<sup>74</sup>

But the wickedness did not stop there, but rather went far beyond. For what is worse than such inhumanity and hatred for mankind than to kill those who have committed no evil? And in fact, whenever the Muslims go to war and one of them falls in battle, they do not consider themselves worthy of reproach as the cause of the war, but on the dead body of the deceased they sacrifice as many living prisoners as each one is able: and the more of them they slaughter, the more they believe that they will be of benefit to the soul of the deceased. And if then there are no men available, the one who intends to help the soul of the dead buys Christians, if there are any, and kills them on the body of the dead or on his grave. And how can he come from God who legislates in this way?<sup>75</sup>

John goes on to mention a practice that he claims is associated with Islam: the sacrifice of living prisoners on the graves of dead warriors. He says that this practice is carried out under the belief that it

<sup>74</sup> John Kantakouzenos, *Apologies* 4.5 (PG 154, col. 545A-B = ed. Förstel 2005, 190 ll. 277-87).

<sup>75</sup> Author's translation.



will benefit the dead. If there are no prisoners available, the Muslims will buy Christians to be killed. This passage has been analysed by Vryonis, who links it to other accounts of human sacrifice in Turkic Central Asia communities dating back to the sixth century, related by Menander Protector and Theophanes.<sup>76</sup>

The reliability of Kantakouzenos' account seems to be confirmed by an episode mentioned by the historian Chalkokondyles,<sup>77</sup> but this does not necessarily mean that the practice of human sacrifice was widespread in Islam. It is possible that this was an isolated incident, or that it was only practised by a small minority of Turkish Muslims, still tied to forms of worship characteristic of Turkic-Mongol communities. Overall, there is no clear evidence to support the claim that the sacrifice of living prisoners is a uniquely Islamic practice. More research is needed to determine the extent to which this practice was actually carried out, and whether it was motivated by religious beliefs or other ethnographical factors. It is significant that Kantakouzenos mentions this practice in order to denounce the brutality of Muḥammad's followers. I believe we are facing a case of flattening of the historical-cultural perspective, which however has the merit of returning to us the depiction of Muslim customs contemporary to the text's composition, although fragmented and episodic, and limited to Turkish groups that were not entirely Islamised, of which John had direct knowledge.

### c. Female Condition

John devotes special attention to the status of women, using this topic as a polemical argument. While he is partly influenced by Kydones' translation, it is crucial to highlight that the discourse on this topic is located in the last of the *Apologies*, which include minimal quotes from the translation of the Greek scholar. John criticises the Qur'ānic indication stating that whoever lies with a prostitute or seduces a consenting virgin or a captive woman is not a sinner.<sup>78</sup> However, the real target of John's polemical attack is the practice of polygamy, which he judges shocking. He does not find any case in the Scriptures where this practice is accepted, and blames Muḥammad for allowing and encouraging sexual practices in this world as in the afterlife. John says:

<sup>76</sup> Vryonis 1971b.

<sup>77</sup> Laonikos Chalkokondyles, *Demonstrations of History* 7 (ed. Darkò 1926, 118 ll. 1-4).

<sup>78</sup> John Kantakouzenos, *Apologies* 4.5 (PG 154, col. 545B-C = ed. Förstel 2005, 190 ll. 294-8).

Ἦτι περὶ τῶν ἀνδρῶν μόνον μέλει τῷ Θεῷ ὡς πλασμάτων αὐτοῦ, περὶ δὲ τῶν γυναικῶν οὐδαμῶς διὰ τὸ μὴ εἶναι αὐτοὺς πλάσμα Θεοῦ; Καὶ διὰ τοῦτο οἱ μὲν ἄνδρες μέλλουσι ἀπολαβεῖν τῶν παρὰ τοῦ Θεοῦ τοιούτων ἀγαθῶν, αἱ δὲ γυναῖκες οὐδ' ὄλωσ; Ἦ, ἐπεὶ μία φύσις ἐστὶν ἀνδρὸς καὶ γυναικὸς καὶ εἰς ἀνθρωπὸς ἐστὶ πᾶς ἀνθρωπος καὶ ὁμοίως μέλλουσι κριθῆναι οἱ πάντες καὶ ὁμοίως μέλλουσι ἀπολαβεῖν, οἱ μὲν καλῶς πολιτευσάμενοι ἀγαθὰ, οἱ δὲ κακῶς ὄργην Θεοῦ καὶ ἀποστροφὴν καὶ κόλασιν, πάντως που παντί που δῆλον, ὅτι πάντες ἀνθρωποὶ ὁμοίως μέλλουσι κριθῆναι ἄνδρες τε καὶ γυναῖκες, ἐπεὶ καὶ μία καὶ ἡ αὐτὴ φύσις ἐστὶ καὶ ὁμοίως μέλλουσι ἀπολαβεῖν, ὡς ἕκαστος αὐτῶν ἔπραξε κακὰ τε καὶ ἀγαθὰ.<sup>79</sup>

And again, does God only care about men, since they are his creation, and not about women, since they are not his creation? And for this reason, are men destined to enjoy such blessings from God and women absolutely not? Or, since the nature of man and woman is unique and one is the human being and in the same way all human beings will be judged and in the same way they will receive some goods because they have lived in righteousness, others God's wrath and disruption and punishment if they have lived badly, obviously to all clearly, because all human beings will be subjected to judgment, men and women, since one and the same is their nature and they will receive in the same way according to what each one did of good and evil.<sup>80</sup>

In the development of his reasoning, John shifts the focus from the topic of polygamy to the reward in the afterlife. He emphasises the presence of an unjustified and unacceptable predominance of the male element in Muhammad's preaching. In Kantakouzenos' view, the woman is relegated to a marginal role, existing solely for the pure pleasure of the man both in this life and in the hereafter. The same configuration of the Islamic Paradise, which denies salvation and any form of enjoyment for women, appears to Kantakouzenos absurd rather than impious. However, at this point a clarification is essential. John, however, should not be regarded as a feminist *avant la lettre*. In his treatment of this topic, Kantakouzenos begins by comparing polygamy and monogamy. He follows John of Damascus and especially Theodore Abu-Qurrah, who believed that the purpose of marriage is pleasure and procreation, and that this is best achieved in a monogamous relationship. This is why God created the original

<sup>79</sup> John Kantakouzenos, *Apologies* 4.6 (PG 154, col. 552A-B = ed. Förstel 2005, 196 ll. 407-17).

<sup>80</sup> Author's translation.

monogamous couple.<sup>81</sup> On this basis, Kantakouzenos considers polygamy absurd and inappropriate, as it constitutes a kind of injustice against women, who have equal dignity to men in the divine economy.

#### d. Saint George and the Miracle of the Three Lamps in Jerusalem

The real *Leitmotif* in Kantakouzenos' anti-Islamic corpus lies in the statement of the superiority of Christianity in order to convince his opponent. This superiority, he says, is not justified by the conquered lands and the submission of people, but by Jesus' preaching, which is the fulfilment of the messianic promises contained in the Scriptures. John says that, while Jesus' words appear so simple and unadorned, they actually contain a supernatural message. Jews and Muslims are like a drop in the sea, because all of the *oikoumene* trusts in Jesus as God. The reliability of Christ's message lies in the direct witness of his disciples, his apostles, and especially of the martyrs who paid their faith with the sacrifice of their lives.

In this context, John mentions the case of George, a saint martyr, who is also worshipped by Muslims as Cheter Eliaz (Χετήρ Ἡλιάς) or Khiḍr-Ilyās.<sup>82</sup> Here is the related passage:

Καί, ὅτι μὲν πάντες οἱ τοῦ Χριστοῦ μάρτυρες θαύματα ἐνήργουν ἄπειρα, ἅτινα διὰ τὸ πλῆθος εἰάθησαν, τοιοῦτόν ἐστιν. Ὅμως δὲ ἐκ τῶν πολλῶν συνεγράψαντο οἱ τῷ καιρῷ ἐκείνῳ εὐρισκόμενοι οὐκ ὀλίγα, ἐξ ὧν ἓν ἐστὶ τοῦτο. Ὁ παρ' ἡμῶν τῶν Χριστιανῶν τιμώμενος μάρτυς τοῦ Χριστοῦ Γεώργιος, ὃς καὶ παρ' αὐτῶν τῶν Μουσουλμάνων τιμᾶται, ὀνομάζεται δὲ παρ' αὐτῶν Χετήρ Ἡλιάς, βασανιζόμενος καὶ πειραζόμενος παρὰ τῶν ἀσεβῶν καὶ εἰδωλολατρῶν, ἵνα τὸν μὲν Χριστὸν ἀρνήσῃται, σεβασθῆ δὲ καὶ προσκυνήσῃ τοῖς ἐκείνων θεοῖς -- ὃ δὲ προεἴλετο μυρίους θανάτους καὶ μυρίας βασάνους ὑπὲρ τοῦ ὀνόματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἢ ὅλως ἀθετῆσαι τὴν εἰς τὸν Χριστὸν πίστιν αὐτοῦ. Καὶ ἐποίησαν αὐτῷ τιμωρίας μεγάλας καὶ πειρατήρια.<sup>83</sup>

Although all the martyrs of Christ performed incalculable miracles, so many that it was impossible to record them all, this is an example. George, the martyr of Christ, honoured by Christians and also respected by Muslims, who call him Cheter Eliaz, was tortured and tempted by the wicked and idolatrous to deny Christ,

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<sup>81</sup> Theodore Abu-Qurrah, *Pamphlet 24*, PG 97, coll. 1556A-57D. For a summary of this topic, cf. Khoury 1972, 260-3.

<sup>82</sup> Vryonis 1971a, 485; Wolper 2000, esp. 315-16.

<sup>83</sup> John Kantakouzenos, *Apologies 3.6-8* (PG 154, coll. 512D-13A = ed. Förstel 2005, 152 ll. 294-304).

to venerate and worship their gods, but he preferred a thousand times death and a thousand torments in the name of Christ rather than renounce his faith in Christ. They attacked him with great tortures and trials.<sup>84</sup>

This is a very astonishing record of overlapped and shared worship. But even more important is that John employs this worship as a polemical argument to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity. This brief passage confirms what has been theorised in the first pages of this article, that is, how situations of cohabitation in contact zones and cases of religious blending, instead of favouring a reconciliation between different faiths, produce, within a polemical context, arguments and examples useful for the demolition of the opponent.

To confirm this, I mention another example a few paragraphs later. Here, Kantakouzenos inveighs against those who do not trust in God because they are blinded by the devil, and there he mentions the miracle of the three lamps in Jerusalem (Ἄγιον Φῶς).<sup>85</sup> He says:

Οἶδας πάντως, ὅτι κρίμασιν, οἷς οἶδε Θεός, κατεξουσιάζουσιν οἱ Μουσουλμάνοι καὶ τοῦ τόπου τοῦ ἁγίου τούτου καὶ κατὰ τὸν δηλωθέντα καιρὸν τῆς τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἀναστάσεως πολλὴν καὶ μεγάλην ποιοῦνται τὴν ἐπιμέλειαν καὶ φροντίδα, ὥστε μηκέτ' εἶναι τὸ παράπαν λυχνιαῖον φῶς. Ἐνεργεῖται τοιγαροῦν τοῦτο οὕτως ἀπαραιτήτως κατὰ τὴν τούτων ἐπιμέλειαν. Ἐν δὲ τῷ καιρῷ, καθ' ὃν ἄδουσιν οἱ ἐκεῖσε εὐρισκόμενοι Χριστιανοὶ τὸν τῆς ἀναστάσεως τοῦ Χριστοῦ ὕμνον, κατέρχεται φῶς οὐρανόθεν ἀνάπτον τὰς εἰς τὸν τοιοῦτον τάφον τοῦ Χριστοῦ εὐρισκομένας τρεῖς λαμπάδας ἐνώπιον τοῦ ἐκεῖσε εὐρισκομένου τηνικαῦτα κατὰ καιρὸν ἄρχοντος τῶν Μουσουλμάνων.

Τί γοῦν σοι δοκεῖ; Ψευδῶς ἔλεγεν ὁ Χριστός, ὅτι Θεός ἐστι καὶ Θεοῦ Υἱός; Ψευδῶς δὲ πιστεύουσι καὶ οἱ Χριστιανοί; Καὶ πῶς τῇ ὥρᾳ ταύτῃ, καθ' ἣν ἀνυμνοῦσιν οὗτοι, ὡς εἶπομεν, τὸν Χριστὸν Θεὸν καὶ Θεοῦ Υἱὸν καὶ ποιητὴν πάσης κτίσεως, εἰς πλείονα δὴθεν πίστῳσιν καὶ δήλωσιν τοῦ θαύματος μαρτυροῦντος τοῦτο τοῦ Θεοῦ, ὥστ' εἶναι τοῦτ' ἀληθές, κατέρχεται οὐρανόθεν φῶς ἐξάπτον τὰς εἰς τὸν τάφον αὐτοῦ διὰ τοῦ Χριστοῦ, ὡς δεδήλωται, λαμπάδας;

Ὡσπερ γὰρ ἐν τῇ Ἰορδάνῃ ἐν τῇ ὥρᾳ τῆς αὐτοῦ τοῦ Χριστοῦ βαπτίσεως κατήλθεν ἐξ οὐρανοῦ φωνὴ λέγουσα, ὅτι “Οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ Υἱός μου ὁ ἀγαπητός”,<sup>86</sup> τουτέστιν ὁ Χριστός, οὕτω καὶ κατὰ τὸν ῥηθέντα καιρὸν κατέρχεται τὸ ἐξ οὐρανοῦ φῶς πιστούμενον καὶ μαρτυροῦν πᾶσι πιστοῖς τε καὶ ἀπίστοις, ὅτι αὐτός ἐστιν ὁ Χριστός

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**84** Author's translation.

**85** Canard 1965; Auxentios of Photiki 1999.

**86** Matt. 3:17; cf. Mark 1:9; Luke 3:22.

ὁ Υἱὸς καὶ Λόγος τοῦ Θεοῦ, ὁ ἀληθὴς Θεὸς τε καὶ ἄνθρωπος. Τίς γοῦν οὕτως ἄθλιος, ὃς οὐ προσκυνεῖ καὶ ὁμολογεῖ αὐτὸν Θεὸν καὶ Υἱὸν καὶ Λόγον τοῦ Θεοῦ;<sup>87</sup>

You know that, by God's inscrutable will, the Muslims also control that place, holy to him, and in the days of the Resurrection of Christ [Holy Week] they take great care and caution that no light is lit. Yet this happens inexorably in spite of their scruples. At the moment when the Christians who live there sing the hymn for the Resurrection of Christ, a light descends from heaven, which lights the three lamps that are placed in the aforementioned tomb of Christ under the eyes of the Muslim governor, who is present on that occasion. What do you think? Did Christ lie when he said that he is God and Son of God? Perhaps the Christians falsely believe? And how is it possible that precisely at the moment they chant, as stated, that Christ is God and the Son of God, the creator of all creatures, as a further proof and confirmation of the prodigy which testifies that this comes from God, i.e., that it is true, a light descends from heaven that turns on the lamps of his tomb, that is, of Christ, as recounted? As indeed at the moment of the baptism of Christ at the Jordan, a voice descended from heaven that proclaimed: "This is my beloved Son", that is, Christ, so also in the aforementioned moment the heavenly light descends that assures and testifies to all the faithful and to the unbelievers that this is Christ, the Son and Word of God, true God and man. Who then is so petty as not to worship him and profess him as God and Son and Word of God?<sup>88</sup>

It is evident that the passage aims to present a miraculous event as irrefutable evidence of the truth of the Christian message and the divine nature of Christ. What merits emphasis is the contrast with previous examples. In those instances, the polemicist drew inspiration from the situations, customs, and practices of the opposing faction that could be compared with those of Christians. In this case, however, Kantakouzenos introduces a miraculous phenomenon observed by Muslims, who have controlled the Holy Land for centuries. The direction is therefore reversed: rather than correlating an Islamic practice with a Christian one, the polemicist utilises a well-known phenomenon from a well-established contact zone to assert the superiority and truth of Christianity.

<sup>87</sup> John Kantakouzenos, *Apologies* 3.8 (PG 154, col. 517AC = ed. Förstel 2005, 156-8 ll. 389-412).

<sup>88</sup> Author's translation.

## 4 A Preliminary Conclusion

In this essay, I have presented a selection of passages from the works of prominent authors of Palaiologan literature. Through these excerpts, I aim to demonstrate the emergence of a new trend in the anti-Islamic literature of that period. Alongside the traditional themes of theological and ethical issues, the close interactions within the contact zones with Turkish Islam provide Byzantine polemicists with fresh points of criticism, examples, and controversial tools derived from everyday practices they directly experience. The incorporation of these elements and the exploitation of their apologetical-polemical potential represent the most significant 'originality' in the polemical literature of the Palaiologan period, setting it apart from the long-standing Byzantine tradition on this subject.

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