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## John of Damascus's Theological Methodology: An Effective Way to Answer Islamic Objections

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### Abstract

John of Damascus, who is considered one of the three pillars of the Eastern Orthodox church, was not known in the West for a long time. Few scholars studied his work in recent years and highlighted some aspects of his *Summa*, which is considered the first systematic theology work in the history of Christianity. This paper will have three sections: the first section shall discuss the life and the educational background of John. The second section shall discuss and evaluate John's theological methodology. The third section shall discuss his methodology in answering the Saracen. This paper aims to highlight John's theological work and methodology, and evaluate his answers to the Islamic objections.

### Keywords

John of Damascus, Islam, Trinity, Saracen, Methodology

### Cover Page Footnote

Sherene was born and raised in Damascus, Syria. She is a Doctoral candidate at Liberty University. She is pursuing a PhD in Theology and Apologetics and expected to graduate in Spring 2021.

## Introduction

John of Damascus is a Syrian theologian who is not very well known in the West. He is one of the three major theologians of the Eastern Orthodox church,<sup>1</sup> and three of his numerous publications were translated into English. In these works, John emphasizes the role of knowledge in Christian life, encouraging Christians to educate themselves and deepen their understanding of the divine and their Christian beliefs. Throughout, he employs a theological methodology that is very effective against heretical beliefs, emphasizing the roles of Scripture, reason, and tradition in understanding divine revelation. With the help of Carl F. H. Henry's test of truth principles, this paper shall examine the distinctiveness and the efficacy of John's theological methodology—especially in comparison to the theological method of conservative modern evangelicalism—noting how it was shaped by his life, education, and experiences.

## John of Damascus's Life, Background, and Context

### John's Family and Civil Life

John of Damascus—also called John Damascene—came from an influential Christian family in Damascus, Syria. His grandfather, Mansur ibn Sargun, was the one who surrendered the city of Damascus to the Islamic leader Khalid ibn al-Walid because he had been the financial governor of Damascus when the Arabs besieged the city in AD 635.<sup>2</sup> Mansur passed his position down through the family line to his son and later to his grandson, John, who in addition to his financial responsibilities was appointed the first counselor to the caliph.

This position indicates that John received good education in his life, leading him to speak several languages including Greek and Arabic. In AD 716, John entered St. Sabas monastery near Jerusalem to start his monastic life.<sup>3</sup> During his life in the monastery, John wrote several books, including *The Fount of Knowledge* (considered the first *Summa*), *The Orthodox Faith* (not a compilation, but a synthesis of Greek theology), *On Heresies* (a summarized work similar to Irenaeus and Hippolyte's works against heresies), and many other

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<sup>1</sup> Noted that the title "Theologian" in Eastern Orthodox tradition was given to three people only: John the Evangelist and Theologian (the apostle), Gregory of Nazianzus (The Theologian), and Symeon the New Theologian which will be discussed further in the paper.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel J. Janosik, *John of Damascus: The First Apologist to the Muslims* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016), 25.

<sup>3</sup> Janosik, *John of Damascus*, 31.

books. While all were written in Greek, only the previous three were translated to English.

John was also a speaker and a preacher. According to Frederic Chase, John “was a preacher of the first order and, although his style is at times more effusive and exalted, he may be said to rank with the great Chrysostom.”<sup>4</sup> His sermons were polemic and somewhat dogmatic. In the title of one of John’s homilies, he is described as a Presbyter (priest) of the Holy resurrection of Christ our God, which may refer to the church of Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, because John defended the Christian faith during the 8<sup>th</sup> century against Islamic objections, Daniel Janosik considers John the first apologist to the Muslims.<sup>6</sup>

### John’s Theological Islamic Context

Like followers of any other religion, Muslims wrestled with specific theological topics. Their focus often centered on issues related to faith and works, predestination and free will, and the uncreated nature of the Qur’an. As Christians and Jews developed their theological doctrines by answering and criticizing the heresies that they faced, Muslim theologians developed their own counterarguments. In the same manner, John felt the need to develop and contextualize his teachings about God and the Trinity against several heresies, especially one he calls the “heresy of the Ishmaelites.”<sup>7</sup> The pattern of developing and re-contextualizing religious doctrines was and is still happening today, underscoring its importance.

At that time, the topics that Muslims were wrestling with related to whether the Qur’an is the eternal word of Allah and whether it is created or uncreated. In the Umayyad era, most Muslims thought of the Qur’an as uncreated, and, therefore, as eternal—like Allah’s power, knowledge, and attributes. Janosik explains that “since the Qur’an is his [Allah] revelation to man through the act of

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<sup>4</sup> Frederic H. Chase, trans., *Saint John of Damascus Writings* (NY: Fathers of the church, 1958), xxiii

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Louth, *St John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology* (Oxford Printing Press, 2002), 7.

<sup>6</sup> Janosik, *John of Damascus*, 1.

<sup>7</sup> Janosik explains that early Christians called Islam a heresy because this is how they viewed the developing of Islamic religion. There were many similarities and historical connections that made them view Islam as a heresy, not a new religion.

speaking, then the Qur'an itself must be eternal like God himself."<sup>8</sup> In other words, Allah's speech is eternal with him, and since the Qur'an is Allah's speech, then the Qur'an must be eternal.<sup>9</sup> This would also indicate that the Qur'an is uncreated because it is part of Allah's nature (like his attributes), and it is, therefore, eternal with him. This line of thought suggests that Allah predestined the Arabs and all the events recorded in the Qur'an from eternity. The Muslim caliphs promoted this position because it strengthened their rule over the people and helped them safely do what they pleased.<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting that this view is the dominant view today among Sunnis, especially in the Arabic world.

During John's time, another group also flourished. The Mu'tazilites gave priority to logic over scripture. They opposed the main view of God's predestination, claiming that God's divine justice requires human free will and responsibility, otherwise God would be the only one responsible for evil and unjust acts.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Mu'tazilites opposed the Sunni belief that the speech act of Allah is anthropomorphism, and the Qur'an is not eternal with or part of the nature of God—otherwise it would ultimately destroy the unity of God. If the Qur'an existed apart from God (which it did on *Al-Lawh Al-Mahfouz*),<sup>12</sup> then there would be two eternal entities rather than one, and the unity of God would be compromised.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, by using reason and giving it a priority over revelation, the Mu'tazilites concluded that the Qur'an had to be created. It seems that John

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<sup>8</sup> Janosik, *John of Damascus*, 86.

<sup>9</sup> Not all Muslims believe that the Qur'an is Allah's speech. A subset called Mu'tazilites believed that the speech of Allah is anthropomorphism, which will negatively affect the unity of the God. The Sunnis, on the other hand, believed that Allah's revelation is Allah's speech. It is eternal, such as Allah's power, knowledge, and attributes, but it was descended from heaven in three stages: the first one is when the Qur'an descended to *Al-Lawh Al-Mahfouz* (the Book of Decrees/the Preserved Tablet) (Surah 57:22; 85:22). *Al-Lawh Al-Mahfouz* is a tablet that Allah had saved in the highest heaven, where all the ecumenical events that have happened and all that will happen are kept in the tablet forever. The second descension was when the Qur'an descended as a whole to *Beit Al-Iza* (the House of Glory), which is another place in heaven, where Jibril (angel Gabriel) has access to the words of the Qur'an. Finally, the third descension took place when the verses of the Qur'an came down to the heart/mind of Mohammad. While the Qur'an was descended as a whole to *Al-Lawh Al-Mahfouz* and to the dwelling place of Jibril in *Beith Al-Iza*, it partially and gradually came down to Mohammad.

<sup>10</sup> Janosik, *John of Damascus*, 83.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>12</sup> Check footnote no. 11.

<sup>13</sup> Duncan Black Macdonald, *Development of Muslim Theology, Jurisprudence, and Constitutional Theory* (New York: Charles Scribner's sons, 1903), 135.

was aware of this Islamic dispute and based his argument over the Sunnis' argument to prove the oneness of God.

### **John of Damascus's Theological Methodology**

In his writings against Christian heresies, John of Damascus demonstrates the need to prepare Christians to defend their beliefs against objections and against the new religious doctrines that were assailing the church throughout the Middle East.<sup>14</sup> This is not necessarily a bad thing. The existence of heresies throughout history has helped the church formulate, advance, and contextualize their doctrines. John was not an exception. He was fully aware of this danger of heresies, the history of the church, and how the early fathers faced handling them. Therefore, he saw a great need to inform the church about its orthodox belief by formulating his *Summa (The Orthodox Faith)* and writing his book *On Heresies*. These works detailed the heresies, taught Christians why these beliefs are mistaken, and answered the objections they raised against Christianity.

#### **The Role of Scripture in John's Methodology**

John's methodology starts with God himself and his revelation to humanity by the prophets, apostles, and evangelists. John admits that God is unknowable; however, certain facts about the divine can be grasped because "the Only-begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him."<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, since the declarations of the Son about God came to us through the Scriptures, all the writings should be followed.

John uses the Bible frequently in his writings. Sometimes he uses direct quotations without referencing them; and other times he paraphrases, integrates, and blends biblical concepts directly into his teachings. The abundance of scriptural references intermixed with his writings indicates that the Bible plays an important role in John's thinking and in the presentation of his message. John gives great attention to the Bible because he admits that man is limited in his knowledge, and he cannot reach to God by himself; therefore, God had to declare himself to man. John believes that it is impossible "to understand anything about God beyond what has been divinely proclaimed to us, whether told or revealed, by the sacred declaration of the Old and New Testament."<sup>16</sup> This statement demonstrates how greatly John revered the Bible and why he used it in his

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<sup>14</sup> Janosik, *John of Damascus*, 71.

<sup>15</sup> John, OF I.1. (John 1:18).

<sup>16</sup> John, OF I.2.

writings the way he did.

John does not believe that the Bible should be read only by monks and religious men. On the contrary, he advises that all Christians should read the Bible.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, he considers the Scripture a good source for knowledge—not just religious knowledge, but knowledge in general. He states, “Let us knock at the very beautiful paradise of the Scriptures, the fragrant, most sweet and lovely paradise...let us not knock casually, but with eagerness and persistence... should we read once and then a second time and still not understand what we are reading, let us not be discouraged.”<sup>18</sup> John encourages people to be persistent and eager while they read the Scriptures and study Christian tradition, even if they do not understand everything completely. He then encourages them to rely on God the Father for further understanding.<sup>19</sup>

While John affirms the role of the Scripture in his writings, he does not emphasize it as much as evangelical theologians have historically done. Evangelical theology, which is rooted in the reformation, holds to the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* and believes that Scripture alone is the final authority in religious knowledge, including theological doctrine, dogma, and morality. According to Matthew Barrett, Scripture is the only “self-authenticating” source of knowledge because God is its author.<sup>20</sup> Carl F. H. Henry stresses the fact that “divine revelation is the evoking cause of Christian theology and faith, and the ultimate criterion of all evangelical doctrine.”<sup>21</sup> While John might not disagree with this claim, he does not emphasize it in his writings.

Since John is one of the main theologians of the Eastern Orthodox church, some scholars see his methodology as mainly Christocentric. Andrew Louth explains that there is no real consensus over how the Scriptures are to be interpreted in the Eastern Orthodox theology.<sup>22</sup> The New Testament is read in its entirety every year in church services in conjunction with the divine liturgy, and the Old Testament is read selectively. However, Louth concludes that the way the

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<sup>17</sup> John lists the canonical books and even includes several of non-canonical books to the list of readings, such as book of 1&2 Paralipomenon, 1&2 Esdras, and Josue, son of Nave ...etc.

<sup>18</sup> John, OF 17.4.

<sup>19</sup> John, OF 17.4

<sup>20</sup> Matthew Barrett, *God's Word Alone: The Authority of Scripture: What the Reformers Taught... and Why It Still Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 145.

<sup>21</sup> Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority: God Who Speaks and Show*, Vol. 1, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1999), 215.

<sup>22</sup> Andrew Louth, *Introducing Eastern Orthodox Theology* (IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 10.

Orthodox Church treats the Scriptures suggests that it does not see the Scripture as a collection of infallible texts, but rather it sees it as a body of witness of varying significance to Jesus Christ.<sup>23</sup>

To be fair to John's theology, it is important to note that his methodology seems to be both Bible-centered and Christ-centered. John uses biblical verses extensively in his writings. He does not consider the Bible errant; rather, it often functions as the vehicle for explaining something else, such as another passage of Scripture, or another subject/concept. Moreover, John uses the Scripture as a sort of authoritative dictionary. He defines important terms in theological discussion by referencing the way Scripture uses them. In the book *The Orthodox Faith*, John writes about the Godhead and that no one knows the Father but the Son. In order to convey this idea, he connects 1 John 1:18, Matthew 11:27, and 1 Corinthians 2:11 together, stating that since no one can know God but the Son, Jesus declared the Father to us.<sup>24</sup> In this way, he uses biblical data to convey what the Son has declared.

At the same time, John's theological methodology is Christocentric. The nature of the heresies that he refuted required him to focus on the two natures of Christ and the Trinity. John provides a thorough defense for the Trinity "against what he saw as a heresy of Christianity, [and] there was a need to prepare Christians to defend their beliefs against the new religious doctrine that was assailing the Christian church throughout the Middle East."<sup>25</sup> Many heresies were spreading in his days, such as Monophysitism, Nestorianism, Arianism, Jacobitism, and what he called "the Ishmaelites" (Islam). All these heresies targeted the divine nature of Jesus, which compelled John to recognize the great need for a definition/framework for the Christian orthodox faith, especially the deity of Christ and the Trinity. John acknowledges that God "has given us knowledge of Himself in accordance with our capacity, at first through the Law and the Prophets and then afterwards through His only-begotten Son, our Lord and God and Saviour, Jesus Christ."<sup>26</sup> To John, God declared himself both through his word and through his son, Jesus Christ.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>24</sup> Chase, trans., *Saint John of Damascus Writings*, 165.

<sup>25</sup> Janosik, *John of Damascus*, 71.

<sup>26</sup> John, OF I.1.



### The Role of Tradition in John's Methodology

The English word *tradition* comes from the Latin term *traditio*, which means “handing over,” “handing down,” or “hanging on.”<sup>27</sup> According to Alister McGrath, this term has two levels of meaning: at one level, it is a biblical idea that Paul references in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4.<sup>28</sup> Paul “reminded his readers that he was handing on to them core teachings of the Christian faith, which he had received from other.”<sup>29</sup> The second level of meaning includes the body of teachings that passed on throughout the church's history. The term also refers to teaching the Bible within the church and passing on the teachings to others from previous generations. In these ways, tradition is a process as well as a body of teaching. Moreover, McGrath points out that the New Testament uses the notion of tradition in a negative sense, referring to human ideas and practices that are not grounded in Scripture.<sup>30</sup> Thus, theologians today should follow the steps of Jesus, who, during his life on earth, upheld some traditions as good and right while criticizing others as man-made. He certainly believed in the passing on of tradition (he quotes the law and the prophets extensively) but also believed that tradition should be critiqued (Matt 15:1-16; Mark 7:13).

Both levels of tradition are referenced in John's *Summa* explaining the nature of God. Regarding the first level of meaning (the teaching of the church), John asserts that the belief and the declaration about the nature of God should not go beyond what God has revealed “by the sacred declarations of the Old and New Testaments.”<sup>31</sup> Regarding the second meaning (the process of handing down the tradition), John seems to hold a unique position. Although he gives the Bible a high stance in his methodology, he seems to equate the Bible with tradition as equally authoritative bases for what Christians know about God. After summarizing the Christian doctrines of prior theologians that he learned in the monastery, he explains that “all those things that have been handed down by the Law and the Prophets and the Apostles and the Evangelists, and we know and

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<sup>27</sup> Alister McGrath, “Engaging the Great Tradition: Evangelical Theology and the Role of Tradition,” in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method*, (MI: Baker Books, 2000), 141.

<sup>28</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the *New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008).

<sup>29</sup> McGrath, “Engaging the Great Tradition,” 141.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> John, OF I.2.

revere them, and over and above these things we seek nothing else.”<sup>32</sup> Being born and raised in Damascus, Syria myself, I do not believe that John means by saying “we seek nothing else” that reason and experience do not factor into his biblical explanation, for these tools are used greatly in his writings. Instead, I believe he means that the Bible and tradition are the major sources of knowledge that he seeks to know God. Therefore, John seems to lend equal credence give equal importance to both the Bible and tradition, by considering them equally valid.<sup>33</sup> In other words, John equates what the Holy Spirit has written through the prophets and the apostles to what the church’s fathers have written in the early centuries of Christianity.

To further support his position, John explains that some leaders in the church were given special gifts that others were not; therefore, the special leaders can authoritatively teach about God. John states,

The shepherds and teachers who succeeded to their grace of the Spirit and by the power of their miracles and the word of their grace enlightened those who were in darkness and converted those who were in error. Now, let us who have not received the gifts of miracles and teaching, ... invoke the aid of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost, and discuss some few of the things which the expounders of grace have handed down to us.<sup>34</sup>

John adopts a humble tone and includes himself with the group of people who do not have the special grace; however, he still teaches and declares the truth of orthodox Christian faith.

The line of thought in the Eastern Orthodox church is compatible with John’s writing because both of them tend to attribute a certain authority to the saints, spiritual leaders, and *starsy* (as the Russians and Romanians call them) in preserving the truth, setting limits, and guiding the Christian community. John Meyendorff, who represents the Eastern Orthodox view, believes that the written words of God are very essential to practicing theology; however, he does not consider theology simply a science. Theologians are not becoming theologians by simply using Scripture as initial data because theology presupposes living in a community of the church. Just as God spoke with Israel as the chosen people, He

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<sup>32</sup> John, OF I.1.

<sup>33</sup> John calls the early fathers evangelists.

<sup>34</sup> John, OF I.3.

will speak to us today.<sup>35</sup> As Israel's literature and history combined as vehicles of divine revelation,<sup>36</sup> in the same manner, the Bible is meant to be read among the Christian community. God, therefore, speaking through the community of the church, is what makes divine revelation. Moreover, Meyendorff advocates for the evolving revelation theory, which consists of the idea that "new writings continued to be added to the Old Testament collection until the time of Christ, but the New Testament was closed ... There was a continuous revelation to the Old Israel, but nothing of the sort is possible in the new dispensation, because salvation has been accomplished once and for all in Christ"<sup>37</sup> That is to say, Meyendorff believes the new revelation extended until the last witness to the resurrection of Christ was dead. The church's role is to define the limits of the authentic witness. But it cannot add any new revelation to the canon.

Conservative evangelicals, on the other hand, acknowledge the importance of historical theology; however, they argue that "tradition and church officials play a *ministerial* role... [whereas] Scripture alone plays a *magisterial* role."<sup>38</sup> Considering Scripture magisterial means that when tradition and Scripture collide, Scripture should be given more priority. Considering tradition ministerial means that tradition might contain some misunderstandings, and, therefore, should be continually revised and reformed by scriptural analysis and application.

McGrath highlights a very important point that is seen clearly in the Eastern Orthodox churches. He states, "tradition carries with it the sense of 'traditionalism'—the dead hand of previous generations that demands we continue to think and act in precisely the same manner as earlier generations, thus locking evangelicalism into a sixteenth-, eighteenth-, or nineteenth-century worldview."<sup>39</sup> This danger, according to McGrath, puts tradition in direct opposition to modernity. While tradition should not be overlooked for the sake of establishing the authority of the church over its congregation, allocating a supreme authority to the Scripture does not necessitate rejecting the role of tradition wholesale.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, it is important to recognize the work of the historical community of faith and incorporate it in today's theological studies.

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<sup>35</sup> John Meyendorff, "Doing Theology in an Eastern Orthodox Perspective," in *Eastern Orthodox Theology: A Contemporary Reader*, ed. Daniel B. Clendenin, (MI: Baker, 2003), 83.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>38</sup> Barrett, *God's Word Alone*, 23.

<sup>39</sup> McGrath, "Engaging the Great Tradition," 142.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

### The Role of Experience in John's Theology

John does not write about the role of experiencing the divine in his life. This could be because he was born into a Christian family and did not start writing until later on in his life. Or perhaps he was humble enough to include himself with the saints.<sup>41</sup> However, there is a story which, though hard to authenticate, may be considered the reason behind John leaving his prestigious job at the government and starting his monastic life. An Arabic source, written by Kamal Yazaji and forwarded by Archbishop George Khider, states that emperor Leo III banned the use of icons, but John wrote three treatises against his mandate. As a retaliation, emperor Leo sent several forged letters to the caliph, embroiling John in a treasonous plot against him. As punishment for disloyalty, the caliph orders John's right hand amputated.<sup>42</sup> Yazaji states that John prayed to the *Theotokos* (The mother of God—Mary) and put his amputated hand on his arm. When he woke up the next morning, his hand was healed. When the caliph saw the healed hand, he declared John innocent and offered him a promotion. John chose the monastic life instead.<sup>43</sup> This fundamental story is widely circulated in the Arabic Eastern Orthodox tradition.

Though it's unknown whether this story is wholly accurate, especially since it is omitted from John's own writings, an event such as this could have played a major role in John's decision in choosing the monastic life.

Eastern Orthodox theology, in general, focuses on experience. Harry Boosalis, professor at St. Tikhon states, "The study of theology is primarily a spiritual process. The believer must first be exposed to, edified by and ultimately identified [sic] with the time-honored Tradition of the Church Fathers."<sup>44</sup> This statement might seem more cognitive than experiential; however, Boosalis continues to explain what he means by tradition. He states, "Ultimately, Holy Tradition is spiritual *experience*; it is personal participation in the life of divine grace. It is this two-thousand-year spiritual tradition that the believer participates in, and comes to call his own."<sup>45</sup> In summation, personal experience is the most important aspect of the Eastern Orthodox theology.

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<sup>41</sup> John, OF I.3.

<sup>42</sup> George Khider, *Ara'oh al-Lahoutiya wa Masa'el 'lim al-Kalam* (Beirut, Lebanon: al-Nour Publication, 1984), 37-38.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Harry M. Boosalis, *Taught by God: An Introduction to Orthodox Theology* (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 2010), 15.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

While it may hold a primary position, personal experience is not the sole way in which Eastern Orthodox theology is informed. Prayer and liturgy also play a major role. According to Boosalis, “For the Fathers of the Church, theology is an existential experience of the life in Christ. Theology is the process of the transfiguration of the human person. Theology is a life of prayer and asceticism centered within the liturgical life of the Church and immersed in Holy Scripture.”<sup>46</sup> This concept fits within John’s teaching, for all what he has taught is for the purpose of making a person a better Christian. John states that when we read the Scripture, it “fills our ears with the varied songs of inspired spiritual birds, which touches our heart, comforting it when grieving, calming it when angry, and filling it with everlasting joy . . .”<sup>47</sup> This picture focuses on the reader’s feelings and experience while reading the Scripture instead of his cognitive state. This picture indicates that John’s theological and philosophical methodology aims at allowing the best experience of Christ in the lives of Christians through learning philosophy and practicing prayer and liturgy.

On the contrary, experience plays a subordinate but important role in evangelical theology and life. While many conservative evangelical theologians ignore or minimize the role of experience in theology, perceiving and literally feeling God’s presence is considered by many other evangelical theologians as “a powerful epistemological guarantee for the truth of Christian belief.”<sup>48</sup> While many conservatives argue that unique personal experience—its data, insights, and power—cannot easily be generalized as a common pattern for all people,<sup>49</sup> others place their personal experience of recognizing God as a priority. In the view of conservative evangelicals, a Christian should not confuse experiential confirmation with Christian knowledge or divine causes because experience is derived and sought by direct connection to Scripture.

Millard Erickson, who is considered one of the greatest evangelical theologians in the twentieth century, warns his readers against a position that became popular during his time, which is similar to John/Eastern Orthodox’s position on the Scripture and experience. Erickson calls it the neo-orthodox position on the Scripture. He states, “If revelation is regarded as the communication of propositional truths, then faith will be viewed as a response of assent, of believing those truths. If, on the other hand, revelation is regarded as the

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<sup>46</sup> Boosalis, *Taught by God*, 32.

<sup>47</sup> John, OF 4.17.

<sup>48</sup> Donald Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: An Introduction* (Lexington, KY: Emeth Press, 2018), 209.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

presentation of a person, then faith will correspondingly be viewed as an act of personal trust or commitment.”<sup>50</sup> The later view—similarly to John and Eastern Orthodox position—does not think of theology as a revealed set of doctrines. Instead, it is the church’s attempt to express what has been found in God’s revelation of himself. Liturgy resembles the language of prayer and worship, whereas propositional theology resembles the language of discourse. The danger of the position that Erickson is refuting (John’s position) lies in the person’s perception about his or her experience of the divine. If the experience is elevated over propositions, then how can that person know that he or she is worshipping the God of Christianity, says Erickson.<sup>51</sup>

In an attempt to answer Erickson’s objection, Louth, coming from an Eastern Orthodox background, might say that,

For John the whole purpose of the *Fountain Head of Knowledge* is to deepen our understanding of Scripture, or perhaps better, our encounter with Christ in the Scriptures, for, in common with the general patristic view, John does not see the Scriptures as a collection of revealed information, but rather as the place where, through careful reading and pondering, prepared for by ascetic struggle and the acquisition of the virtues, we may encounter Christ himself.<sup>52</sup>

Louth believes that if the Bible is to be read because of the comfort and the joy that it brings, its truth, statements and proposition will automatically be minimized. But, if it is read to learn about who Christ is, then the person supposedly should know Christ through the experience. However, Louth’s answer does not take into consideration the real reason that made John concentrate on the Trinity and Christ’s nature. It also ignores the amount and the nature of the heresies that were circulating during John’s time.

### The Role of Reason in John’s Theology

John wrote a complete book (the *Fount of Knowledge*) on philosophy and reason. He wrote this book at the request of his friend Cosmas of Maiuma. The work was dedicated to him as a bishop of Maiuma in AD 743. In it, John’s

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<sup>50</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 157.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>52</sup> Andrew Louth, “St. John Damascene as Monastic Theologian,” *The Downside Review* 125, no. 440 (July 2007): 205.

intention is to bring the best of Greek philosophy that has been offered.<sup>53</sup> According to Chase, “The philosophical introduction is new being the first attempt to present a complete manual of philosophy to serve as a basis for the study of Christian theology.”<sup>54</sup> In this work, John presents several topics related to philosophy, logic, and reason. For example, he dedicates a whole chapter to the definition of a statement, its negation, and its affirmation. He states, “so-and-so is not wise, so-and-so does not walk. Since a negation is opposed to every affirmation and an affirmation to every negation, the negation opposed to the affirmation and the affirmation opposed to the negation are called contradictions.”<sup>55</sup> This concept might sound primitive to the contemporary readers; however, it was essential to John’s culture and surrounding. Moreover, John allocates several chapters to define terms, premises, and syllogism. He also assigns another chapter to explain different philosophical concepts, such as interrogation, inquiry, antiparastasis, heresy, thesis, substance, and simple excogitation. John explains these terms, outlines their relation to each other, and provides examples from daily life. For instance, when explaining the hypostatic union, he gives an example of the soul and the body.

John’s use of reason to interpret Scripture falls into two broad categories. First, he uses basic reason to define terms and make distinctions, helping him present his concepts and prepare his readers for biblical arguments. Second, John often uses reason to examine the implications of Scripture. He frequently makes use of precise definitions and distinctions, which were frequently overlooked, misunderstood, or ignored by others. For example, he defines philosophy as the “knowledge of divine and human things ... philosophy is the study of death... philosophy is a becoming like God ... it is in justice, sanctity, and goodness that we become like God.”<sup>56</sup> John brings a new perspective on the definition of philosophy and concludes that “the love of God—this is the true philosophy.”<sup>57</sup>

John’s use of reason is particularly apparent in his apologetical argument against Islam. In his book *On Heresies*, he includes a long list of several types of heresies.<sup>58</sup> He starts with Barbarism and ends with Doxarii. These heresies were supposedly in play during his time, and he believes that they needed to be

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<sup>53</sup> Chase, trans., *Saint John of Damascus Writings*, xxv.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, xxvi.

<sup>55</sup> John, FON 63.

<sup>56</sup> John, FON 67.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> John lists 103 heresies.

addressed because of their dangerous effect on the Christian belief. John gives different space and attention to each one of the 103 heresies, allotting few lines for some and dedicating pages to others. The most important heresy relating to the subject of this paper is the *Heresy of the Ishmaelites*.

In this apology against the Ishmaelites heresy (Islamic religion), there is a good example of the use of reason in John's methodology. Islamic religion accuses Christians of being *Mushrikin* (polytheists, associator, or hetaeriasts); however, John knows that this is a misconception in need of correction. John starts by listing the Islamic Christological belief. For instance, Muslims believe that Jesus was the result of a virgin birth, served as a prophet, and that was called the Spirit of God and his Word (Surah 4:171).<sup>59</sup> John starts his reply with a question, asking: "As long as you say that Christ is the Word of God and his Spirit, why do you accuse us of being Hetaeriasts?"<sup>60</sup> The purpose behind this question is to help his objectors to think through their objections.

After presenting the question, John argues from Islamic literature and brings out the contradictions of the Islamic argument against Jesus. For example, John demonstrates his use of reason by arguing from Qur'an that the Islamic unbelief in the deity of Jesus is irrational:

"For the word, and the spirit, is inseparable from that in which it naturally has existence. Therefore, if the Word of God is in God, then it is obvious that He is God. If, however, He is outside of God, then according to you, God is without word and without spirit. Consequently, by avoiding the introduction of an associate with God you have mutilated Him."<sup>61</sup>

In other words, John says that God's Word and Spirit cannot stand on a separate ground because they are shared within the divine essence. If they are separated, then God will be wordless and spiritless, "as if you were dealing with a stone or a piece of wood or some other inanimate object."<sup>62</sup> This is impossible because no Christian or Muslim believe in such a god. This advanced use of reason shows how much John valued and used it in his methodology.

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<sup>59</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Qur'anic passages referenced are in Translation of the Meaning of the *Noble Qur'an in English Language* (Madinah, KSA: King Fahed Complex, 1984).

<sup>60</sup> John, OH, 101.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.



### John's Methodology: An Evaluation

This section shall evaluate John's Methodology in light of Carl F. H. Henry's test of truth. Henry offers the current standard in this area. He writes,

Divine revelation is the source of all truth, the truth of Christianity included; reason is the instrument for recognizing it; Scripture is its verifying principle; logical consistency is a negative test for truth and coherence a subordinate test. The task of Christian theology is to exhibit the content of biblical revelation as an orderly whole.<sup>63</sup>

Henry's standard includes two premises as axiomatic presuppositions: 1) the God of Christianity is the source of all knowledge and truth, and He has communicated to mankind through divine revelation. Therefore, Scripture is the source of learning about the divine. 2) Theological statements (propositional truth) are assessed according to the laws of human reason and logic.<sup>64</sup>

Theological statements are to be dismissed if they violate the law of non-contradiction. Furthermore, theological propositions are required to be consistent with one another. They should not contradict other statements within the same system of thought, or the whole system would be considered internally incoherent. Also, theological statements should help refute the opposing argument. These tests of truth serve as needed tools to invalidate fallacious arguments and guard against veracious ones. In summary, the evangelical test for truth utilizes Scripture as a source for the knowledge of God. It also uses human reasoning as a positive verification principle (when propositions cohere with each other and with the entire system of truth), and as a negative verification principle (when propositions refute the opposing arguments and show the inadequacy of the other systems).

By stating this, one can notice that the similarities between John and Henry are great and the differences are minor. Both Henry and John, for instance, concentrate on consistency and coherency of their arguments; however, their starting points might differ. They both focus on the knowledge of God; however, one thinks it should be based on Scripture only, and the other thinks tradition should be included. The next section shall evaluate John's methodology in the light of Henry's criteria—focusing on their starting point, presuppositions, and

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<sup>63</sup> Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 215.

<sup>64</sup> Laws of logic are: 1) the law of contradiction (for all propositions p, it is impossible for both p and not p to be true), (2) the law of excluded middle (either p or not p must be true, there being no third or middle true proposition between them), and (3) the principle of identity (if a propositional function F is true of an individual variable x, then F is true of x. Another formulation of the principle of identity asserts that a thing is identical with itself, (x = x)).

their use of reason—for the purpose of identifying where the limitations of John’s argument lie.

### The Starting Point of John’s Methodology

As stated earlier, the starting point of Henry’s theological methodology is the Scripture. He believes that “the positive, good, and creative Word of God stands behind us and above us and ahead of us.”<sup>65</sup> He acknowledges that knowing God is important because God is the source of all truth and knowledge. He also believes that man needs God more than ever because of the noetic effect of sin and the corruption that it left to the human thinking and volition. John, on the other hand, does not talk about the noetic effect of sin. Instead, he affirms the limitation of the human understanding. His starting point is the divine knowledge God declared through nature, the Bible, and tradition.

Henry is more explicit about his starting point. While he recognizes the validity of both general and special revelation, he gives particular attention to the special revelation because it is the one, in his opinion, that takes epistemological priority over general revelation. He believes this “not because general revelation is obscure or because man as sinner cannot know it, but because Scripture as an inspired literary document republishes the content of general revelation objectively, over against sinful man’s reductive dilutions and misconstructions of it.”<sup>66</sup> John, nevertheless, does not distinguish this priority. While he acknowledges the importance of the general revelation to the knowledge of God, he also affirms the significance of the special revelation.

Unlike Augustine who believed in the concept of “I understand in order to believe,” John focuses on knowledge. Therefore, it is safe to say that John understands the relationship between faith and reason in terms of “I should know in order to believe.” John does not say this explicitly, but it is embedded in his writings and his concentration on knowing the divine. He states, “Nothing is more honourable than knowledge, for if knowledge is the light of the rational soul, then contrariwise ignorance is darkness.”<sup>67</sup> John’s focus on gaining knowledge of the divine makes knowledge “the proper state of rational beings, so for rational beings, lack of knowledge renders them worse than irrational beings.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 29.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>67</sup> John, FON I.

<sup>68</sup> Louth, *St John Damascene*, 44.

### John's Presuppositions

John's method in approaching his readers includes his presuppositions about truth. One of his presuppositions is embedded in his starting point. John presupposes that truth is obvious, and everyone should know what truth is. This is clear in the Greeks' teachings, as he says, "first, I shall set forth what is most excellent among the wise men of the Greeks, knowing that anything that is true has been given to human beings from God, since 'every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.'"<sup>69</sup> John's assertion about the wise Greek men presupposes that most people agree that truth comes from God and that whoever opposes the truth opposes God. While this line of thought does not contradict Henry's belief, John does not discuss which God he and the Greeks are talking about, nor whether people have natural ability to recognize the truth and its source. He just assumes that it is obvious to them.

In his writings, John adds another presupposition related to the subject of the knowledge of God. His purpose is to help Christians gain knowledge of God, successfully experience him in their lives, and convincingly defend their faith against heresies. As Daniel Sahas notes, "the issue at stake [for John] is not whether God is one or many ... the issue at stake is how God can be known."<sup>70</sup> In John's opinion, the knowledge of God is the basis of truth. One might say that the difference between Henry and John's emphases is minor and only rhetorical because they both insist on learning about God from the revelation of God. However, John does not discuss the issue nor anticipate the danger of adding tradition as a source of learning alongside the Bible. Henry, on the other hand, deals with the danger of giving tradition the same authority as the Bible as a divine source to teach about God. This teaching makes tradition infallible and inerrant; and if this is true, then there should be no collision between both of them.

In relation to the topic of truth, both Henry and John presuppose the importance of vocabulary and definitions. Human beings cannot live and communicate deeply without language, and language consist of words, which in turn consist of meaning. Henry states, "The claim of Jesus of Nazareth to know and proclaim the Word and teaching of God is nonsense if words are inherently distortive and deceptive."<sup>71</sup> Henry's claim is true because if words are emptied of their meaning, then there is no point to all what is being written or said. Deceit

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<sup>69</sup> *Dial.*, proem. 43–60. Obtained from Louth *St John Damascene*, 32.

<sup>70</sup> Daniel J. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 74.

<sup>71</sup> Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 27.

easily becomes the new trend. John, on the other hand, warns against using highly sophisticated language for the same purpose: to prevent deceiving other people. During his days, the majority of people were uneducated in the official languages (Greek or Arabic) because people spoke Aramaic (Syriac). Social elites were the ones who had the privilege of learning official languages. In the monastery, monks learned and used Greek, a dynamic which concerned John. He states, “Let us not belittle that which is good [art of rhetoric]. Nor let us use the art of rhetoric for the deception of simpler folk.”<sup>72</sup> John asks his readers and fellow teachers to use adaptable and understandable semantics, lest they deceive the less-educated people with their sophisticated language. This advice indicates how important language was to him, and how important its use is. It could easily become a deceptive instrument. As Henry states, “When truth is lost, falsehood no longer exists, and everything becomes relative to its own situation.”<sup>73</sup>

### **The Efficacy of John’s Methodology in Answering the Saracen**

John writes against 103 heresies spreading during his time. His apology against Islamic belief is what made him famous in the western world. The means, manners, and modes of his methodology show a great knowledge of Islam. Moreover, his methodology’s internal coherency and causal adequacy are what make it very effective against Islamic objections.

#### The Means of John’s Theological Method in Answering the Saracen

John calls the Muslims the Ishmaelites, Hagarenes, and Saracens. His etymology for all these names comes respectively from Ishmael (Abraham’s elder son by his wife’s slave), Hagar (Abraham’s slave wife), and Sarah and her descendants (Abraham’s wife).<sup>74</sup> According to Louth, “The Damascene’s derivation of ‘Saracen,’ etymologically perhaps a term meaning ‘Eastern’ applied to Arabs, is more fanciful.”<sup>75</sup> These names are not used in today’s scholarship because everyone refers to the Saracen’s heresy as the religion of Islam.

Some of John’s historical means cannot be verified today by scholars. For instance, John asserts that Muslims believe in a stone that is the head of Aphrodite

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<sup>72</sup> John, FON 1.

<sup>73</sup> Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 28-29.

<sup>74</sup> John, OH 101.

<sup>75</sup> Louth, *St John Damascene*, 79.

and that they call it Khabar.<sup>76</sup> He also mentions that this stone was built by Abraham. If John is referring to al-Ka'ba, however, then there is no Islamic document known today that calls al-Ka'ba Aphrodite or Khabar. Barbra Roggema states that "a number of late antique sources describe the Arabs as worshippers of Aphrodite, and it has been often been suggested, but never clearly proven, that this refers to the cult of al 'Uzzà, who was worshipped by many Arabian tribes, and whose name features in the Qur'an alongside Allât and Manât."<sup>77</sup> The Qur'an mentions that Arabian tribes worshipped female gods; however, they give them different names. So, it is unclear where John got the names Aphrodite or Khabar.

John conveys critical information about the sources of Mohammad's prophecy when he suggests that Mohammad obtained information about Jesus from an "Arian monk." Arianism was a fourth-century heresy, which taught that Jesus is less than God because there was a time before Christ, a time when Jesus did not exist. With reference to the "Arian monk," John might be pointing to a *hadith* about Bahira monk,<sup>78</sup> who had predicted the future prophetic status of Mohammad.<sup>79</sup> According to Sahas, "This tradition was, later, utilized by the Muslims as an answer to the challenge of the Christians that Muhammad was an 'un-announced' and, thus a false prophet."<sup>80</sup> John does not seem to know about this tradition and *hadith*, especially when one considers that many scholars date *hadiths* to 200 years after the death of Mohammad. Sahas speculates that John's preference for the identity of the monk as an Arian "reflects the initial impression that Islam made upon him, and it explains the content and the character of his refutation."<sup>81</sup> The idea that "the one did not influence the other," according to Peter Schadler, "was common to engage in the practice of identifying new heresies with older ones to discredit them in order to educate one's audience theologically, it is argued that John was similarly engaged in this rhetorical practice."<sup>82</sup> If this is true, then it seems that John, while associating new heresies

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<sup>76</sup> John, OH 101.

<sup>77</sup> Barbara Roggema, "Muslims as Crypto-Idolaters—A Theme in the Christian portrayal of Islam in the Near East," in *Christians at the Heart of Islamic Rule: Church Life and Scholarship in Abbasid Iraq*, ed. David Thomas, (Leiden: BRILL, 2003), 6.

<sup>78</sup> The accumulated commands and sayings of Prophet Mohammad.

<sup>79</sup> Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam*, 73.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>82</sup> Peter Schadler, *John of Damascus and Islam: Christian Heresiology and the Intellectual Background to Earliest Christian-Muslim Relations* (Boston: BRILL, 2017), 167.

with old theological ideas, is attempting to explain the thoughts of a new heretic while simultaneously condemning the new heresy by association. In doing so, John is unwittingly presupposing that the new heresy is an Arian heresy from an Arian monk rather than an Islamic theology from an authentic Islamic source like *hadith*.

#### The Manners of John's Theological Method in Answering the Saracen

John structures his argument based on previous works. Some scholars think that while writing the *Orthodox Faith*, he might have relied on other resources for the structure as a whole. Joseph Langen contends that the book follows the structure of the *Book of Heresies* by Theodoret of Cyrus.<sup>83</sup> Nevertheless, Louth revisits Langen's claim and concludes that John's language and structure are too distinct from the *Book of Heresies* of Theodoret. He views any similarities between the two texts' structures as either coincidental or a hint that John and Theodoret both relied on a previous conventional system, one based on the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed.<sup>84</sup>

The manner that John uses to start his presentation includes an offensive style. For instance, John presupposes that the Ishmaelites' religion is superstitious because it is a forerunner of the antichrist.<sup>85</sup> He indicates that Mohammad is a false prophet, who concocted his heresy from the Old and New Testaments and from a conversation with an Arian monk (only later did Mohammad claim to have a revelation from heaven). John does not use an evidential method to examine the authentication and the historicity of the Qur'an, nor does he give reasons behind these claims. He even uses sarcasm and includes fling elements in his defense. For instance, after giving a historical background about Islam and Mohammad, he states, "and from these 'laughable revelations' he [Mohammad] taught his followers to worship God."<sup>86</sup> This style is not being used recently in the west, especially among conservative evangelical scholars, because it cuts the relationship and stops the interreligious dialogue. In comparison to contemporary research standard, John's method seems polemic.

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<sup>83</sup> Joseph Langen, *Johannes von Damaskus* (Gotha: Friedrich Andreas Perthes, 1879), 62.

<sup>84</sup> Louth, *St John Damascene*, 88-89.

<sup>85</sup> John, OH 101.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

### The Modes of John's Theological Method in Answering the Saracen

John uses a traditional technique against the Ishmaelites, one consistent with the teaching of the Bible. Instead of categorizing the Islamic belief as a religion, he condemns Islamic theology as a heresy. He does this because any false doctrine of those who believe in what is contrary to the orthodox belief of the church was traditionally considered as heresy. Within the same context, John includes twenty heresies that he calls the "mother of heresies." This term signifies his view of Christian truth: he considers Christianity the standard by which all other heresies/religions should be judged. Whenever a religion proclaims something contrary to the Bible or a distortion of its truth, it is then deemed heretical.<sup>87</sup>

The mode that John follows in answering the Saracen includes the practice of exposing their double standards in defending their prophets. In an attempt to verify the Islamic claims about Mohammad's prophecy, for example, John asks them about the evidences that they have to prove the authenticity of Mohammad's prophecy. And when he hears their answer (which seems to have been approximate to "because the Qur'an says so"), John, rather than considering their answer to be circular, attempts to show its weakness in a different way. He states, "Although you may not marry a wife without witnesses, or buy, or acquire property; although you neither receive an ass nor possess a beast of burden unwitnessed ... yet it is only your faith and your scriptures that you hold unsubstantiated by witnesses."<sup>88</sup> John points out the hypocrisy and the double standards of Muslims following and accepting the prophecy and office of Mohammad without any evidence or witness, while demanding witnesses within their ordinary acts of life. In short, John's technique tries to show that the claim of Saracen about Mohammad's prophecy is unverifiable.

### The Coherency of John's Argument in Answering the Saracen

John's argument is internally coherent with the teachings of the Old and New Testaments. In relation to his answer to the prophecy of Mohammad, it is evident that John had the Old Testament criteria of authenticating a prophet in mind. God warns the Israelites about false prophets and their inevitable presence. "If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the LORD does not take place or come true," says God, "that is a message the LORD has not spoken" (Deut 19: 22). He additionally warns them against those who persuade people to believe in

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<sup>87</sup> Janosik, *John of Damascus*, 97.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

another God after performing wonders and miracles (Deut 13:1-3). Based upon what the Old Testament teaches, John states that Mohammad's prophecies, if he were a true prophet, should have agreed with the earlier prophets like Moses and David who foretold the coming of Christ (Num 24:17; Psalms 110:1-4). John reminds his readers that "they not only foretold his coming, but they would have agreed with the view that 'Christ is God, and the Son of God,' and that he would be 'Crucified, and die, and rise again, that he will be the judge of the living and the dead.'"<sup>89</sup> In other words, John states that Mohammad should follow the belief of the Old and New Testaments if he is in fact a prophet from God. John's logic shows consistency and internal coherency with biblical teachings.

### The Causal Adequacy of John's Argument in Answering the Saracen

A theory is causally adequate if it specifies causal factors that plausibly produce the effects in need of explanation.<sup>90</sup> John's argument for the nature of God satisfies this principle, even going beyond it to refute the Islamic claim about the oneness of God. After introducing some essential theological terminologies in the *Fount of Knowledge*, John further explains the theological doctrines related to the terms. In his *Summa*, for example, John clarifies that Jesus, the Logos, is God, who is distinct from the One in whom He has His subsistence. Then employing an analogy consistent with biblical teachings, John explains how the words of God and the words of mankind differ in their essence. The words of human beings are generated in the mind and share in the essence of that thought. When the words are spoken, they disperse into air. While they remain as words, their nature changes; they become non-subsistent in themselves. The eternal Word (Jesus Christ), on the other hand, while He is generated from the Father, does not pass out from Him but always remains within Him. The Logos is fully distinct from the Father and yet has His subsistence within the Father. The only way that this can be explained is through the unity of the one God, who must exist in more than one hypostasis and yet remain perfect in His unity.<sup>91</sup> This explanation, therefore, is causally adequate with the biblical teachings about the nature of God and stands in contrast to the oneness of God that Islam teaches.

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<sup>89</sup> John, OH 101; also Janosik, *John of Damascus*, 103.

<sup>90</sup> Michael N. Kaes, "Systematizing the theoretical virtues," *Synthese*, 195 (2018): 2765.

<sup>91</sup> Janosik, *John of Damascus*, 177.



## Conclusion

Understanding John's background, life, and education is essential to recognizing his theological method. Based on the inspired word of God, tradition, and reason, John systematizes explicitly and implicitly the truth-content of Christian theology. In comparison, his theological method shows only minor differences to the Scripture-centered methodology of conservative modern evangelicalism, where the key difference is his equal emphases on Scripture and tradition.

Henry's test of truth principle shows that John's argument, which relies on the Old and New Testaments in his answers, is internally coherent. It also shows the causal efficacy of John's argument because the Logos within his theological method is fully distinct from the Father and yet has His subsistence within the Father. The only way that this can be explained is through the unity of the one God. The illustration of God's Word and Spirit is another factor that shows John's logical consistency and wide knowledge about Islamic literature. Despite the fact that he does not mention his sources about Islam, his background (i.e., his life, education, and the experience of living in the shadow of the mosques of the Dome of the Rock and of Al-Aqs) made his arguments against Islamic objections—especially his apology on the doctrine of the Trinity—very effective.

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