Truth or Diplomacy? *For the Life of the World*, Islam and the Patristic Approach

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In their writings on Islam, John Damascene and Theodore Abu Qurrah, both authoritative patristic saints of the Orthodox Church, took an apologetic and polemic stand in defence of the Christian truth. In the modern interreligious discourse, however, the approach to Islam is rather diplomatic, concentrating on universal human values and common aspects of religions. How does the document For the Life of the World operate in this tension? In general, it aims to build on patristic argumentation, but the approach to Islam is most positive and all-embracing, welcoming the “beauty and truths” of Islam and stressing the “common roots,” while the patristic views on Islam are silenced. The discrepancy may arouse questions on the sincerity and coherence of the modern approach in relation to the patristic tradition. This reflects wider challenges in the modern theology of the Church: how to find a discursive position in the tension between the defence of truth, characteristic for the patristic thought, and the “diplomatic” language of the modern interreligious encounters.

Keywords: *Orthodox Church, Islam, interreligious encounter, patristic, John Damascene, Theodore Abu Qurrah*

The recent document *For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church* (henceforth FLW) is characterised by remarkable openness and dynamism, at least in the Orthodox scale. The argumentation in the document is largely based on patristic sources, which illustratively shows where the authority of Orthodox theology lies. Approximately three out of four references in FLW are from patristic texts (that is, from the second to circa eighth century); modern authors are quoted mainly in the case of contemporary concerns that the patristic authors do not provide comments. The section on Islam, however, is an exception in this respect. Therefore, it is worthwhile to examine FLW’s approach and views on Islam in relation to those of John Damascene and Theodore Abu Qurrah – the first patristic authors to discuss Islam in detail. The aim is to outline how the document’s approach to Islam differs from the patristic one and then analyse the nature of this discrepancy. This is not to imply that whenever the document and the patristic authors disagree, it automatically means that the document is “mistaken”, but rather that the discrepancy is something that should be recognised and deliberated.

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The Thesis: Modern Orthodox Approach to Islam

Relation to the other has always been a challenging topic for the Orthodox theology, and a wide variety of perspectives have been employed up to our times, when Orthodoxy is significantly divided in her approach to ecumenism. Therefore, it is not surprising that FLW offers certain inconstancies in its approach to the other. Approaching the Protestant part of Christendom is done in a curiously imbalanced way. The Anglican Church, “Canterbury,” is elevated to the company of Oriental Orthodox Churches, as the other Protestant Churches are merely a “story not finished” (§ 58), a stylistic expression leaving the impression that they are perhaps not worthy of a proper estimation. The statement in this respect reflects decades of ecumenical developments,¹ but from the practical point of view, the setting is rather odd: by entering Anglican, Methodist and Lutheran churches one could hardly grasp which worship is apostolic and which belongs to the “unfinished”. Moreover, it seems that the Orthodox Church still has a way to go before it realises that it is the Pentecostal sector which largely dominates the Christian religious life of our times. Statistically, they represent significant portions of the population in a huge number of countries; they deserve to be taken seriously, not only because of their numbers but also by their zeal and enthusiasm for Christ.

This is relevant for our topic because the approach to Islam seems somewhat incongruous to begin with, as FLW appears considerably more positive about Islam than about Protestant Christianity. It goes without saying that the world situation urgently demands mutual religious respect, and reciprocal understanding is needed – but the status of this demand as a *theological* argument is another question.

Remarkably, the stand taken by FLW is in line with that of Patriarch Bartholomew and his active dialogue with the Islamic world.² In fact, it is the very affinity with the patriarchal speech which makes the FLW’s short statement relevant: it seems to reflect or represent the current predominant

¹ There is a long tradition of Orthodox appraisal of Canterbury, represented by the patriarchate of Constantinople, culminating in the Ecumenical Patriarch’s “Encyclical on Anglican Orders”; see: Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder, eds., *Documents of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 400–1. The most famous champion of unity with the Anglican Church was Sergei Bulgakov who famously suggested a “partial” Eucharistic unity.

² E.g. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, *Speaking the Truth in Love: Theological and Spiritual Exhortations of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew*, ed. John Chrysavgis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 157, 291, 344, 396, 410, 417. See: Bartholomew, *On Earth as in Heaven: Ecological Vision and Initiatives of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 254–55.

Orthodox approach as known from the interreligious encounters by the head of the Church. A champion of Orthodox-Islamic dialogue, Bartholomew is known for his appreciation and positive approach to Islam, especially in its Turkish form. However, recent developments have shown that Bartholomew's optimistic belief in the secular and tolerant character of Turkish Islam that "seeks the legitimization of all religions and the freedom to choose at all times"³ has been over-optimistic, if not utterly false, and his hope of Turkey's admission to the European Union is considerably less realistic today than it was twenty years ago.⁴

Inside the Orthodox Church, the critique of ecumenical and interreligious encounters is oftentimes directed against "syncretism". Had the critics read the documents, they would know that the main problem of interreligious encounters is not at all so ambitious; the problem is rather that the language is regularly so abstract, general and well-mannered that it is unable to pronounce much theologically substantial, or even substantially theological. This is rather unavoidable in the case of two religions entering a dialogue, but in any case, the language of universal virtues such as "harmony, solidarity and understanding"⁵ or "liberty, justice, brotherhood, solidarity and love"⁶ are so clichéd that it is unlikely to cause much enthusiasm from the general public or interest from theologians. The language of the recent Orthodox-Islamic dialogue represents diplomatically formulated speech with little of concreteness, and one has to admit that the process has aroused very little of common or theological interest. In fact, it seems that even theologians are not very well aware of the very existence of such a dialogue, even though the participants themselves may resort to rhetoric that is highly assured of the dialogue's remarkableness and its achievements.⁷

³ Bartholomew, *Encountering the Mystery* (New York: Double Day, 2008), 204. For discussion, see: Gregorios D. Ziakas, "The Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and Recent Dialogue with Islam," in: *Two Traditions, One Space: Orthodox Christians and Muslims in Dialogue*, ed. George C. Papademetriou (Boston: Somerset Hall Press, 2011), 231–46. An uncritical praiseful summary of Bartholomew's approach to Islam in John Chrysavgis, *Bartholomew: Apostle and Visionary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2016), 13–29.

⁴ As I am writing this, Turkey is involved in bloody conflicts in Syria, Libya and against Kurds and actively promoting a massive war against Armenians carried out by Azerbaijan with the help of Islamist mercenaries, as more and more religious rhetoric is being involved.

⁵ Address to the Second Congress of Leaders of World Religions (Kazakhstan 2006), discussed in Chrysavgis, *Bartholomew*, 28.

⁶ Amaroussion Declaration, Athens 2004, discussed in Chrysavgis, *Bartholomew*, 25.

⁷ For instance, Ziakas declares that the 1994 Istanbul conference on peace and tolerance "was of great importance for Eastern Mediterranean peoples, the peoples of the Black Sea, and for the peoples of the Caucasus area," as the reality is that next to no-one has heard of such a conference or its contents. Ziakas, "The Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and Recent Dialogue with Islam," 234.

It is probably from this background that one should understand why FLW seems to present Islam as an entity of beauty and truths, some of which are simply a matter of agreement, and some a matter of disagreement. Nevertheless, the document does not resort to abstract generalisations. Instead, it dares to touch upon several particular topics related to Christology. It stresses “common roots” and theological parallels such as “common affirmation of the message of the unity of God,” “common recognition of the holiness and truth of God’s Word and his Prophets,” and “the importance of prayer and ascesis,” in addition to common struggle to “discern the will of God in all things.” The reason for these emphases is explicitly defined as “advancement of peace and understanding,” not theological reflection (of the Truth, that is) as such. This is of course fully understandable, and hardly unavoidable, but still it arouses the question of relation to the patristic views on the matter.⁸

The Antithesis: John Damascene and Theodoros Abu Qurrah on Islam

There exists a substantial corpus of writings on Islam by authoritative Orthodox saints and patristic authors from the early Islamic times, the most remarkable ones being John Damascene, the famous Χρυσοπρόας and *doctor ecclesiae*, and Theodoros Abu Qurrah, the first Orthodox Church father writing in Arabic. The lack of reference to them in the document is not surprising, given that the patristic approach to Islam is essentially opposite to that of FLW. The difference is not only in details but in the paradigm and aims: the patristic authors were concerned with defending the truth of Christianity and showing the mistakes of Islam, as FLW seeks to point at a “common” ground.

John Damascene’s views on Islam are well known as such.⁹ Against the prevailing misconception, however, he did not really view Islam as “Christian heresy,” even though he discussed Islam in the end of his catalogue of

⁸ The thesis–antithesis structure is used here not historically but synchronically, given that the patristic positions represent a kind of antithetic position to FLW, which is our topic to begin with.

⁹ The Greek text: *De haerisibus*, PG 94, 764–73. Translation by Frederic H. Chase in Saint John of Damascus, *Writings*, Fathers of the Church 37 (1st ed. New York, 1958; 2nd ed. Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1999), 153–60. The classical study on the text is Daniel J. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam: The “Heresy of the Ishmaelites”* (Leiden: Brill, 1972). For discussion, see: Radko Popov, “Speaking His Mind in a Multi-Cultural and Multi-Religious Society: John of Damascus and His Knowledge of Islam in Chapter 101 of His Work Concerning Heresy,” in: Papademetriou, *Two Traditions*, 109–46; Sidney F. Griffith, “The Mansūr family and Saint John of Damascus: Christians and Muslims in Umayyad Times,” in: *Christians and Others in the Umayyad State*, eds. Antoine Borrut and Fred M. Donner (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 2016), 29–52.

traditional heresies. In his main work “On the Orthodox Faith” (*De fide*), John did not refer in any way to Islam, even when writing about monotheism and Trinity. In other words, Islam was for him a phenomenon outside the Christian theology. This shows throughout his use of vocabulary: Christianity is a faith (πίστις) but Islam is a σκεία – a word that seems to be a variant of “shadow” (σκία) and resembling a shortened form of θρησκεία, “cult.” For John, Islam simply leads people astray (λαοπλάνος).¹⁰ In fact, his motivation to enlist all the theological mistakes of the past was to show that Islam’s claim as being something novel was unfounded: essentially Islam was no more than another set of mistaken views after all those historical movements that were proven false and lost long ago.

For John Damascene, the very first weakness and principal flaw of Islam was precisely the fact that it did not emerge from the (Judeo-)Christian tradition but was essentially an outsider. John Damascene built his whole discourse on this very fact: the lack of common roots is precisely where the spiritual status of Islam shows. Logically speaking, this already implies that Islam can represent truth only in the case that Christianity does not. For John Damascene, Arabs are children of Abraham indeed, but this was a biological and historical claim, not a religious or spiritual one, and it applied to Arabs rather than Muslims,¹¹ though the difference between the two was vague in John’s time. Indeed, the idea of viewing Arabs as descendants of Abraham and Hagar was not related to Islam, for it was pre-Islamic and well known in Byzantium centuries before the emergence of Muhammad.¹² Therefore, the modern speech of “common roots” is extremely ambiguous, for it can be taken in a biblical, mythical, historical, cultural or spiritual sense; in Islamic eyes, the claim certainly covers the spiritual dimension.

Similarly, for Theodore Abu Qurrah, Islam was a long step behind,¹³ but this was essentially a *qualitative* estimation, not a “chronological” claim of return to any common roots, even though there was considerable thematic parallelism with Islam and primitive Judaic monotheism of ancient times. The fact that both John and Theodore treat Islam unfairly and one-sidedly, aiming to portray it as a caricature, does not alter the fact that Islam was for both essentially erroneous, and not only in dogmatic terms: Theodore puts a lot of stress on its failures and dangers in practical ethics.

¹⁰ John Damascene, *De haer.* 101, PG 94, 764A.

¹¹ John Damascene, *De haer.* 101, PG 94, 764A–B. Cf. Gen. 16:8.

¹² E.g. Sozomenos, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.38, PG 67, 1412A–B.

¹³ For discussion, see: Serafim Seppälä, “Torah in the Christian-Islamic Polemics of Theodore Abū Qurrah and ‘Abd al-Jabbār,” in *Mosaic Torah in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, ed. Antti Laato (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 228–32.

Typically for interreligious jargon, FLW diplomatically refers to “holiness and truth” of God’s Prophets,¹⁴ without clarifying the reference, which opaquely suggests that the Prophet of Islam is included. While that may be, it is clear that John Damascene saw Muhammad exactly as a pseudo-prophet (ψευδοπροφήτες)¹⁵ who came from outside the tradition of divine prophecy and was not foretold or expected by anyone. On the contrary, Muhammad was the “forerunner (πρόδρομος) of Anti-Christ.”¹⁶ In modern theological literature, there is an established tendency to downplay John’s views somewhat. For instance, when John Damascene says that Muhammad was merely showing “seeming piety” and claiming that a book with “ridiculous compositions” had been sent to him from heaven, Orthodox scholar Radko Popov uses this very statement to argue that John was “well informed that Muhammad was a pious man.”¹⁷ To be clear, the problem here is not whether Muhammad was pious or not, but that the patristic authors are sometimes used to support claims they did not maintain.

In patristic eyes, the difference between Christianity and Islam was not due to any particular theological disagreements: it was in the different foundations and contrasting bases of the two religions. This was also the basic approach of Theodore Abu Qurrah. It is telling that he wrote dozens of writings dealing with Islam¹⁸ without discussing any Quranic verse in detail, nor did he enlist specific concurrences or disagreements. For him, it was neither necessary nor useful to wrestle with details when the differences were in the paradigms rather than in their particular contents. This shows illustratively when comparing the use of historical argument in Abu Qurrah and in writings of the Islamic polemicist ‘Abd al-Jabbār. Both agreed on the principle that the true nature of a religion can be seen in its earliest history but

¹⁴ It is perhaps telling that in the case of Islam, FLW writes Prophets with capital P, unlike in the case of Judaism (except when referring to the compilation of prophetic books).

¹⁵ John of Damascus, *De haer.* 101, PG 94, 764B.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, 764A.

¹⁷ Popov, “Speaking His Mind,” 120.

¹⁸ The Arabic texts in Qusṭanṭīn al-Bāṣā, ed., *Mayāmir Tāwudūrus Abī Qurra ‘usqf Harrān* (Beirut: Maṭba‘at al-fawā’id, 1904); Ignace Dick, ed., *Théodore Abuqurra, Traite de l’existence du Createur et de la vraie religion*, Patrimoine arabe chrétien 3 (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 1982). Most of the Greek dialogues preserved in the name of Abu Qurrah also deal with Islam, see: Reinhold Glei and Adel Theodor Khoury, *Johannes Damaskenos und Theodor Abu Qurra*, Corpus Islamo-Christianum Series Graeca 3 (Würzburg & Altenberge: Echter & Oros, 1995). I have currently translated the Arabic and Greek writings dealing with Islam into Finnish in Seppälä, *Theodoros Abu Qurra: Kirjoituksia kristinuskosta ja islamista*, Studia Patristica Fennica 10 (Helsinki: Suomen patristinen seura, 2020). English translation by John C. Lamoreaux in: *Theodore Abu Qurrah*, Library of the Christian East 1 (Brigham Young University Press, 2005).

disagreed on the applications of this principle; there was often agreement on historical facts, but disagreement whether these very facts were positive or negative by nature.¹⁹

As for “beauty” and its relation to religion, we may note that for Theodore Abu Qurrah it was a structural and paradigmatic truth that Christianity was an aesthetic religion that during the centuries had painstakingly taught mankind a refined aesthetic attitude. In his view, Islam represented a certain rudeness and roughness that caused serious regression in this respect.²⁰ Nonetheless, it was only after the times of Abu Qurrah that Islamic culture started to develop its greatest aesthetic achievements such as mystical poetry or calligraphy, so Abu Qurrah’s argument has somewhat collapsed, even though it still applies to icons and sacred images, which were his main concern.

The critique on the lack of aesthetic attitude in Islam was related to other values. Throughout the literary output of Abu Qurrah, he stresses – albeit often in implicit terms – how Christianity is superior to Islam for the reason that Christianity is ascetic and Islam is disposed for worldly pleasures.²¹ Without considering the question how widely this stand corresponds to reality, it is obvious that from the perspective of Abu Qurrah – and even his Islamic counter-criticism that did not really deny the difference – it is quite unexpected to encounter in an Orthodox document the statement on the common recognition of the importance of asceticism. If this is the current Orthodox position, it once again arouses the question: what should the Orthodox think of Theodore Abu Qurrah and John Damascene’s stance on Islam?

Space for Synthesis?

Without proceeding any further with the details, it is evident from the outset that FLW approaches Islam in a different way and from an opposite direction than the apologetic writings of the eighth century patristic authors.

¹⁹ For details, see: Seppälä, “The early history of religion (dis)proving its truth: the historical argument in Theodore Abū Qurrah and ‘Abd al-Jabbār,” *Approaching religion* 8, no. 2 (2018): 27–39. For their views on the Torah and Judaism, see: idem, “Torah in the Christian-Islamic Polemics,” 228–54.

²⁰ See: chapters 8, 12, 15 and 18 in Theodore Abu Qurrah’s treatise on the Veneration of Icons. The Arabic original in Théodore Abuqurra, *Traité de Culte des Icones (Maimar fi ’ikram al-’aiqunāt): Introduction et texte critique par I. Dick* (Liban/Roma: Patrimoine Arabe Chrétien, 1986). English translation in Sydney H. Griffith, *A Treatise on the Veneration of the Holy Icons Written in Arabic by Theodore Abu Qurrah, Bishop of Harran*, Eastern Christian Texts in Translation 1 (Louvain: Peeters, 1997).

²¹ Moreover, ascetic character of Christianity was for Abu Qurrah an essential part of the apostolic tradition and firmly rooted in the Gospels. Abu Qurrah discusses this e.g. in *Theologus autodidactus* 3 and *On the Trinity* (al-Bāšā, *Mayāmir* 25–26).

Respectively, Patriarch Bartholomew's approach to Islam is remarkably different from John Damascene and Theodore Abu Qurrah. This is of course not surprising, given the difference in genres and eras; the modern dialogue aims to understand the other, promote tolerance and so on.

Given the differences in aims and genres, it may well be that the patristic approach and the interreligious discourse should not be compared at all in the first place. There is something disturbing in the discrepancy, however, given that the patristic approach is elementarily connected with Christological and Trinitarian truths on which the whole Orthodox theology is built upon. Therefore, the matter is in need of some further exploration.

After centuries of polemical encounters, it is of course possible to see the contemporary fading of polemic mode of speech as *evolution* of theological thought that has surpassed its own paradigms. This is undoubtedly a natural view for many. Paradoxically, however, this evolution often reduces theological thought into general statements regarding universal virtues and other self-evident conceptions, which in the end express nothing substantial, at least for the life of the Church. Moreover, the interreligious dialogues of our times are often characterised by extreme selectiveness in portraying and quoting – or not quoting – one's own tradition in order to make it smooth enough. What should one conclude of such a disposition? It goes without saying that the modern approach is reasonable, pragmatic and good-willing, even profound in its pursuit for a universal ethos.²² However, when it comes to estimating the Truth, which is the long-established function of the Church after all, theological quality should not be estimated on the basis of quantitative facts (i.e., a religion is to be taken seriously in theological terms when it gains a certain number of followers, perhaps with potentiality to cause serious conflicts).

In more precise terms, the problem is that the “matching details” and apparently parallel constituents in Christianity and Islam (or, in the Bible and Quran) have a totally different function, and in that sense different meanings, in patristic and modern contexts. For John Damascene and Theodore Abu Qurrah, any number of parallel particulars did not help with the basic problem: Islam is a religion that leads people to the wrong direction.²³ In the diplomatic speech of modern dialogues, such essential problems are typically

²² An illustrious example of this is patriarch Bartholomew's concluding address at the World Conference in Brussels, December 20, 2001; see: *In the World, Yet Not of the World: Social and Global Initiatives of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew*, ed. John Chrysavgis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 285–86.

²³ In the time of John and Theodore, it was possible to consider polytheists an exception in this respect, since for them monotheism was a step forwards; in our times, however, the patristic question would be whether it is better for secularist atheists to have a “wrong” religion or no religion at all.

avoided, and with good reason, but if the Church avoids taking a clear stand on the matter, it is also not without problems; especially if this is done in a way that may appear to suppress the essential message of her saints and teachers. Namely, it seems evident that Abu Qurrah avoided the discussion on the common features of the two religions so that no-one could use them as an excuse for converting to Islam. For the Church, this is a relevant concern also in the Western world of freedom of religion.

Even if the apologetic and interreligious modes of speech are taken to be incomparable with each other, the discrepancy between them may still cause problems in other sectors of religious speech. This is precisely the problem in FLW, the primary aim of which is not exactly apologetic, certainly not polemical, but also not any interreligious reconciliation as such. What to say about Islam in this mode of speech, then? Islam is now not an opposite of the truth, as in patristic apology, but still the document aims to represent the voice of the Church,²⁴ unlike the interreligious statements that often seem to represent a kind of universal monotheistic zone of views constituted by single representatives of the respective religions. The brief numeration of common and diverging aspects is a modest solution that avoids both the abstraction of interreligious statements and the harshness of apologetic approach, but in reducing the paradigmatic differences to particular disagreements, it also illustrates the main problem: how to represent the voice of the Church in our times?

What, then, is the value of the patristic apologetic approach to Islam in our times? This is almost the same as asking what Islam is according to the teaching of the Orthodox Church. Or to put it more blatantly, what is the Truth? Namely, it happens that Theodore Abu Qurrah is the voice of Orthodoxy in Arabic, and no author in the Orthodox Church has more authority than John Damascene, for his thought in general defines the essential lines of classical Orthodox theology. Therefore, to say that they were essentially on the wrong track is simply unsustainable in the general paradigm of Orthodox thought. Moreover, their remarks do not only apply to detached details, but to the basic approach and essential estimation of the fundamental character of Islam. This in turn is much more difficult challenge than, say, Buddhism, because Islam is not only a faith with dissimilar contents, but a faith that explicitly *denies* most of the fundamentals of Christianity such as crucifixion, resurrection and divinity of Christ. Such explicit denials do not usually occur in the sacred books of other religions, and this makes Islam an especially uneasy partner in theological terms in spite of its proximity in many respects.

²⁴ This is culminated in the definition of the aim of dialogue: all sectors of Islam are invited to dialogue “regarding proper understanding of these central Christian teachings.”

Could the approaches be combined, then? That would mean the following: Islam as a refusal of Christ's divinity and resurrection is primarily a misleading invention by a pseudoprophet, having no actual common spiritual roots with Christianity and being not genuinely ascetic – but for the sake of humane politeness, political pragmatism, cultural openness and perhaps even religious evolution towards a more universalistic ethos, one is to turn to the common interests instead and speak discreetly about common roots, common asceticism and spiritual truths. In a way, this is what happens to certain extent in FLW, even though it rather clearly sets the aim of dialogue as “proper understanding” of the “central Christian teachings” that Quran has its own versions of; this, in fact, is a most patristic concern.

Expressions such as “God's Word and his Prophets” or the fashionable “children of Abraham” (in FLW, “Abrahamic traditions”) are handy in syncretical mode of speech, for they, when left undefined, can be taken in different senses by different people. For some, “children of Abraham” is an ethnic-mythic designation or oriental/biblical romanticism, and for others, an indicator of spiritual truth and common God. Diplomatic as these wordings are, they are probably read and understood in different ways by Muslims and Orthodox Christians. However, opaqueness is not an “unspiritual” approach as such, given that it helps to avoid condemning the other, which is the main virtue in Orthodox ethos – but it may arise some questions on sincerity and coherence of the speech. Namely, the sole references to “common roots” or “truth of God's Word and his Prophets” easily appear to intentionally obscure the fact that there are essential and paradigmatic disagreements on these very questions.

This is in fact a problem that Theodore Abu Qurrah and other early polemicists writing in Arabic themselves had to wrestle with from another angle. That is to say, the more they adopted themselves to the Islamic forms of expression in their writings, the more difficult it became to express Christian truths as something more than “Christian versions (or equivalents) of Islamic truths.”²⁵ This very problem shows up also in FLW. For instance, the expression “God's Word” is used in a very *Islamic* way; for patristic authors, “God's Word” was of course not a book but a divine person or, more rarely, an instance of divine speech. The problems in such a mode of

²⁵ For instance, to present Christians as “people of the book” (*ahl al-kitāb*) may be ambiguous as it seems to provide an implication that the sacred script has a similar function in Christianity and Islam, and that the religions are in that sense equivalent. When dozens of such expressions are used, it may alter the way how religion is comprehended. However, there is also the peculiar historical fact that many terms employed by Abu Qurrah gained their Islamic associations only later, given that when he wrote, there was hardly any literature in Arabic (except the Quran).

discourse are two-fold. First, the discourse using Islamically flavoured terminology may become a technical curiosity that does function inside the dialogue with Islam, but has no function whatsoever in other sectors of Orthodox theology. Secondly, if the speech is “diplomatic” enough, it may fail to represent one’s own tradition or may obscure some of its principal positions. Both problems result in lack of interest to the language of dialogue.

Perhaps a good solution and a promising track for the future dialogues would be to concentrate on new approaches instead of old debates such as Monotheistic/Trinitarian and Christological issues the contents of which are doomed to dead ends. The reference to “beauty” in FLW is promising in this respect, for it is a universal concept with a profound patristic and platonic background. Moreover, the contemporary Orthodox Church is blessed to have in her ranks the leading authority on the theology of beauty: David Bentley Hart’s writings are inspiring exactly due to his ability to find universal monotheistic perspectives and express them in novel ways and abundant nuances.

As for the problem of how to formulate the voice of the Church in modern times, there is an evident need for three distinct modes of speech. First, the Church has to represent the Truth in clear terms, renewing the patristic message again and again. Secondly, the Church has to be able to have “diplomatic” encounters and open discussions with all religious, political and cultural traditions, with bold openings and deep-penetrating insights. Thirdly, there has to be honest intellectual reflection on the relation between the two. The latter one is probably the task of “academic Orthodox theology,” an interesting category which is in our times slowly emerging somewhere between the voice of the Church and the “purely objective” academic world.