Dialogues with a Learned Muslim: Dialogue 7

Manuel II Palaiologos (AD 1350–1425)

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The most pious Emperor, friend of Christ, MANUEL PALEOLOGUS, — to his most dear brother, the most fortunate born-in-the-purple despot, Theodore Paleologus. — A dialogue with a certain Persian, by profession a teacher, held in Ancyra of Galatia

The beginning of the seventh controversy 1. a. At daybreak, the Mudarris greeted us at the doorstep. Addressing himself to us, according to his custom, he said, "Let us address, if you like, the points left over from yesterday." When they had all sat down around us, as by custom, I started the subject: b. "The Law of Moses comes from God. This is shown by the multitude of supernatural miracles. Because Moses could not have worked wonders beyond nature, if the laws that he was bearing were not communicated to him by God. However God manifestly honoured this Law by constant works and declarations, not only by those by which he glorified the aforementioned legislator, during and after the promulgation of the Law, but also by the fact that He hated (so to speak) and rejected those who did not observe it, and that if somebody scorned it, He scorned him and inflicted on him suitable punishment.

c. "But I can teach you in a clear and short way the difference between the two Laws. "Almost all mankind divides into three groups: those for Moses, those for Christ and those for he whom you are not afraid to compare to him that saw God. However only your Law has, in the eyes of all, from all points of view, nothing healthy about it. 2. a. "Consider this: you yourselves say that the Law of Moses came down from God and that ours is without any doubt much better than it. You thus judge them both good, although you preferred your own, which is valued by nobody but is decried by all. b. "Here is the proof: If one asked the whole of the men which is the best of all the Laws and which is on the contrary the worst, each one would make this assertion: that his own is the best, but that of Mohammed is the worst. We, now, we say that in the form of a supposition, but you are not unaware that it is indeed the truth. You in vain scorn the opinion of all men; taking them one at a time as if they were enemies, you reason badly. It is undoubtedly necessary to consider the testimony of each for itself as inadmissible, and its vote invalid; those of the whole of mankind on the contrary, when they converge, must be admitted, whatever the subject under consideration.

c. ”So your law cannot properly be called a ”Law” any more, nor ranged with those which are established by a number of legislators. And that because the most significant articles of this new Law are older even than the legislation of Moses. Because they have an ancient origin, and it is not Mahomet who instituted them. Indeed, to demolish the making of idols, to flee polytheism, to believe in only one creator God, to receive circumcision as a sign of faith, and other similar points, Abraham established these without writing. Moses then put them in writing and promulgated them, adding to it what God, in his discussions with him, had ordered. So this more recent Law, coming later than the old one, borrowed it - this is obvious - its basis and its principles; and certainly not the older from it. How indeed the could the older one be derived from the more recent? However so much does such a condition give pre-eminence, that there is no need of a discourse to show it. And what need I say about the basis and the principles, when what appears most perfect of all and, we might say, all of what your Law seems to consist is obviously taken from the old Law? So there is nothing new there, but the same things have been said again; or rather they have been impudently plundered. For show me anything that Mohammed instituted new: you will only find what is bad or inhuman, such as when he orders in decreeing that the belief that he preached should be advanced by the sword.

3.a. ”But it is necessary, I think, to explain this point more clearly. Men on earth must experience one of three things [according to Mohammed]: -- they must place themselves under this law -- or pay tribute and, more, be reduced into slavery -- or, in the absence of either, be struck without hesitation with iron. b. ”But this is extremely absurd! Why? Because God is not pleased with blood, and to act unreasonably is foreign to God. What you say thus has stepped over the border of insanity, or almost so. Firstly indeed, is it not very absurd to pay money and to thus buy the opportunity to lead an impious life and one contrary to the Law? c. ”Next, faith is a fruit of the heart, not of the body. So he who intends to bring somebody to faith needs skilful language and correct thinking, not violence or threats, nor some instrument of wounding or intimidation. Because just as, when it is necessary to compel a non-reasonable nature, one would not have recourse to persuasion, in the same way to persuade a reasonable soul, one does not need to resort to force, or a whip, or any other threat of death.

d. ”No one can ever claim that, if he uses violence, it is in spite of himself, because it is an order from God. Because if it was good to attack with the sword those which are complete unbelievers and that this was a law of God given from heaven -- as Mohammed claims -- it would undoubtedly be necessary to kill all those who would not embrace this Law and this preaching. He is indeed quite impious to buy piety with money. Do you think differently about this? I do not think so. How would you do it? However if that is not good, to kill is yet much worse. e. ”However if it is found that Mohammed added something to the Law of Moses, at once you call that the Law. And you are not satisfied that we allow you to talk like that, but you require that we prefer this Law to those which preceded it. In virtue of what? -- and something which it is not right even to call the Law!

f. ”In fact the very thing which makes us consider it as Law, is the same thing which places this kind of Law on the opposite side (from the real law). One of the properties of the Law is that it can lay down new regulations which are agreeable to God. Yours boasts that it has borrowed regulations. If we pruned out the older articles from it, it would be just like the jay in the fable: He borrowed feathers of every kind, then they were removed from him, and there he was, once again just a jay. g. ”If so, everyone will consider your Law — we'll call it the Law, in the meantime, to make you happy — inferior to that of the Jews. And if it is inferior to that, it is far more so to the Law of Christ, which, with your consent and the consent of all, superabundantly prevails over that of the Jews.”

4. a. I spoke thus. He was silent for rather a long time. Then the interpreter — he was descended from Christians, liked the beliefs of his parents and was opposed to our interlocutors in thought, although not as much as might have been appropriate -- the interpreter thus, rightly transported by our words, with a pleased look, put the blame on the Persian, but not openly. He said more or less this: ”How long will we remain like statues without replying? You need to have the courage to perform some generous action if we do not want to come out of here covered in confusion, leaving to others the crown of victory. ” b. He therefore, lifting his head with haughty pride, looked at them, and then, turning to us, he spoke more or less as follows: The Persian 5. a. -- ”I have said, I say and I will say that good and beautiful is the Law of Christ and much better than the earlier Law, but that mine is superior to both. Therefore consider what I am going to say, you may hear something that you do not condemn altogether. Your law, I say, is beautiful and good, but it is very hard and very burdensome and can not easily be useful. These remedies are too bitter to taste. So there is no error in believing it is not completely perfect.

b. ”The Law of Mohammed follows the middle path and proclaims ordinances which are bearable and in sum gentler and more humane. Hence it is moderate in all respects and takes precedence over other laws. Indeed, the shortcomings of the old Law it fills by the supplements which it brings; on the other hand it reduces the exaggerations of the Law of Christ. There is also what it prunes visibly from both Laws, and suddenly it quite prevails over them. c. ”It also avoids, I think, the mediocrity and the imperfection of the Law of the Jews on the one hand, and on the other hand, the elevation and height of the precepts of Christ, their harshness, that they are excessive and impractical so far for men, because they force, so to speak, our terrestrial nature to mount up to Heaven. It thus avoids both faults and strives for moderation in everything. Thereby it appears better than all the Laws that have preceded it.

d. ”The virtues, you know, consist of avoiding excesses and keeping exactly to a happy medium. That's what we call virtue, and what virtue is. What is virtue is a happy medium, and what is not such is not virtue. This is the doctrine of all the ancients, and you yourself have said the same earlier. e. ”But tell me, is it to stay in the happy medium - 'to love one's enemies, to pray for them', to provide them with food when they are hungry; -- And what is amusing - allow me this freedom - to 'hate his parents and brothers and even his own soul;

--- 'to he who took your shirt, to give him also your coat';--- 'to give without distinction to he who asks' until you appear more naked than a stick and ridiculous in the eyes of those who would then make your property the loot of the Mysians, by pretending to be in need;--- to he who strikes 'on one cheek, to turn the other; to never stand up to evil';--- to have 'no stick, no bag, no money, nor two tunics';-- 'to not worry about tomorrow'? "Who is the man of iron, diamond, more insensible than stone, who will bear all these things,- who will bear the offence and cherish the insulter;-- who will do good to he who is ill-disposed towards him;--- who by his extra bounty will invite the people of this species to gorge on him like vultures on the corpses of the dead?

f. "What ear could accept this, at least one without great complaisance towards requirements of any kind, even those for which our miseries do not suffice? And that which is quite intolerable and opposes the precept of God enacted already, I mean virginity, should that be allowed? The answer is obvious. Because living in a body and wanting to imitate the nature of incorporeal beings and, as if we lived as pure spirits, not approaching women, is contrary to reason: it is a heavy burden and a great violence. g. "Also, to not procreate children for posterity, because of living without getting married, obviously destroys the world. It is completely absurd and unworthy of God to make the human male and female in the beginning, to prescribe them to multiply, and then, having reached the prescribed end and the earth being filled with men, to give men a law that must do away with men. Do not tell me about the flood, nor the case of those who were slaughtered in the desert at the time of Moses, nor the extraordinary fire, that of Sodom. These cases and consequent punishment did not make the world entirely disappear, and it was because of the magnitude of the transgression that they were inflicted on the guilty. Christ, himself, is not a Minister of anger. He did not come, I think, to take revenge on men who offended God, but rather to bring benefit and relief to men, mainly by a better law.

h. "Let us consider this: It is good to 'leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife' and thereby increase the human race, as the former precept ordered. There's no reply to this, I think. God forbid that I try to destroy what has been prescribed by God to our first parents for the construction of our species and that has peopled this world with humans! But the second Law, which establishes virginity, you just want to see this as carrying on from the previous one! What? Should not everyone observe it? But if everyone observed it, the whole human race would be reduced to absolutely nothing. Thus these precepts, namely, multiply and keep virginity, do not agree, they rather fight against each other. And since there's no choice that, given their opposition, one must be good and one not, the one is bad, in my opinion, that urges men to have an indecent opinion about God. But this is indeed the case for the one that would have made the human race disappear, virginity, as I said.

i. "So the interim Law, I mean yours, offering us many such examples, is clearly not perfect. However, it is without question much better than that which preceded it. But relative to that which followed, it clearly comes second. 6. a. "The Law that came later thus appears higher than the others, as in buildings. That is why the Jew, under an Law which lies closer

to the ground, we can not welcome him when he comes to the law of Mohammed, the highest located, unless he has first of all, as far as possible, practiced your religion. He who comes to God must not in fact leapfrog forward in a disorderly advance, but, by degrees, climb through the intermediate level to the last, beginning with the first: thus everywhere the order will be preserved. b. "It follows, therefore, to speak briefly, that the Jews had the true religion until the advent of Christ, and that was the case for those who had faith in him; and the others were unfaithful to the Law and not obeying Moses who had predicted Christ, even if they observed all the precepts, even if they claimed to render to Moses veneration and honour (to him) after God himself. It also follows that those who believed in Christ were God's people, all in succession, until the arrival of Muhammad, who brings the perfect law. But, afterwards only those (belong to the people of God) who adhere to this Law. So those who have rallied to Mohammed, those are really the disciples of Christ and Moses. Those on the contrary who are more zealous than they should be and because of this have remained in the repealed Laws, provoke against themselves the wrath of legislators and by their madness work to their own injury."

The emperor 7. a. The old man, after these words, raised his eyebrows and sat down. The circle of listeners were attentive. The struggle, they felt, was reaching the culmination. The children underscored with gestures the words of their father, applauded and wanted to jump up and down. b. So I say : 8. a. -- "What's this, my man? Here, by a massive attack, you invested the acropolis with an arrogance and a fierce passion. You were expecting to take it at the first assault. But you were mistaken in your hopes. There are men who live there, and it is firmly based on the rock. It is full of wonderful goods. Perhaps of these goods of which you never had experience, you will have your share, when the war is fortunately completed with the support of God, you and your two sons that are here. b. "But I'm allowed to be amazed at this: You are in truth a man of sense and honour, in the very first place among the doctors in your land, you are adorned with the great wisdom that is specific to your country, you have virtuous morals, believing everything less important than the truth. And yet here you refute yourself and you contradict yourself openly. You have already declared the Law of Moses divine and good, and said strongly that it has been sent from heaven to men. Then, as if you have repented of your previous declarations, you do not hesitate to say evil of it, and thus contradict yourself, as I said. It is not actually possible that the same Law is both divine and good and is also such that it can receive fair criticism. However, this Law and that of Christ, because they did not recommend moderation, you place among the bad Laws.

c. "You assume that the Law which is the best on all points, is yours, and that it keeps to a happy medium. You hope to show thereby that because of this happy medium, it is consistent with virtue. You deviate in this from the right position, and your friends will be ashamed for you. Because it is not appropriate for so important a man as you to cover the Law of Christ with lengthy contempt. You know how much you have allowed yourself to show scorn, openly calling it very unbearable and very violent, and absurd and cumbersome, even like a trap, and other similar epithets. I'm not saying anything about the many criticisms

that you have uttered against virginity and because of which you have grossly attacked the legislator who established it, although you also placed him above all. [1] 9. a. "But continue to reflect on this. You could reach better judgments even on points where you seem not to contradict yourself.

Now I should present my defence against your objections. b. "The extraordinary and supernatural things that, you say, are beyond human virtue, because they seem to you above human nature, are merely beyond a man. On the other hand, they are very accessible and easy for men, if they wish. That may seem to you like a puzzle, but it is completely the truth. If we consider our strength, or rather our weakness inherited from Adam, these points may seem above every virtue, but not when you consider the support and power of him who calls us to them. He doesn't encourage men in order to abandon them without his aid, but invisibly the hand of God helps them with their actions. Here, then where such assistance is found, won't that which seems rude, what seems awkward, be that which appears instead very easy? c. "Get into the spirit where the reward is the kingdom of God. The previous discourse has already shown this and you yourself are still in agreement with it. It is therefore necessary that those whom this hope nourishes bear all. But this is not the time to explain myself. Your words lead us imperceptibly to the assistants, like a current. Let us therefore proceed to the defence, with the reasons that might persuade you, without, from need of a reply, you having to be ashamed of what is fair (to say).

10. a. "Our Lord, in the time he lived among us, adjusting our habits and leading us by all means into the light of truth, seemed to command and prescribe certain things indistinctly to everyone. He established them actually as an indication, as a sign, if you like, that we love him. Because, he says, 'one who loves me, keep my commandments. Therefore all must observe them well. Without this it is not possible to truly become his servants, from the enemies that we were previously because of the sin of our first parents. b. "The other points, he does not establish them as precepts necessary, not for all, nor as absolute master. It is in the form of exhortations and advice, or spiritual battle, if we like to call them so, that he offers to the most perfect, the promise of both the kingdom and the divine sonship. To those who are content to be servants, little ones with little ambitions, He gives corresponding benefits. All wealth, as they say, is not the same. On the contrary, all those who receive and observe this advice, enjoy the mystical parentage through participation in the divine grace. As evidenced by the operations and the power of the divine Spirit, who reveals himself in them and comes from them, like a current from an eternal source.

11. a. "I want to speak about this more clearly. May I be forgiven if I allow myself to follow the thread of discourse, led, if you like, by the current of truth; it leads me to what I now don't want to say or agree to, and what looks like green fruit, or rather, to speak more exactly, things premature for you who are attached to things carnal. Such spiritual food belongs to all those who are found inferior to them, and who are still attached all the same to the commandments: because if we omit them, we cannot be considered blameless servants. So these men can not only avoid incurring punishment, but also benefit from immortal rewards

by the grace of the master to his servants, so that is beneficial for all those who, to this end, agreed to 'take the form of a slave', even though He is by nature the lord of all.

b. "So it is clear that to respect the precepts is a general and essential need. But to raise the level of the advice, which raise up to sonship, is a matter only for those who choose to suffer the painful things, whatever the quality and quantity, in order to win a joy and a glory without end. It is their task to preserve their eagerness until the end, not over time to abandon the group of the virtuous who practise virtue for itself, and finally get the crowns that are only for the heads of the virtuous.

c. "That's why, in dealing with this, the Saviour, who wanted to show what I said, uses this expression, very brief if we consider the words alone, but as great as Heaven when you consider its power: 'Let he who is able understand.' It is as if he said: great is the current battle, but larger and eternal are the rewards. This is to notify the man who has shown youthful courage and who, supported by his meditation, knows how to endure the hard part. I do not intend (you) to train at the race-track by force: that is neither normal nor just. Know who has the power, i.e. the will to overcome the hard part. He's the one who is worthy of admiration. Because free will, the honour given to men from the beginning and by which they are superior to other animals, remains intact: it is unnecessary that it be otherwise. Because how would one make a gift for what was done of necessity, whether it concerns a kingdom, or should one crown the lazy? On the contrary, it is in another way, it is by an art and a suitable power that he drives us all towards better goals. He has opened to all men the kingdom of heaven, and indicated the path that leads to it. Leading to a successful conclusion all that relates to that purpose, he had omitted nothing by way of relief to help strugglers and travellers. Rather there is nothing that he has not strongly recommended to all for their good.

d. "Is this a law above nature that you see here? It trains all men into virtue, provides relief to the will and rewards that reflect the struggles of everyone. " The Persians 12. a. -- "We see, said some, you speak of mysteries and doctrines higher than our knowledge. The precepts of Christ, you divide them into commands and counsels. You have expounded extremely well on this subject. b. "But we would like to hear you explain this more clearly and in detail." The Emperor 13. a. -- "How do you think, I said, that I should complete my defence? Anyone who can not keep their virginity will not be deprived of future blessings: otherwise the elect would be few. Similarly, any person who, stripped of his coat, does not give his shirt also to him who seeks a quarrel, he is not liable to punishment, nor the one that, struck on one cheek, did not present the other to the aggressor. But even though we were unable to demonstrate a willingness to bear a greater injustice than the inclination to injustice of the unjust, nevertheless the fact that we suffer patiently injustice from anyone deserves, as we know, an important reward: because that is not easy nor possible for most people.

b. "These are your statements from the start - you remember - which we have rightly brought to these words. However, even taken this way, the high character of the exhortations does

us good. Because certainly nothing would be happier than being able to achieve them, to launch ourselves out towards them like a goal and to strip oneself of this infirmity of spirit. This is not for us an acquisition of nature, far from it! Even if we were not able to give even what has escaped the ferocity of the unjust, even though we have not practiced all the higher virtues and are not in this way come to the end of perfection, if we have been able to accomplish, as they say, the second crossing, to know how to support patiently anyone encroaching on us, but we keep the medium, knowing how much we are lacking to the best of the best things."

The Persian 14. a. -- "How is it obvious," said the Persian, "that the medium will look after those who are lacking with respect to higher things, but practice charity, justice and like virtues? b. "For you have said, I think, that few will share in the eternal blessings. Living in such expectations is not keeping the medium." The Emperor 15. a. -- "But, my dear fellow, this is possible at need for those at least who have the spirit and reason from suitable principles. If men carefully observe the commandments good for mercenary servants, consider how to estimate those provided by the son? There is nothing that can engage a servant to take pride, if he is sensible. If in fact he performs the works of the servants, although by his service he gave his master thousands of blessings, made of dark, poor and humble elements, he merely carried out his duty and did not perform a service of freewill. He who does not do his duty is liable for a beating, imprisonment and other chastisements. He on the other hand who performs well in all things, no-one admires; he does even admire himself, I think. Is it his place to do it? Far from it.

b. " However the example, certainly, is not a happy one. For us, we need servants, and there are those who, by their servants, have escaped many misfortunes and gained a lot of property. But God, what need would he have of our services, He who lacks absolutely nothing and who created all things merely out of goodwill? Thus no man of intelligence could feel proud, because he observes the commandments of the master. He will however have his wages, which are granted by grace. Because no wages are due to slaves. He will obtain, however, what his moderate conduct deserves, and he will envy those who have practiced the points that he himself left out. 16. a. "That should be enough on that. But it was necessary that the discourse, which has deviated from the topic because of your questions, should respond to those who require one. Sometimes even in the course of discussion, the discourse takes us back on track so that it completes its course and returns to the subject that is appropriate.

b. "It is certainly not true that all those who have not managed to raise themselves to the level of the advice and exhortations were lost themselves. If, without any wrong to anyone, without wishing to suffer any longer, we then carry on in fear of being abused and will refer to the master of judgment to accuse the evildoer, we will not for that be liable to this censure. Certainly not, any more than if we go about wearing shoes, owning two tunics, with a staff, bag and money on the belt. It is also possible for those who want to marry and gain money by just means to live in a reasonable manner, although it would be a better acquisition if

we did not want to acquire possessions in this world and loved the poverty adopted at the beginning by Christ more than any abundance. In short, to perform for a reasonable cause anything which is for us life is not condemned by nature, so to speak, nor prohibited by the Law.

17. a. "Let us say this, if we must make distinctions and summarize what has been said about this subject: b. "This is the act of evil men, unworthy even to be servants, to scorn the commands of the Master. To observe them is the due of wise and faithful servants. But to welcome the wonderful advice with pleasure and carry it out as you can, this is the duty of a man desirous of great values, not content to just be a servant, when it is possible to be a son. c. "It is thus necessary to speak as follows: it is the nature of better men, I mean those who say that they follow the values above, to be with the angels and become, so to speak, their companions in life. The characteristic of men below them, men in the middle, is simply to observe the precepts that save and reconcile God with sinners. The third group, I mean those who, by their own decision, place themselves outside the other two groups mentioned, this is the herd of swine that are no good.

d. "It seems to me, dear friend, that you no longer hold to your first opinion, having learned this, and do not declare more openly that our Law is very hard and like a trap, nor that exhortations and advice which you said exceed the virtue of men, against all truth. For how would this law have seen fit to recommend things impossible? e. "That this advice seem more burdensome to you than the commandments of the past, is not surprising: they are clearly higher that them - because they lead to their completion - as you yourself have already agreed. But the thing that is complete is in all points higher than that which receives its completion from it. On the other hand, that which is higher and ascending is somewhat more difficult and makes more difficult the path that leads there. For in truth, narrow, straight and elevating, considering it for itself, is the path paved for all by God who, without leaving heaven, descended and became man for the salvation of our species. This way was in the beginning unknown, unused and difficult. These difficulties are inherent for it, because it leads upwards: it leads to the highest place; it is neither broad, neither plain, nor easy, for the reason that nobody traversed it before.

f. "The characteristics of the way that our first parents followed are the opposite. It leads to the abyss, and there are many men who from the beginning committed themselves, attracted by its gentle and easy slope and by the lure of the easiness. Not surprisingly, the Saviour leads men away from pleasures that lead to the abyss, and He encourages them to embark on the path that can save the travellers. It would have been amazing if he had recommended the opposite. The main reason is that there is of necessity nothing in common between him and playing around and that he has stigmatised the easy life, so to speak, in the eyes of all and of those who seek the same. g. "Indeed, among all humans, it is to you also and above all that he shows this. For those among you who seem to be the children of virtue, you believe that they are better than those who boast of a wide reputation and of great riches. The Greeks, obviously, thought in the same way. In short, for all, virtue is an object of esteem,

and vice one of contempt. However, it was undoubtedly in giving precepts or advice in good and due form, better done than in seeking to gain the consent of all.

18. a. "But as in fact not all of them follow the same way as the fervent (disciples), it is not this which it is important to examine. The part which is flesh and mud may be urged and pushed and led by any means to virtue by a rational soul, but it resists, you think well, and by its nature refuses the benefits which refrain from corruption. Because if it is true that the fruits of the virtue are sweet, the root of it is bitter. If such is the truth, the works of virtue are painful and are not achieved by necessity in nature but by the generosity of the will. However the will is not the same in everyone. It would be necessary, on the contrary, to be astonished if all nourished the same dispositions with regard to virtue and did not differ from each other in conduct.

b. "Thus the fact that all do not follow the same way as the fervent, in no way disparages the affirmation that virtue is good. On the contrary, the fact that all rather wish to be numbered with the virtuous than with those who have given themselves up to a slacker life, it is this which raises it to the value of a higher good. I think that if one offered, even to those dedicated to carelessness, the choice to be able, in all their conduct, to turn towards the better values, or of living in their usual loose morals, they would choose the first way and would reject the other, almost without considering it. [The seventh dialogue continues, to chapter 37, when the day ends and the two sides separate]

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