

CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM IN SOUTHERN ITALY IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE NINTH CENTURY

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Abstract

Almost always in the history of mankind, religion represented a very important part of the life of different communities or, later on, nations. In our times, in Europe, for example, religion does not have the same power and influence like it used to have in the past centuries. On the other hand, in the countries from the Middle East religion represents a way of life or at least it has a great influence on everyday living. For example, many legislative codes of the Arab countries are build up after religious codes of law.

The goal of this article is to call attention to the political and religious encounters between Christians and Muslims in two major cities and principalities from southern Italy (Salerno and Benevento), in the second half of the ninth century. The article will emphasize, bringing historical proof of Latin translation of some papal registers, the fact that Christianity and Islam were only used as the interest required to be most useful for political advantage and territorial domination.

Keywords *Christianity, Islam, Lombards, Byzantines*

Nowadays, the religious issues (e.g. fundamentalist Islamic movements) have arise again in Europe and in other major parts of the world. Ten or twenty years ago, no one thought that religion will represent a menace for the 21st century. My analysis will not deal with the religious issues from

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our times but with those ones from the beginning of the religious clash between Christianity and Islam and a good example is the encounter of the two in southern Italy in the Ninth century, when most of the southern part of the peninsula was under Arab rule.

In the ninth century, southern Italy was a place of fight between two religions (Christianity and Islam) and three identities (Lombard, Byzantine and Arab). We may find many information about this local fight from the letters of Pope John VIII (872-882), who ruled in those years the Church of Rome and who had a major interest in keeping Christianity as the only religion in southern Italy. He had fourteen letters sent not only to the clergy, but also to the rulers from Salerno and Benevento, in regards to this issue. Two things do tend to represent a shock for him:

- a) the fact that Christians (Lombards and Byzantines) make pacts with the Muslims to fulfill their own territorial ambitions;
- b) the fact that the same Christians tend to fight each other over territorial supremacy, instead of uniting themselves and fighting against the "heathen" Arabs.

Thus, the ninth century witnessed military cooperation as well as armed conflict between Arabs and the Christian polities of southern Italy, and it further seemed plausible to a tenth-century Christian chronicler from Salerno that in the 870s the local prince might have been warned of an impending invasion by an Arab merchant from North Africa. Moreover, European Christians continued to travel to Carthage as pilgrims in the Aghlabid period and, like the Calabrian monk Simon and his abbot, Pope Paschal I (817–824) too was able safely to ransom Christians who had been abducted and carried into captivity across the sea (Conant, 2014).

The involvement of the Roman Church was crucial in the second half of the ninth century in dealing with all these events. An important figure of the papacy was Pope John VIII. Elected as Pope on 14 December 872, he succeeded his predecessor, Adrian II (867-872). His pontificate was during a very troubled period in the history of the Italian Peninsula and Western Europe. As we have mentioned, southern Italy was under constant raid of the Saracens, and frictions for gaining power were seen in the Roman-German Empire, between the French and German dynasties. As character, Pope John was an energetic man with many talents, a true Pope soldier, trying to restore the prestige of papacy acquired during Pope Nicholas I (858-867) (Rendina,

2003, p. 290). Moreover, he was the first Pope killed (Engreen, 1945, p. 318), allegedly being poisoned.

Louis II (king of Italy, 844-875 and emperor of the Holy Roman-German Empire, 850-875) died on 12 August 875. Since then, John VIII saw himself as the only person who could, or at least try, to stem the Muslim avalanche. The great goal of Louis II was to remove the Muslim foundations from Italy. This desire has made him appreciated and desired by the Byzantines (Partner, 1972, p. 66). This was, however, an extremely difficult task which he had imposed to himself. The Arabs in Southern Italy were quarrelsome and disorderly, but so were the Christians.

In regards to the Byzantines, their Empire continued to rule over parts of southern Italy from the reconquest of Justinian I the Great (Byzantine emperor, 527-565) through to the conquest by the Normans in the later eleventh century, this region was only intermittently an area of major concern to the government in Constantinople. However much the Byzantines wished to maintain, and even to extend, their hold on the southern Italian provinces, the latter were strategically of far less significance to them than were the frontiers of Eastern Asia Minor and Thrace, or the naval war against Islam in the Mediterranean (Loud, 2012). Even so, the Byzantines did not let go this territory and made everything necessary to maintain it under its influence.

The problem of Saracen invasions was very pressing, since they had arrived near Rome, bringing severe damage to the economy and to papal patrimony. In such conditions, the Pope fought for the establishment of a coalition between the so called state elements in Southern Italy, with the principalities of Benevento and Salerno as centre points.

Thus, in the summer of 875, the Pope sent a letter *to the clergy of Salerno*, as follows:

„Those priests, who, being excommunicated in the time of our Most Holy predecessor, the lord Pope Nicholas, had the audacity to touch the Sacred Sermon, will be subject to penalty of conviction, as the sacred canons decide. However, since apostolic mercy comes to those now reformed, because of this high mercy, we show them such indulgence, that satisfied by the Saint Eucharist, to want that, for three consecutive years, every Monday and Friday, each week, to completely fast from food and wine, and in no way to plain more” (Migne, 1852).

In trying to achieve the above-mentioned anti-Muslim coalition, Pope John VIII tried, first, to bring the clergy in the region to his side. Thus, writing

this letter *clero et ordini Salernitano*, to the clergy and mastery of Salerno the Pope wanted to show that he is willing to compromise in order to achieve the formation of an anti-Muslim coalition. Thus, John VIII removed the penalty of excommunication of the clergy of Salerno, decided by Pope Nicholas I, as a result of total disobedience of the clergy from Salerno to the Apostolic Seat.

However, the clergy had to spend another three years from then in a state of repentance, reflected in the fact that *every Monday and Friday, each week, to completely fast from food and wine, and in no way to plain more*. And here was now a Pope willing to compromise in order to achieve his plan. It thus crystallized a new attitude of the papacy toward relations with Muslims. If the predecessor of Pope John, Pope Nicholas I approved some relations of friendship and peace with the pagans, and the conclusion of treaties with them, Pope John VIII was completely against such an attitude, being the first Pope to put to the fore the Christian faith, regardless of consequences of relations with Muslims (Mastnak, 2002, p. 109). He claimed that any treaty or friendship with the unfaithful ones was against God. Moreover, the Pope believed that any friendship or other type of relationship defiled the Christian society, since he considered the Muslims as malevolent people, vicious and unclean, sons of adultery, members the devil, *sons of Belial, bodies of the devil and subjects of devilish law* (Mastnak, 2002, p. 110). Those who had any connection with the Saracens were against Christ Himself, even if it was for peace (Shryock, 2010, p. 32).

Solving somehow the problems between the Apostolic Seat and clergy of Salerno, Pope John is now turning his attention to the political leadership of the principality, namely the Prince Guaifer of Salerno (861-880), to whom he sends a letter, in 876:

„Because we know, not only from those said by our loyal legates, that you are obedient to our Roman Church dominion which we chair, Christ being the founder, [and] that your almighty son-in-law, the prefect Pulcario, is really determined that together [with you] to free the entire homeland, as Christ entrusted this task to us, we came to your places to find you as a true believer. Therefore, the pact you asked for, as promised in a true Pontifical statement of our beloved son, Emperor Charles Augustus, who should rightly be strengthened by you, the power being accepted through the venerable delegates of our Church who returned, justly and legally, we are ready to establish in the future. And at the same time, I want you to prepare for me and for the new crowd of companions, how to say it, such accommodation, and for

those loyal to us by steadfastness started strongly, and for the infidels, as you can, enforce them rein to fight, trusting in our arrival, under the protection of God” (Migne, 1852).

Guaifer I became prince of Salerno in the year 861, twelve years after the territorial separation of Salerno and Benevento (Wood, 2006, p. 404). He ruled the principality until 880, when, apparently, he was deposed and forced by his son to go to the Abbey of Monte Cassino, where he died shortly.

In the aforementioned letter, Pope John VIII tells the Prince he will send pontifical representatives to Salerno to conclude an anti-Muslim alliance. For strengthening the relationship between the two entities - the Papacy and the Principality of Salerno - he brings to discussion the new king Charles II the Bald (king of Italy, 875-877; emperor, 875-877). In the end, emperor Charles II was a great disappointment for the Pope, as he appeared not to be that rightful arm in which the Pope put so much hope to fight against the Saracen raids. The pontifical ambitious plans remained a byword caused by the failure of the man on whom the Pope relied so much (Rendina, 2003, p. 292).

Returning to the historical context in which this letter was drafted and sent, it must be noted that most political and state entities in Southern Italy concluded, over time, a series of peace treaties with the new Muslim power in the region. The Pope, as mentioned above, totally opposed to such state of affairs. Between 875-876, Pope John VIII called on all states in Southern Italy to join the anti-Muslim coalition he wanted formed for so long. Italian leaders were not in a hurry to join the Pope in his „crusade”. Seeing this, the Pope himself decided to take a long trip throughout Southern Italy, in order to try to convince the leaders, in person, to join his coalition. Thus, in 876, the Pope starts a journey through Campania for organizing the coalition. It seems Salerno and Capua immediately joined the papal initiative, unwilling to enter into open conflict with the papacy, and in June 877, delegates from Salerno, Capua, Naples, Gaeta, Amalfi travelled to Traietto to meet with the fearless Pope (Kreutz, 1991, p. 58). Following this meeting, an anti-Muslim alliance was created, even if for a very short period of time, without the participation, in the end, of Sergius II, duke of Naples (870-877/78). He considered more profitable a friendship with Muslims than joining the papal coalition and for this reason, he was excommunicated.

However, things were not as simple and happy, as they originally seemed. Pope John VIII was forced to turn to the only solution that worked for

centuries in such cases. He used money from the treasury of the Roman Church to buy the help of Guaifer of Salerno (861-880) and Pulcario of Amalfi (866-879). Thus, the Pope had to pay 10,000 *manusi* (Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2007, p. 115) to Pulcario of Amalfi for his ships to patrol the coastline between Traetto and Civitavecchia (Kreutz, 1991, p. 58). Regarding the situation in Naples, things developed in favor of the Pope, as in 877, bishop Athanasius II of Naples gave a coup that removed duke Sergius II, who was his brother, and he became duke (878-898) himself, keeping, however, his Episcopal position, which he held since 872. However, hope from the beginning quickly turned into disappointment for the Pope, as Athanasius II was not in a hurry to break relations with Muslims.

An important character that appears in this letter is *Pulcari praefectum, prefect Pulcario*. Pulcario was the son of Marinus, the prefect of Amalfi. Marinus is known for his involvement in politics of Naples, in 876, when he provided vessels for rescue of the bishop Athanasius I from the prison in which the duke Sergius II had thrown him, and for the good relations he had with his neighbor, duke Guaifer of Salerno, whose daughter married to his son Pulcario (Skinner, 1995, p. 50).

On 18th January 876, the Pope sent a new letter to the Prince of Salerno: „To your glorious nobility, which we embrace with spiritual arms, and no less we strive to warm with love at our chests, we thank praiseworthy, as neither rivers nor wind can move from stability the rock of faith laying the foundation of steadiness, through violence of various events, neither can be removed in any way from us through the promises offered, for it is founded on rock. But you have made known these things about the past and present misleading actions of Adelgisius and his accomplices and we really understood them and your cleverness undoubtedly, as things appear. But it will be for them as it was with Saul and Ahab (I Pr. XX), and their soul as the soul of the Lord's enemies, because little fear they had to send a worthy man to death, and because God is compassionate to us, we will sing and intone: *The sinner is snared in the work of his hands* (Ps. 9, 16), and again: *Whoever digs a hole and scoops it out falls into the pit they have made. The trouble they cause recoils on them and other* (Ps. 7:15-16). Meanwhile, while divine virtue will consider appropriate to help us, by help and advice we will not pass over and give you protection, but we urge your too humble son and always August, as quickly as possible, to help you, both by himself and his army. In the same way, we will take care to urge and encourage zealously other believers and

friends of the Church of Christ to this direction, and all, be those to which we think, be those conveniently found that you hurried to confess to us, we will hasten to meet with boundless joy. Meanwhile, *Be strong in faith, courageous and strengthen your heart* (acc. to Ps. 26, 20), not in insults, which rather is called Satan, but trusting in the Lord, so as to remove all of the fellowship of the heathen, and you, instead, in peace and good understanding of unity in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Any advice, for sure, whether it would add or would seem to be savior, do not hesitate to make it known to us, as by our balance to be advantageously approved, or if somehow was been divinely revealed, so and be ordained. For we believe that your losses are ours, and your gains we consider ours with no doubt. Meanwhile, Bishop of Sorrento, gone either on earth or in the sea, since we have already received a few [pieces of news from him], we bear in no less annoying way, and if not sent quickly, we will not support him, not unfairly, undeserved, but rightful if we were directed to us without distinction, then we will recognize the great and usual evidence of your obedience, and the sun of your love shining completely around our pontificate, more clearly [your] insignia will come to light. We wish you honor etc. Date 18 January, the tenth indiction” (Migne, 1852).

In this letter, Pope John VIII praises Prince Guaifer for his involvement to defend the faith but also because he informed the Pope about *Adelgisii et complicum ejus prioribus ac modernis fraudulentis actibus*, about *the past and current misleading facts of Adelgisius and his accomplices*.

This *Adelgisius* is actually prince Adelchis of Benevento (854-878). In this letter, the Pope referred to the fact that Adelchis kept king Louis II in captivity and released him subject to the condition of never daring to return to Southern Italy (Setton & Baldwin, 1969, p. 48).

In turn, the Pope informs the Prince of the fact that the army of the new king, Charles II, will assist him in the fight against Muslims, and that he has not heard from *episcopum Surrentinum*, the bishop of Sorrento whose name was not preserved by history. It is possible that the *Bishop of Sorrento* has been sent as an apostolic delegate in search of military aid to support the papal plans.

On 29th June 877, Pope John VIII sent another letter to Prince Guaifer, considered as one of the last supporters of the coalition papal: „Since we are not going to wait nor to investigate the ambassadors of the Neapolitan Duke, according to his and your writings, but we are forced once again to write Your Excellence, to return those separated from the unbelievers to the

pious breast of the Holy Mother Church For this, since you've worked long, we urge you to put your effort and also the same struggle until the end. Because if he was ready to break the wicked link immediately, and we knew it certainly, we will hasten to Traetto (The current provincial town Minturno, Lazio) and who is already sought and was even promised, we will give the greatest pleasure, clearer safety and truth of faith being set on both sides; there [at Traetto] even yourself and blessed protector Landulf, and the Duke mentioned and, of course, the famous prefect Pulcario, we long you to be there. We persistently ask to put your cleverness on contribution. For even if comes the same duke *after thy hardness and impenitent heart, treasures up unto thyself wrath in the day of wrath* (acc. to Rm. 2, 5), to be willing to despise, either to estranger or reject, the cause of his salvation and of many, this we want to know now, because we are absolutely not lacking any advice or human or divine help. This clear thing I re-give to it according to his work and fruit of his discoveries [...] I wish wholeheartedly, rejoice at his arrival, because God Almighty shows gentle to the righteous and ruthless to the unjust. So your beloved charity is shown to us almighty believer above this and as long are our powers last, does not cease to toil, that, until by your urging, this desire reaches a result, we thank you accordingly and remember you in our prayers to the Holy Apostles. Date June 29th, the tenth indiction” (Migne, 1852).

The Pope informs the Prince of the duplicity of duke Sergius II of Naples, who did not keep his word to send troops against Muslims and will be, as we have seen, deposed and blinded by his brother, Bishop Athanasius II. The other character mentioned in this letter, *Landulfi*, is Landulf II, Bishop-Count of Capua (871-879), that the Pope was able to convince him to break relations with Muslims and join the papal coalition. In the second part of the letter, Pope praises the qualities of Prince Guaifer and his commitment to the Apostolic Seat, although we must say, this „commitment” of Prince Guaifer was bought with good money by the Pope.

As a conclusion, we will say only that the much-trumpeted anti-Muslim papal coalition was not successful. Even if, as we have seen, in June 877, the leaders of Salerno, Capua, Naples, Gaeta, Amalfi went to Traetto, as the Pope himself stated in this last letter to Guaifer, saying *ad Trajectum properabimus, we will hasten to Traetto* to unite against Muslims. Although they agreed with the Pope, and pledged that they will fight against Muslims,

Naples, Gaeta and Amalfi did not observe the papal treaty since the beginning, meaning they continued their commercial relations with Muslims.

Pope John VIII has not given up his anti-Muslim plans and he established an army that he led personally, although he had to call the secular princes (Mastnak, 2002, p. 108). Anticipating the personality of Julius II, this Pope-soldier personally led in 877, the naval operations near Cicero Cape, managing to capture eighteen Saracens vessels and release 600 Christians slaves (Rendina, 2003, p. 293). It was the only time the full glory of the Pope, in his fight against the heathen.

Finally, left alone in his approach, although he estranged the papal rich heritage of Fondi and Traetto that stretched from south of Terracina to the Gargliano River, in order to „buy” the help of Southern States, Pope John VIII was needed that, finally, in 878, to pay himself the amount of 25,000 *manusi* to Arabs, so they no longer forward to the north of the peninsula (Partner, 1972, p. 71).

A very important question that prompted Southern Italian states not to continue military cooperation with the Papacy was the Byzantine danger in the south. Thus, in 876 and 877, Naples, Gaeta, Salerno, Capua and even Amalfi, joined with the Muslim power to undertake a series of military raids on the southern shores of the Italian Peninsula to eliminate the Byzantines, this happening to despair of the Pope, who saw himself unable to prevent looting of monastic lands and kidnapping of monks and nuns (Setton & Baldwin, 1969, p. 49). Thus, cities and duchies in Southern Italy refused to form a united anti-Saracen front, under papal auspices, they cooperating, in the end, with the Byzantines and Muslims, according to their own needs and ambitions (Setton & Baldwin, 1969, p. 50).

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