Gerasimos

Gerasimos, Abbot of the Monastery of St Symeon

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<th>DATE OF BIRTH</th>
<th>Unknown; perhaps 12th or early 13th century</th>
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<td>PLACE OF BIRTH</td>
<td>Unknown; perhaps Antioch</td>
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<tr>
<td>DATE OF DEATH</td>
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BIOGRAPHY

Gerasimos is an exceedingly obscure figure. The body of his sole surviving work offers no biographical information. From its title, we learn that its author, Gerasimos, was ‘the abbot of the Monastery of the Blessed Saint Symeon the Wonderworker’, on the ‘wondrous mountain’ (thau-maston oros). This would be the monastery of Symeon the Thaumaturgos (d. 597), known as the Younger, to distinguish him from his famous namesake. A church and a monastery sprang up around the younger Symeon’s pillar, and soon became a popular goal for urban pilgrims who could easily reach it from Antioch in a day. The monastery seems to have suffered little during the Muslim conquests. By the 9th and 10th centuries it had become a center for the intellectual life of Arabic-speaking Christians, with many works being written, translated, and copied there.

It is difficult to be precise as to when Gerasimos was active. The few scholars to examine the question have been inclined to place him in the 12th or 13th centuries. This was particularly the conclusion of Cheikho and Nasrallah. While Graf did not hazard a specific guess, he discussed Gerasimos’s work in the context of authors dating to the 13th century. The main points of evidence cited in this connection are the date of the earliest manuscript of his work and the history of his monastery. The oldest known manuscript dates to the 13th century, while his monastery flourished as a literary center between the 9th century and the first half of the 13th century, after which it quickly faded from view. Gerasimos cannot have been writing earlier than the early 9th century, as he knew and used the works of Theodore Abū Qurra (d. c. 820, q.v.).

While it cannot be excluded that Gerasimos lived in an earlier century, a date in the 12th or 13th century does not seem unreasonable. A late date also helps to explain the lack of references to him in earlier
Christian Arabic literature. Assuming that Gerasimos does belong to the 13th century, one wonders whether he is not to be identified with the 13th-century scribe Gerasimos, who helped produce a copy of the lives of St Symeon and the Blessed Martha, his mother, 'in the Monastery of Symeon the Thaumaturgos on the wondrous mountain'. The name Gerasimos seems not to have been widely used in early medieval Syria, so this identification is especially tempting.

Whoever Gerasimos may have been, he was clearly well educated. He makes easy and extensive use of the terminology and concepts of Aristotelian logic, and draws freely on a large corpus of non-Christian literature: the testimony of the ancient Greeks, the lore of the pagans of Harrān, and the Qur’an itself. He does not as a rule cite his sources, though it is clear that he was well read in the disputation literature of earlier centuries. Stylistically, his work is largely composed in saj’ or rhyming prose – with its necessary multiplication of modifiers, the clausal parallelism, the researched vocabulary, and the preference for oblique propositions. While this device sometimes gets the better of good sense, on the whole Gerasimos keeps his exuberant use of the form under control.

MAIN SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Primary
M. Vogel and V. Gardthausen, *Die griechischen Schreiber des Mittelalters und der Renaissance*, Leipzig, 1909 (for the scribe Gerasimos)
A. Papadopoulos-Kerameus, *Hierosolymitike bibliothekes*, 5 vols, St. Petersburg, 1891-1915 (for the scribe Gerasimos)

Secondary
W. Dalrymple, *From the holy mountain. A journey among the Christians of the Middle East*, New York, 1997, pp. 54-60 (a moving account of a modern traveller's visit to the remains of the Monastery of St Symeon)

Nasrallah, *HMLEM* iii.2, pp. 115-18
J. Nasrallah, ‘Couvents de la Syrie du Nord portant le nom de Siméon’, *Syria* 49 (1972) 127-59 (pp. 136-40, for the monastery's 'age of gold' in the 10th and 11th centuries; pp. 146-47, for the life of Gerasimos; and pp. 147-48, for the latest attested activity of its scriptorium, around 1260)
Graf, *GCAL* ii, pp. 82-84
Gerasimos’ work is divided into six parts. The first five seek to discover the marks by which one can recognize the true religion. They include an extensive collection of testimonies, some from the Old and New Testaments, but most from non-Christian literature. The last part is disproportionately long, and offers a series of detailed responses to possible objections.

Parts 1 and 2 apply reason to the problem of discerning the true religion. Gerasimos opens with an examination of the nature of religion, and how it summons creatures to God by revealing a law of commands and prohibitions and by the promise of reward and punishment. An examination of the various religions and their laws shows that Christianity alone fulfills the proper function of religion – to summon creatures to God – while others summon to earthly or evil ends by catering to base passions. Gerasimos then turns to a second set of criteria for recognizing the true religion: it must not be tribal or parochial but have a universal message; it must be attested by miracles; and it must address people in languages they understand. An examination of the religions of his immediate region shows that Christianity alone meets these criteria.

Parts 3 and 4 cite testimonies to confirm the earlier discussion, first from the Old and New Testaments, and then from later Jewish authors such as Josephus, the writings of the Sabeans (i.e., the pagans of Harrân), the Greek philosophers (Plato, Aristotle, Hermes, Socrates, etc.), and finally from the Qur’an itself.

Part 5 treats six clusters of possible objections.

Objection 1 examines the questions: How can Christianity be the true religion when it is not the largest, when it has not always existed, and when there are places where it is held in contempt? On the last point, the author is eager to show that ‘the ascendancy of the umma of Muḥammad and their oppression’ of Christianity does not invalidate his argument, for such things are marks of the mercy of God, in that he disciplines his children through ‘the sword of Islam’.
Objections 2-4 are philosophical in nature. Gerasimos is required to show that the Christian doctrines of the crucifixion, the Trinity, and the Incarnation are not repugnant to reason; that God’s foreknowledge of sin does not make him responsible for it, but rather that freewill is a necessary attribute of human beings; and that God’s omnipotence does not require that he should have saved Adam by fiat, but rather his own nature and attributes of mercy, might, justice, and wisdom all require that he submit to death on the cross.

In response to Objections 5 and 6, Gerasimos explains that revelation is progressive, and thus one cannot fault God for abolishing earlier revelations, specifically the Law of Moses. He argues that religion in this respect is analogous to education, in that people at different stages require different levels of training. The Law, for instance, offered training in basic matters, and is analogous to the use of wooden swords to train soldiers or to a parent’s tolerance of certain behavior in the young but not in those who are older. In general, revelation passes through three stages: natural law, the Law of Moses, and the Law of Christ.

SIGNIFICANCE
Gerasimos’ is one of the most detailed defenses of the faith written by an Orthodox author in Arabic. His is also perhaps one of the most learned and gracious of such writers. He is well versed in the history of disputation theology and quite conversant with the ideas of his opponents. He avoids the temptations of an overly scholastic approach and instead weaves together theological reflection with memorable and provoking analogical stories. While buttressing the faith of Christians, Gerasimos takes care not to offend the sensibilities of potential Muslim readers. The rancor that sometimes characterizes later apologetic literature is lacking in this skillful and gracious presentation.

MANUSCRIPTS
MS Sinai, Monastery of St Catherine – Ar. 448 (Kamil 495), fols 100v-127r (13th century; Nasrallah, HMLEM iii.2, p. 116, reports that this MS contains the first part of the treatise)
MS Sinai, Monastery of St Catherine – Ar. 451 (Kamil 497), towards the end (1323; Nasrallah, HMLEM iii.2, p. 116, reports that this MS contains the third part)
MS Paris, BNF – Ar. 258, fols 73-78 (15th century; testimonies of the Greeks)
MS Beirut, Bibliothèque Orientale – 548, pp. 243-71 (16th century; testimonies from the Greeks and from the Qur’an)
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MS Aleppo, Nahhas (private collection) – no shelf mark (See Sbath, Fihris, supplément, p. 80) (1627)
MS Joun, Dayr al-Mukhallīṣ – 1807, 4th work (17th century; see Edelby, Sulaiman al-Gazzi, pp. 23-24; this seems to be the MS that Nasrallah, HMLEM iii.2, p. 117, cites as ‘A.CENTURY 359 [1644], 4th’
MS Oxford, Bodleian Library – Marshall Or. 69 (Uri ar. chr. 49) (1656)
MS Vat – Sbath 49, pp. 304-500 (1686)
MS Beirut, Bibliothèque Orientale – 552, pp. 65-179 (17th century; parts 1, 4, and 5, bowdlerized)
MS Homs, Dr Sim‘ān (private collection) – no shelf mark (1701; Cheikho notes the existence of this MS in his Catalogue, p. 81)
MS Homs, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese – 33, fols 1-99 (17th or 18th century)
MS Jerusalem, Greek Orthodox Patriarchate – Holy Sepulchre Ar. 101, fols 82v-87v (17th or 18th century; testimonies from the Greeks)
MS Alexandria, Fondation Georges et Mathilde Salem – Sbath 1324, 18th work (1773; present location unknown)
MS Damascus, Greek Orthodox Patriarchate – 181 (formerly 1616), 5th work (18th century; testimonies of the Greeks and the Muslims)
MS Nasrallah (private collection) – 46 (18th century; current location unknown; it is reported that Nasrallah’s heirs dispersed the collection)
MS Basha – no shelf mark (the existence of the MS was first noted by Cheikho, Catalogue, p. 81; it may be the same as Dayr al-Mukhallīṣ 1807, cited above)
MS Beirut, Bibliothèque Orientale – 553 (19th century; modern copy of the preceding MS)
MS Damascus, Greek Orthodox Patriarchate – 252 (formerly 1675), pp. 258-72 (19th century; according to Nasrallah, HMLEM iii.2, p. 117, this is the fourth part of Gerasimos, on the testimonies of Christ)
MS St Petersburg, Institute of Oriental Studies – B1218, fols 64r-68r (19th century; testimonies of the Greeks)
MS Bakhkhach (private collection) – no shelf mark (see Sbath, Fihris, i, p. 40, with no indication of date; no trace of the MS has been found)
MS Bassal (private collection) – no shelf mark (see Sbath, Fihris, i, p. 40, with no indication of date; no trace of the MS has been found)
MS Saegh (private collection) – no shelf mark (see Sbath, *Fihris*, i, p. 40, with no indication of date; no trace of the MS has been found)

**Editions & Translations**

A. Bakhou has prepared an edition and translation of the work’s sixth part for a dissertation in progress at PISAI, Rome. Otherwise, the text has never been edited.

R. Khawam (trans.), *Dialogues oecuméniques de guérison suivi de Traité sur la Sainte Trinité*, Paris, 1998 (it is somewhat unclear whether this translation is from one or more MSS; it should also be noted that Khawam sometimes omits parts of the text and at other times adds to it, presumably to make it more accessible to modern readers)

**STUDIES**


L. Cheikho, *Catalogue des manuscrits des auteurs arabes chrétiens*, Beirut, 1924

**Abgar Bakhou and John Lamoreaux**