

The Dialogue of Emperor Manuel II Paleologus. Context and History*

Bogdan TIMARIU*

Summary

This article will try to offer a description of the context and history of the Dialogue with a Persian, a literary work belonging to the byzantine emperor Manuel II Palaeologus. I will start by presenting the life of the author, emphasizing the general aspects of the important activities and events during his life, which had an impact on the visions of the emperor and influenced his thinking, as reflected in his own writings. These aspects point mostly to the declining of the byzantine state and the servitude towards the Muslim-Turkish enemy. The largest opera of the emperor (the Greek text published in 1966 expands on 301 pages), but neglected until our time by scholars, *The Dialogue with a worthy Persian* mousterizes in Ancyra of Galatia is a remarkably rich work, both literary and because of its thematic, with a high level of theology and spirituality, placed in the context of interreligious dialogue between a Christian and a Muslim. The environment of its appearance is important since it includes several aspects that have caught public attention even today, especially in September 2006, when pope Benedict XVI quoted a critical passage regarding Islam from the *Dialogue*. This study will focus on the general aspects of the Dialogue and the context of its creation, seen as relevant for understanding its purpose in the nowadays interreligious dialogue.

Keywords

Byzantium; Manuel al II-lea Palaeologus; Islam; dialogue; Muslim polemics

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* Bogdan Timariu is doctoral student at Orthodox Theological Faculty St. „Andrei Şaguna”, „Lucian Blaga” University, Sibiu, Romania. E-mail: bogdantmr@yahoo.com

The Dialogue of Emperor Manuel II Paleologus

The author of *The Dialogue* is the byzantine emperor Manuel II Palaeologus (1391-1425), one of the last byzantine rulers of the Eastern Roman Empire. Emperor Manuel was born at 27th September 1350 in Constantinople and was the middle son of Emperor John V Palaeologus and Helena Kantakouzenos, and of Anna Asanina, daughter of the ex-emperor John VI Kantakouzenos. He came into the world in the time when his father and grandfather were wrestling for the byzantine throne in the so-called second civil war of Byzantium.¹ The capital of his father was at that point Thessalonica, but in 1352, John returned to Constantinople and was forced to leave the city for Didymoteichos, followed by his wife and by his son Manuel, while their older children, Andronicus and Irene, remained behind with their grandmother Irene Asanina.² In 1354, a popular revolt supported Emperor John V who entered Constantinople and deposed John VI Kantakouzenos, restoring the Palaeologus family on the Byzantine throne.³

The first historical record regarding Manuel states from 1355: his father had signed a letter sent to pope Innocent VI, then at Avignon, in which he asked the pontiff to organise a military campaign to be sent to Constantinople (15 transport ships, 5 galleys, 500 knights and 1000 infantrymen) that was to support the Emperor against his Turkish and Greek enemies. In exchange, the basileus agreed with the presence of a papal legate in Constantinople to implement the union of the Churches. As a guarantee for this fidelity, his second son, Manuel, will be sent as a hostage to the Curia of Avignon, in order to be educated and married according to the popes` wishes. But Innocent was not convinced by these unrealistic promises made by the Emperor, mainly because he knew that, from a spiritual point of view, the feelings towards the Latins in Constantinople were unpredictable and hostile.⁴

In that same year, passed away the greatest European threat for Byzantium, Stephen Dusan. But his death coincided with the breaking of the empire he had created and the rapid ascension of the Turks in Europe. Thrace, exhausted by the last civil war, was conquered almost entirely: in 1361 the Turks conquered Didymoteichos, followed by Adrianople in 1362 (or 1369). Everywhere the local population is deported in Anatolia and replaced with Turks.⁵

¹ John W. Barker, *Manuel II Palaeologos (1391-1425) A Study in Late Byzantine Statesmanship*, Ed. Rutgers University Press, New Jersey, 1969, p. xix.

² George T. Dennis, *The Reign of Manuel in Thessalonica 1382-1387*, Ed. Pont. Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, Roma, 1960, p. 11-12.

³ Stelian Brezeanu, *Istoria Imperiului Bizantin*, Meronia, București, 2007, p. 370.

⁴ Donald M. Nicol, *The Last Centuries of Byzantium (1261-1453)*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, p. 258.

⁵ John Julius Norwich, *A Short History of Byzantium*, Vintage Books A Division of Random House, New York, 1997, p. 350.

Because of this, in 1366, John travelled again to Western Europe again, searching for allies. Leaving his oldest son, Andronicus, in charge in Constantinople, the emperor heads for Hungary, accompanied by two sons, Manuel and Michael, probably with the perspective of offering them as hostages, as a guarantee, if he would receive military assistance. But kind Louis I accepted to help Byzantium only when the *entire* Empire would convert to Catholicism. And on his way back, the Bulgars forbid him to transit territory so that the emperor and his sons became prisoners of the Bulgars for six months, until the cousin of John, Amadeus of Savoy, came to support Byzantium, besieged Varna, threatened the Tzar John Alexander of Tarnovo.⁶

In the summer of year 1369, if not earlier, Manuel is named governor of Thessalonica, and his brother Andronicus, now crowned as co-emperor, remained as a regent in Constantinople, while John V leaved for Rome, where he alone converted to Catholicism, however without getting anything in return. On his way back, the basileus responded to a letter sent by the doge of Venice, in which he was reminded of the fact that his mother, Anne of Savoy, pawned the crown jewels to the venetians and they offered him the chance of recovering them. When John reached Venice, because he could not pay anything, even though he offered to Venice the island of Tenedos for six galleys, he was held prisoner. When he asks Andronicus for help, the co-emperor ignored his own father, probably influenced by the Genovese. Only after Manuel gathered the amount required by the Venetians (30.000 Ducates) and leaved for the Laguna in the middle of winter, his father was able to come back in Constantinople, on 28th October 1371.⁷

A month before John entered his capital city, the Serbs were decisively defeated by the Turks on the Maritza river. This opened for the Ottomans the way inside the heart of the Balkans. Manuel was the only ruler who used this event in his own advantage, and in November 1371 he occupied Serres. The Turks were not late to reply and besieged both Serres and Thessalonica in April 1372. However Manuel was successful in repelling them and the territories he had conquered were recognized as his in an imperial bulla from 1372.⁸

In 1373, John V became the vasal of Murad and was forced to accompany the him in Asia Minor. But while he was absent from his capital, Andronicus made an alliance with the sultan's son and both dethroned their parents. In the end, John managed to convince Andronicus to surrender, but the furious Murad blinded his son and asked the Byzantine ruler to do the same with his son and grandson. However,

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 351.

⁷ Donald M. Nicol, *The Last Centuries...*, p. 275.

⁸ John W. Barker, *Manuel II Palaeologos (1391-1425) A Study...*, p. 12-14.

the treatment applied to Andronicus and his son was formal, and the two eventually recovered their full sight.⁹

But, because of the many nuisances he created, Andronicus was thrown into jail, and the right to the throne were transferred at 25th September 1373 to Manuel. Andronicus managed to escaped from prison in 1376, with the support of the Genovese, and asked the sultan for help. With Turkish support Andronicus now threw his father and brother in jail. The emperor and the prince escaped only in 1378, thanks to Murad`s support. The sultan offered to help them but only in exchange for a higher tribute, military assistance in Asia and the surrender of the city of Philadelphia. Peace was installed only in 1381, when Andronicus was firstly removed but accepted again later as a legitimate successor, which angered Manuel who returned to Thessalonica in 1382. The right to the throne will become his only in 1385, when Andronicus died.¹⁰

Manuel started his second period of rule in Thessalonica in 1382, during which time he became the only byzantine enemy of the Turks, while the rest of the territories were their vassals. The Turks already acquired in 1380 Ohrid, Prilep and in 1385 Sofia. Thessalonica was in this way fully isolated and got an ultimate in October 1383. Manuel encouraged the people to resist but because they did not get any help, in 1387 Thessalonica surrendered, mainly in order to avoid a massacre. Manuel was forced to leave the city, greatly infuriated.¹¹

After this failure, Murad categorically asked John V to remove Manuel from the position of heir. Therefore, the emperor exiled the prince in Lesbos, where he was still living when Serbia fell under Bayezid in 1389. In 1390, John V was dethroned again by his nephew John VII, who got the Turkish support. Manuel had arrived in Constantinople only shortly before and he barricaded himself and his father in the fortress built at the Golden Gate. Still under siege, Manuel managed to escape and returned with nine rented galleys, taking the pretender by surprise. But the success of recovering the throne came with a high price for the Byzantines.¹²

The humiliation that both Manuel and John V have had to endure was that they had to follow the sultan with their own Greek detachments in Turkish campaign in Asia Minor, in order to extinguish the last resisting points. Thus, Manuel was the one that conquered and handed over to the ottomans the last byzantine free city of Anatolia – Philadelphia in 1390.¹³

⁹ S.B. Daşkov, *Dicţionar de Împăraţi Bizantini*, Ed. Enciclopedică, Bucureşti, 1999, p. 396.

¹⁰ John Julius Norwich, *A Short History...*, p. 353-354.

¹¹ George T. Dennis, *The Reign of Manuel...*, p. 53-57.

¹² Donald M. Nicol, *The Last Centuries...*, p. 292.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 293.

When John V died at 16th February 1391, Manuel was still a prisoner of sultan Bayezid, and had just returned to Bursa. When he heard of his father's death, in the night of 7th March 1391, Manuel escaped immediately from the Turkish prison and managed to reach Constantinople where he was crowned emperor in the spring of 1391, ruling as Manuel II Palaeologus until his death.¹⁴

When the sultan heard about Manuel's escape in Constantinople, he was furious, regretting that he did not kill this prince which he viewed as dangerous, given his popularity. But the Byzantines were humbled again. The sultan sent an ambassador to Constantinople, warning the emperor that he was still a vassal of his:

*"If you wish to disobey my commands, then lock the doors of your city and rule inside it, because everything outside your city belongs to me."*¹⁵

Three months later, the sovereign was summoned by Bayezid to support him in his campaign in Asia Minor. In January 1392 Manuel returned to his capital and married Helena Dragases, daughter of prince Constantine Dragases of Serres, who was also a vassal of Bayezid.¹⁶

The emperor's rule proved to be a difficult task especially because of Bayezid's hostile attitude. His first two years as emperor were not pointed out by unsavoury incidents, but in 1393-1394, the sultan summoned to Serres all Christian princes that were his vassals (Manuel II, Theodore, despot of Morea, Constantine Dragases, John VII and the Serbian Stephen Lazarevich), intending to assassinate them, but the plan was not followed. When a similar summoning was set again, it was not heeded by the emperor and from that point on, the sultan, who wanted to acquire the fame of conquering Constantinople, began a continuous siege of the city. Manuel took this risk because he knew that the Turks did not have the necessary means and logistics to pass the unpassable fortifications of the Byzantine capital. The only weak part of the walls, the maritime ones, could not be threatened by the Ottomans since they do not possess an assault fleet. That is why the sultan wanted to kneel the population of the city by starvation. Because of his blockade, provisions inside the city became scarce, and only two venetian transports of wheat helped the doomed city.¹⁷

In 1396, the Byzantines put their hope in the success of the crusade from Nilopolis. This determined Bayezid to concentrate his forces on the Danube, where he crushed the Christian armies and returned to Constantinople. The emperor already

¹⁴ A.A. Vasiliev, *Istoria Imperiului Bizantin*, Polirom, Iași, 2010, p. 593.

¹⁵ Ducas, *Historia byzantina*, XIII, ed. Bonn, 49, *apud.* A. A. Vasiliev, *Istoria Imperiului...*, p. 593.

¹⁶ John Julius Norwich, *Byzantium, The Decline and Fall*, Penguin Books Ltd., New York, 1995, p. 350.

¹⁷ Nevra Necipoglu, *Byzantium Between the Ottomans and the Latins, Politics and Society in the Late Empire*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009, p. 150.

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knew that only a Western help could now save the Byzantine Empire, a reason for him to launch an appeal to catholic Europe. The only one to respond as the emperor wished was the king of France, who sent marshal Bouccicault with a small contingent. The small successes acquired by these troops determined the emperor to travel personally in Europe to get help.¹⁸

In December 1399, the emperor set course from Constantinople and reached Modon in 1400, where he left his wife and two sons. From there he continued to Venice.¹⁹ Manuel then reached France and England, where he was welcomed and admired. He stayed in Western Europe until 1403. Ironically, the military the emperor needed by the Byzantine emperor came unexpectedly from the Mongols of Timur, who crushed Bayezid's army at the battle of Ankara at 28th July 1402.²⁰ But the fact that he returned home without any concrete support from the West, made him only to see even more clear the reality he lived in.²¹

From this point until 1425 when Bayezid died, Byzantium got involved in the internal Ottoman struggles for the throne between Bayezid successors. The Byzantines received Thessalonica by treaty and other settlements. However, sultan Murad besieged Constantinople in 1422 and reconquer gradually all towns controlled by the Byzantines in the Balkans. Emperor Manuel died at 21st July 1425, after he was tonsured a monk two days before, under the name Matthew. He left behind a beautiful literary work and a weakened Empire.²²

In this context it is not hard to see why the only consolation of this literate basileus was his own writings. It is assumed that the *Dialogue* was written when Manuel was fighting alongside his Ottoman masters in Anatolia. We know that in 1391-92, Bayezid was campaigning against the Turkish emirates of northern Asia Minor, and after this victorious campaign the army was stationed at Ankara. Here it was where the Emperor met a *müderris*, a Muslim scholar with whom he had several conversations that are known as *The Dialogue of Emperor Manuel II Palaeologus with a Persian Mouterizes in Ankyra*. The fact that Manuel wrote this long work is not surprising since he was a prolific writer: from letters and treatises to sermons and

¹⁸ *The Cambridge History of Turkey, Byzantium to Turkey 1071-1453*, vol. I, ed. Kate Fleet, Ed. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009, p. 44.

¹⁹ *The Papacy and The Levant (1204-1571)*, vol. I: *The Thirteenth to Fourteenth Centuries*, ed. Kenneth M. Setton, The American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, 1976, p. 371-372.

²⁰ A.A. Vasiliev, *Istoria Imperiului...*, p. 599.

²¹ Christina Kakkoura, *An annotated critical edition of Emperor Manuel II Palaeologus', Seven Ethico-Political Oration*, PhD Thesis at the University of London, 2013, p. 23.

²² A.A. Vasiliev, *Istoria Imperiului...*, p. 561.

even poetry. Today more famous are his *Funeral Oration* at the death of his brother Theodore, and *Dialogue on Marriage with the Empress Mother*. Regardless, some of his works are still unpublished.²³

The *Dialogue* is included in the collection of *Migne*, vol. 156, and is composed of 26 discourses in the form of dialogues. These were first published in other edition than Migne in 1966 by Erich Trapp²⁴, with a wide introduction in German. Then in the same year Theodore Khourry published an edition with a French translation of the seventh dialogue.²⁵ Between 1993-1996, K. Forstel published another edition of the *Dialogue* in three volumes, with a German translation.²⁶ Finally in 2003 Wilhelm Baum, published the text with an introduction in German and the translation in German of the *Dialogues 1-7* by Raimund Senoner.²⁷

Public attention turned towards the *Dialogue* only in 2006, when Pope Benedict XVI, in a speech at the University of Regensburg, quoted a few words from the seventh dialogue, based on Khourry's translation, regarding violence in the name of religion, namely the violence of Mohamed. What's more striking is that the Pope's statement caused wide indignation in the Muslim countries and, in 2007, was published *A common word*, a long letter, from a large group of Muslim scholars.²⁸

From a literary point of view, works like the *Dialogue* of Manuel, were common since the emergence of islam, beginning with the 8th Century, and they dealt with the powerful rise of the Muslim faith. From John of Damascus (†749) to Leon VI The Wise (†912), Gregory Palamas (†1359) and John VI Joasaph Cantacuzenus (†1383), there were always literary works which prove that Byzantium fought on other fronts as well. For example, they appeared mostly during the great Seljuk

²³ Siren Çelik, "The emperor, the sultan and the scholar: the portrayal of the Ottomans in the Dialogue with a Persian of Manuel II Palaiologos", in: *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 41:2 (2017), p. 208-209.

²⁴ *Manuel II Palaiologos, Dialoge mit einem 'Perser'*, Wiener Byzantinistische Studien 2, Vienna, 1966, being the first complete edition of the Greek text in *Christian-Muslim Relations A Bibliographical History*, vol. 5 (1350-1500), ed. David Thomas, Alex Mallett, Brill, Leiden-Boston, 2003, p. 323.

²⁵ *Manuel II Paléologue, Entretiens avec un Musulman, 7e Controverse*, (Sources Chrétiennes 115), Paris, 1966.

²⁶ *Manuel II Palaiologos, Dialoge mit einem Muslim*, 3 vols, (Corpus Islamo-Christianum 4/1-3), Würzburg, 1993, 1995 and 1996.

²⁷ *Kaiser Manuel II Palaiologos, Dialog über den Islam und Erziehungsratschläge. Mit drei Briefen König Sigismunds von Luxemburg an Manuel II*, (Texte der Weltliteratur 1), Vienna, 2003.

²⁸ *Christian-Muslim Relations A Bibliographical History*, vol. 5 (1350-1500), ed. David Thomas, Alex Mallett, Brill, Leiden-Boston, 2003, p. 323.

expansion in Anatolia in the 12th Century, and then during the Ottoman conquests, in the 14th – 15th Centuries.²⁹

The *Dialogue* of Manuel is included in the last period and can be characterized both as polemic and apologetic, with a high degree of theology and philosophy. It is clear that in it the author does not want to compare the two religions, Christianity and Islam, but to prove the superiority of the first.³⁰

The model on which the *Dialogue* is constructed follows the Platonic pattern. In fact, dialogue was often used by Byzantine authors to express philosophical and theological thoughts, and since it is flexible, it can accommodate even humour.³¹

The main source of inspiration for Manuel, as it is mentioned in the introduction of the *Dialogue*, was the work of his grandfather (John VI), who wrote among others, by the time he was already a monk, *Four Orations against Muhammad*.³² But, according to Trapp, even if he does not mention it, is clear that the Emperor has known Islam since his childhood, and he received all his knowledge thanks to the wide gallery of literary works regarding the Muslim faith.³³ In his era Byzantium was experiencing a last *Renaissance*, as Steven Runciman says, and the interest in the ancient forms of culture, like the linguistic forms and literary works had a great impact on the works of this period.³⁴

The *Dialogue* is a work larger than that of the other Byzantine authors who wrote on such topics, with a wider range of themes and argumentation. But he does not remain in the position of defending the Christian dogma; the Emperor touches subjects like choice, free will, desire or fortune.³⁵ Also, even if he uses the patristic literature and may not be considered a theologian of the calibre of John of Damascus for example, the Emperor poses as the teacher and defender of Orthodox Christianity based on the tradition of Emperors as Apostles (Constantine the Great, Justinian, Alexis I).³⁶

The interlocutor of Manuel is called *mouterizes*, which is commonly translated as *müderriş*, a teacher of faith in the Saljuk and Ottoman era. Both dialogue partners

²⁹ Siren Çelik, “The emperor, the sultan...”, p. 211.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 211-212

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 216.

³² *Christian-Muslim Relations...*, p. 173. John’s own source of inspiration were the writings of Riccoldo da Monte di Croce (A1320), an Italian Dominican monk, whose works were also translated in German by Martin Luther.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 322.

³⁴ Steven Runciman, *Ultima Renaştere Bizantină*, Nemira, Bucureşti, 2016, p. 21-22. The author mentions the interest for the Attic form in language and the imitation of Plato and Aristotle in elaboration of literary works, specific to XIV-XVth centuries.

³⁵ Siren Çelik, “The emperor, the sultan...”, p. 213-214.

³⁶ *Christian-Muslim Relations...*, p. 322.

have an audience, made by the Emperor's entourage and the *müderris'* circle. Even though the *muderris'* name is not stated, Manuel describes him as an old learned scholar that arrived from Babylon, honoured by both Persians and Ottomans, and who was fluent both in Persian and in Arabic.³⁷

Since the importance of this literary work stands in its religious and philosophical content, I would like to relate what are the exact subjects that the Emperor and the *müderris* have debated.

In *Dialogue 1*, the Emperor defends the authority of the Scripture (Septuagint) as a true book, against the accusation of falsification, and sustains the Christian teachings regarding the immortality of the angels. *Dialogues 2 and 3* are a condemnation of the Muslim image of paradise as carnal, regarded as too material an unheavenly. Asked by the *müderris* about the true redemption, Manuel is focused on the fact that God alone is the true Saviour of mankind, along with the idea that animals are not rational. Only human beings are capable of self-control, have the freedom to choose between good and evil and can express their thoughts through language. *Dialogue 5* criticizes the accuracy of Mohamed's ascension to heaven; then the *müderris* accuses the Christians of refusing to convert to Islam (comparing them with the Jews) pointing out that this is the only reason why they are in such critical situation. To this Manuel responds arguing that military and political successes are not based on moral superiority, since history has its own course with the continuous rise and fall of kingdoms. Then the Emperor mentions the Christians of the West who at the time were superior to Muslims. This *Dialogue* concludes with the idea that on earth happiness is ephemeral.³⁸

In *Dialogue 6* Manuel picks on the comparison of Moses and Mohamed, which turns bad for the second. On the other hand, he states that even Muslims regard Christ in honour as they too admit that He was the Son of a Virgin and made great miracles. In *Dialogue 7* Manuel criticizes Mohamed against the *müderris* statement that the laws of Mohamed are a bridge between the Jewish and Christian laws, both of which are imperfect. Manuel replies that God is always helping those who fulfil His commandments and that Mohamed took some laws from the Bible but failed to take the best ones. In *Dialogue 8* the Emperor rejects the idea that Mohamed is the *Paraclete* from the Gospel of John, since he didn't glorify Christ and was not himself sent by God. *Dialogue 9* expresses the idea that even if they cannot discern the depth and nature of matter, humans can at least come to know God from His works.³⁹

Dialogues 10-19 and 21-24, explain and defend the doctrine of Trinity, the unity of the divine and human nature in the Person of Jesus Christ, and the redemption of

³⁷ Siren Çelik, "The emperor, the sultan...", p. 214-215.

³⁸ *Christian-Muslim Relations...*, p. 320.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 321.

humanity through Christ. In *Dialogue 20* the Emperor defends the veneration of icons in the Orthodox Church and in the concluding *Dialogues 25-26* Manuel defends the role of Apostles as true witnesses of Christ.⁴⁰

As we might have expected, Manuel is the one that emerges victorious from this debate. And the appreciations expressed by the *müderris* towards the Emperor like someone who has satisfied his curiosity regarding Christianity, serve as little *eulogies*, which the Emperor, in a very platonic way, refuse. Manuel even states that the others were more enthusiastic than him about the conversations. This might not be an isolated fact. The increasing contact between Ottomans and Byzantines had already prepared the ground for such kind of discussions, and we know that when Gregory Palamas was prisoner of the Turks held debates about Christianity and Islam to an enthusiastic Ottoman audience.⁴¹ In the final part of the *Dialog*, even though the *müderris* agreed with Manuel's profession of Christianity, it is not stated that he converted, but only that he promised to go to Constantinople.⁴²

It is worthy to notice the fact that the *müderris* is not quoting from the Quran, neither does he use the thoughts of other prominent Muslim scholars, which proves to some that the Emperor embellished some time later the content of his opera. It is also clear to see, from to the size of the argumentation, that the Emperor subsequently added some new material to the text, but without wiping out the original form of the *Dialogue*, a thing that should not diminish the importance of his work but to reveal it as more complex.⁴³

As a final statement, this *Dialog* is remarkable thanks to its historical and theological value. Also, it is just started to be the subject of more elaborate scholarly attention. The *Dialogue's* depiction of the level of argumentation between Islam and Christianity in the 15th Century proves that the boundaries between these two religions were clearly understood and that two representatives of an apparently polemic dispute with an apparently denunciative speech can depart peacefully. Probably this is the aspect that was overlooked when the *Dialogue* was first encountered on the scene of religions. The fact that Pope Benedict's speech gave rise to much displeasure was due to the fact that those who rushed to accuse the Roman Pontif of intolerance did not wait to hear the rest of his lecture. We can though follow the reaction from the other point of view which was pronounced as *A common word*, a letter caused, ironically, by what seemed to be intolerance.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 321-322.

⁴¹ Siren Çelik, "The emperor, the sultan...", p. 215.

⁴² *Christian-Muslim Relations...*, p. 322.

⁴³ Siren Çelik, "The emperor, the sultan...", p. 217.